



Perceived service quality in postgraduate studies: an integrated perspective in the IMBA program*



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Resumen

Este trabajo propone un sistema de evaluación integral de la calidad del servicio en el International Master in Business Administration (iMBA) de la Universitat de València (UV), España. Partiendo del sistema actual para la medición de la calidad de servicio y considerando a los estudiantes como stakeholders en la universidad en el contexto de marketing relacional, la presente propuesta desarrolla un proceso para la evaluación de la calidad de servicio donde el estudiante es quien diseña el instrumento de medida desde una perspectiva integral del servicio que recibe. Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes perciben la experiencia del servicio como concepto multidimensional, abarcando no sólo la experiencia académica, sino también la calidad de las instalaciones, organización y coordinación del programa.

Palabras clave: calidad del servicio, postgrado, innovación, internacional

Resum

Aquest treball proposa un sistema d'avaluació integral de la qualitat del servei a l'International Master in Business Administration (iMBA) de la Universitat de València (UV), Espanya. Partint del sistema actual per al mesurament de la qualitat de servei i considerant els estudiants com a stakeholders a la universitat en el context de màrqueting relacional, la present proposta desenvolupa un procés per a l'avaluació de la qualitat de servei on l'estudiant és qui dissenya l'instrument de mesura des d'una perspectiva integral del servei que rep. Els resultats suggereixen que els estudiants perceben l'experiència del servei com a concepte multidimensional, abastant no només l'experiència acadèmica, sinó també la qualitat de les instal·lacions, organització i coordinació del programa.

Paraules clau: qualitat del servei, postgrau, innovació, internacional

Abstract

This work proposes a comprehensive evaluation system for service quality in the International Master in Business Administration (iMBA) at Universitat de València (UV), Spain. Going further than the current system for measuring service quality and considering students as stakeholders in the university in the context of relationship marketing, this present experience develops a process for evaluating service quality where the student designs the measurement instrument itself from an integral vision of the service s/he receives. The results suggest that students perceive the service experience as a multidimensional concept covering not only the academic experience, but also the quality of the facilities and program organisation and coordination.

Key words: service quality, postgraduate, innovation, international

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1. Introduction

Currently, universities are facing an environment characterised by increased competition, new political and social contexts, changes in student age range, financial restrictions and changes in funding, among others (Angell et al., 2008; Schlesinger, 2010). In view of this situation, establishing stable relations between universities and their publics, mainly students and former students, has become essential for guaranteeing their survival.

By way of example, Gibbs (2001) notes that groups involved in higher education seek to develop relations which are more than just simple supplier/user transactions. Other authors conduct their research in this context based on relational marketing theory in contrast to the transactional marketing model used in previous decades. Furthermore, researchers such as Arnett et al. (2003) and Optlaka and Hemsley (2004) have directed research towards establishing the benefits of this theory for non-profit organisations such as universities, analysing the nature of these relations and the degree of student involvement with the university, which have a direct impact on prestige and the development and formation of the university's image.

In short, to guarantee their own survival, universities must apply a relational marketing approach to their student relations so that aspects such as student satisfaction, University identification, service quality, confidence, commitment and loyalty enable them to measure their performance and provide guidelines for long-term strategies.

In the context of the Spanish University Strategy for 2015, one of the most important objectives is to increase internationalisation through international postgraduate courses (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2010). Recognising the importance of quality and student satisfaction, the present study proposes a comprehensive system for evaluating service quality in the context of an international postgraduate course, the International Master in Business Administration, iMBA at UV. The iMBA is officially recognised by the International Business School Alliance, IBSA, and leads to a dual qualification: students receive the Master's degree qualification from the university where they study core subjects in the first semester and from the university where they study the specialisation. The universities in the network are: Universitat de València, Hochschule Bremen, Institute of Business Studies Moscow, University of North Carolina Wilmington, University of Hertfordshire, University Tu Abdul Razak and Advancia-Negocia in Paris. The iMBA has been taught at UV since February 2004 and it is a multidisciplinary course taught by staff from four departments: Marketing, Business Administration, Business Finances and International Law. The course has a set of six core modules in the first semester in all the associated universities for a total of 30 ECTS. The corresponding specialisation (30 ECTS) is offered in the second semester, which students must study in a different university. UV offers the specialisation "International Marketing". Finally, students do a Master's course thesis for 30 ECTS.

The Master's course managers and the teaching and administrative staff attempt to promote course quality and innovation, and are committed to educational innovation from a multidisciplinary and international perspective. To achieve this objective, students' evaluation of postgraduate course quality is highly important given the University's competitive environment and must take into account the particular features of this Master's course:

1. Most of the students are foreigners, thereby generating service interactions which are not common on other courses (obtaining visas, accommodation), but their influence on satisfaction cannot be ignored.
2. Obligatory mobility of students between universities in the two semesters of the course. This means that their expectations and, ultimately, their satisfaction, is very much conditioned by their prior experiences at the first semester universities.
3. English is the official language of the course. At key service moments students face situations which do not occur on other postgraduate courses: Administrative staff assistance in English during the registration process, availability of information before registration in English, informational and teaching materials and immersion in a daily life context where the language does not coincide with the official language of the course.
4. As regards the way the course is taught, although EEES methodologies are being applied, the Spanish teaching tradition may be different from the way things are done in the students' countries of origin (not only in Europe) and also from the universities where they go in the second semester or where they have studied the first semester: More classroom teaching, more individual work and less emphasis on individual tutorials. The impact of these particular features on student satisfaction can also be significant.
5. There are around 25 students every semester. Student profile is varied (different nationalities, ages and academic training) and they interact and exchange experiences.

In order to carry out a comprehensive quality evaluation since the introduction of the iMBA in 2004-05, a satisfaction evaluation system has been implemented from a bottom-up perspective, that is, obtaining information from students about the factors determining satisfaction before their evaluation (Angell et al., 2008). This work presents the evaluation process which is carried out in one of the subjects in the second semester of the iMBA: International Marketing Research.

2. University students as stakeholders: the importance of student satisfaction with university services.

In the described university context the study of student satisfaction and the factors that may have an impact on it provides significant conclusions for establishing management strategies for student-university relations. Universities must adopt a proactive approach towards their various stakeholders in order to achieve equilibrium between desirable, necessary and suitable competences by gaining an understanding of the individual attitudes of all the stakeholders (Galán and Suárez, 2005).

Stakeholder theory has had a great impact on management behaviour. Under this theory, each group of stakeholders, i.e., groups or individuals who can affect or be affected by achievement of the organisation's objectives (Freeman, 1984), is entitled not to be treated as a means towards any goal but must participate in determining the organisation's future direction (Evan and Freeman, 1988). According to this theory, the organisation's true aim is to operate as a vehicle that coordinates and balances stakeholder interests.

In the specific field of universities, stakeholders cannot be ignored if higher education institutions intend to survive in current turbulent environments. The organization must be responsible for considering the concerns and

needs of each stakeholder (Chung and McLarney, 2000; Caballero et al., 2007, 2008).

The stakeholder approach considers organisations as systems for cooperation between individuals and is very appropriate for configuring higher education institutions as generators of services to society. From this perspective, education serves multiple publics or stakeholders (Bayer, 1996), each one with its own expectations and responsibilities towards the university service they organise and they reflect the way the teaching process is designed and executed (Bayer, 1996).

To provide an effective response to the plurality of demands, organisational management must correctly identify each stakeholder, as individual analysis of their qualities will enable their identification and a more accurate knowledge of the expectations they may have regarding the organisation's strategy (Caballero et al., 2008). One stakeholder attribute proposed by Clemens and Gallagher (2003), durability, is particularly important in this work, considering that one of the main objectives in the current Bologna process is to provide lifelong education for citizens. In this regard, Taddy (2007) proposes the need to strengthen relations between company, university and students to achieve new opportunities for students and commitment to long-term relationships. In short, this stakeholder quality highlights the importance of university managers' strategies, considering, promoting and motivating durable stakeholders, that is, those with whom there are ongoing relationships over time (Caballero et al., 2008).

Despite the main initial focus of this theory on private organisations (Donaldson and Preston, 1995), Phillips et al. (2003) consider that it can also apply to other types of organisations such as non profit or government organisations. As a strategic and ethical management theory, it must apply to all types of organisations, especially in view of the changes currently being experienced by non profit organisations (Knox and Gruar, 2007).

Based on previous classifications (Chung and McLarney, 2000; Taddy, 2007; Caballero et al., 2008) the following groups of stakeholders for a university institution have been identified: Teaching and Research Staff (TRS), Administrative and Service Staff (ASS), managers, companies, society, students, graduates, public authorities, educational associations, families, trade unions, media and community in general.

Although education has become a global activity in the aforementioned competitive environment, it is being marketed increasingly according to the standards of consumer goods (Melewar and Akeel, 2005). However, it should be noted that according to the literature review various authors do not consider students to be customers of universities, at least, not in the strict sense of the word. There are various reasons for not regarding students as customers, for example, Sirvanci (1996) and Guolla (1999) consider that students can play up to four roles by belonging to a University depending on time and place: (i) *raw material* being processed or input, during the training process; (ii) *internal users* for activities which are not directly academic (restaurants, student accommodation, gymnasiums, libraries); (iii) *workers* during the learning process; (iv) *internal customers* for teachers in each class and (v) *products* when they leave university and offer their training on the labour market. From this perspective, students can be inputs, users or results of the training process depending on the time and place of the analysis.

Another of the reasons provided by Apodaca and Grad (2002) and Winston (1997) for not considering them as cus-

tomers during the training process refers to the fact that students have a partial vision of the process, they do not know if the training they are receiving adapts to their needs and those of the labour market until they leave university. Svensson and Wood (2007) however, consider that the relationship between students and University is more than a customer-organisation relationship and they compare it to the relationship between citizens and their communities with the corresponding rights and duties. In this regard, Shupe (1999) considers the specific relations which can occur such as the fact that at a given moment the student can be the receiver (of knowledge) and the University the supplier, or in other cases, the reverse can occur and the student may provide the knowledge, with the University as receiver, a situation not commonly found between a customer and a firm.

In contrast, another set of authors consider that students can be regarded as a resource for university institutions and in turn, must also be considered as users in different contexts such as: in the application of EFQM models, the study of total quality management, perceived social responsibility, marketing, measurement of satisfaction and identification of customers, among others (Downey et al., 1994; Melle, 2003; Pitman, 2000; Modell, 2005; Helgesen, 2006; Helgesen and Nettet, 2007a; 2007b).

The lack of an agreed position and subjectivity in analysis of this topic might suggest that it would be more logical to speak of stakeholders or interest groups rather than customers or users in the university context (Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Education Pilot Criteria (MBNQA), 1995; Marzo, 2005; Traverso, 2005; Caballero et al., 2007), as the concept is wider than that of user or customer covering not only those who pay for the goods or service, but also any group which obtains some benefit from the institution and does not connote passivity (Savage et al., 1991; Bowie, 1987; Knox and Gruar, 2007). Utbildningsdepartementet (1992), Chung and Mc. Larney (2000) and Seeman and O'Hara (2006) mention students as the most important stakeholders in universities and therefore their interests and needs should guide the organisation's priorities and operation. This present study considers students as an interest group and student evaluation of University services and in particular, their international postgraduate experience is fundamental for guiding management decisions.

The review of the work on satisfaction in the university context (Schlesinger et al. 2009; Beerli et al. 2002; Marzo et al. 2005; Helgesen and Nettet, 2007a, 2007b; Alves and Raposo, 2004) leads us to approach satisfaction as a cognitive and affective response which occurs after students' consumption experience and is the result of graduates' global evaluation of the services provided by the University during their time there. This satisfaction will be determined by students' expectations before entering the University, following the predominant model in the disconfirmation of expectations literature (Nguyen and Leblanc, 1998) and by variables including the cognitive component of satisfaction (Oliver, 1993). Elliot and Shin (2002) refer to student satisfaction as the attitude resulting from evaluation of the experience in relation to the education service received.

At UV, student satisfaction studies are currently organised around surveys with predetermined scales which students respond to in relation to five dimensions concerning materials and teaching guide, classroom methodology, tutorials, teacher's attitude to the student and global evaluation. However, the basis of this approach is to reconsider service satisfaction evaluation dimensions from the perspec-

tive of the users themselves. This requires a bottom-up approach (Angell et al., 2008) and a prior qualitative approach to enable approximation to the object of study.

3. Methodology/Data and analysis

Following the above approach, this work offers a proposal for comprehensive measurement in the case of the international postgraduate iMBA. Below is an analysis of the methodology used to analyse teaching service quality and the main results of its application in the 2008-09 academic year.

International Marketing Research is a subject taught in the second semester of the international postgraduate course and aims to equip students with the abilities and skills required to carry out market research in a globalised, cross-cultural context. The syllabus is structured around a logical process of market research: definition of the problem requiring investigation, the research approach, qualitative and quantitative research design, field work, data analysis and preparation of the report (Malhotra and Birks, 2007) in a total of thirteen 5-hour sessions.

Although each session contains individual works for evaluation, the need to evaluate abilities such as the ability to work as part of a group or the ability to summarise research results in a presentation, students need experience of working in a group. Following a rigorous research methodology, group work in this subject area is the design and administration of a questionnaire to measure student satisfaction with the iMBA where the students themselves determine the key dimensions for measuring perceived service quality of the Master's course from an integrated perspective. The process is described in Figure 1.

1. Definition of the research problem and its dimensions.

On the first day of the course the student receives a brief description of the research objectives from a management

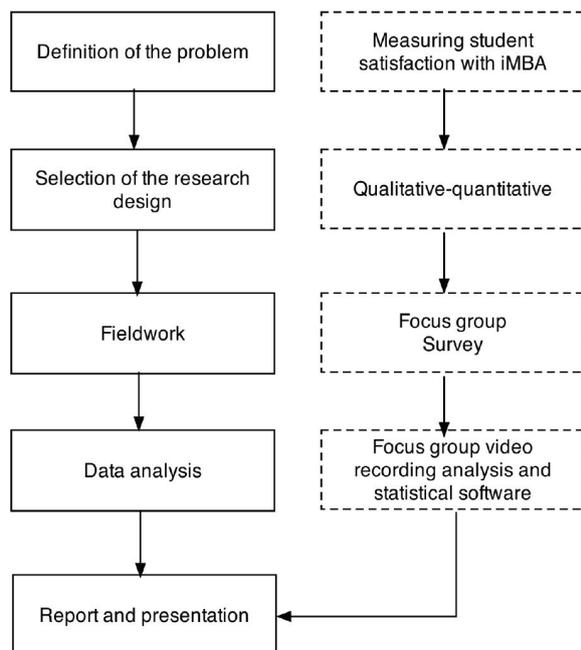


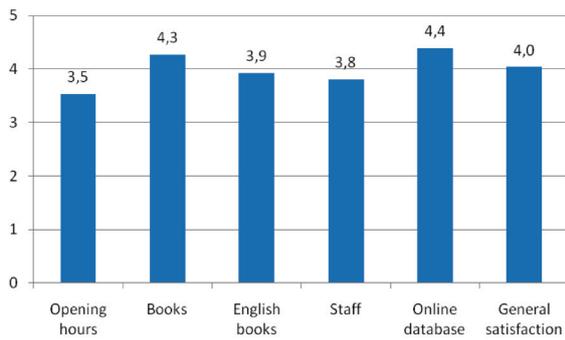
Figure 1. The market research process for measuring student satisfaction (Original work)

perspective, that is, the student must be able to transform a management problem into a market research problem which can be tackled with scientific methodology. The description indicates in broad outline that the Master's Course managers want a diagnostic of student satisfaction with the course in order to make improvements. They have to assume the role of a market research company and follow all the steps structuring the syllabus.

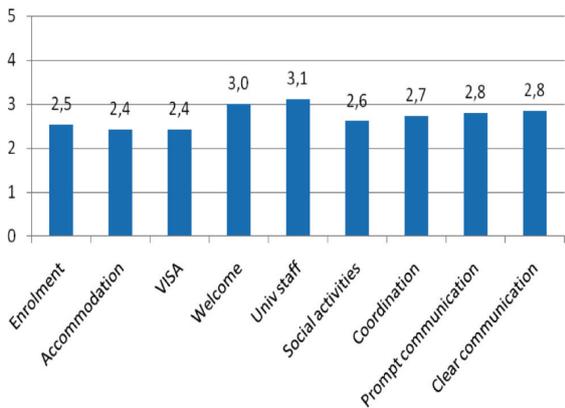
2. *Qualitative Research*: discussion groups. Taking advantage of the practical work for the qualitative research session, the students hold a group discussion with one of them as the moderator and the objective is to decide on the major areas determining satisfaction with the iMBA. It is emphasised that the final result of this research technique is not the measure of satisfaction, but knowing which elements are important for determining satisfaction given that the measurement will be done afterwards through a questionnaire with specific questions for each area. The group discussion is recorded and each student receives a copy to serve as the basis for their individual work from that session: writing a letter of invitation to participate, preparing an agenda for the meeting, producing a report for participants and a report for the managers.
3. *Quantitative research*: questionnaire design. With the results of the group discussion, the students begin to work on the questionnaire which is produced after several theoretical sessions where they are trained in question-making, scales for collecting the responses and questionnaire format design. Before administering the questionnaire, the teacher must review the final design. The questionnaire is administered on the same day for all the groups to ensure equal conditions and prevent one group from borrowing ideas for the questionnaire from other colleagues.
4. *Data analysis*. After the theoretical data analysis sessions, the groups proceed to exploit the questionnaire always under the rule that the analysis must respond to the specific questions expressed in the research objectives.
5. *Final report*. After the penultimate session where guidelines are given on producing a report and making a presentation, the groups produce their final report and all the students participate in giving a presentation lasting no more than 15 minutes of their results. The presence of all the students at their colleagues' presentations is fundamental for guaranteeing the perception of fairness in the evaluation, given that the involvement of the students in their work makes it difficult to accept a classification below their expectations if they have not been modulated by the presentations from the other groups.

We illustrate the results with data for the 2008-09 course. On that course the group discussion led to the identification of the following key factors for student satisfaction: facilities and services, teaching staff, timetables, workload, complementary activities, seminars, interaction with teaching/administrative staff, that were finally grouped in four more general factors: facilities, administration, academic experience and overall evaluation.

With the above information, the students produced a questionnaire in work groups. Basically the process consists in generating questions for each of the factors identified qualitatively in the focus group session. After purging re-



Graph 1. Satisfaction with facilities (library).



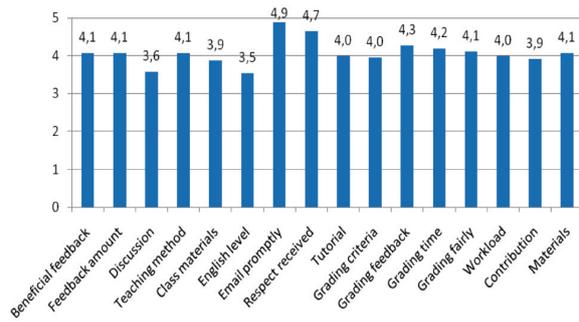
Graph 2. Satisfaction with course organisation

dundant or badly formulated questions, the choice of the most suitable measurement scales and the search for a graphic design which would facilitate the response, a 4 part questionnaire was produced:

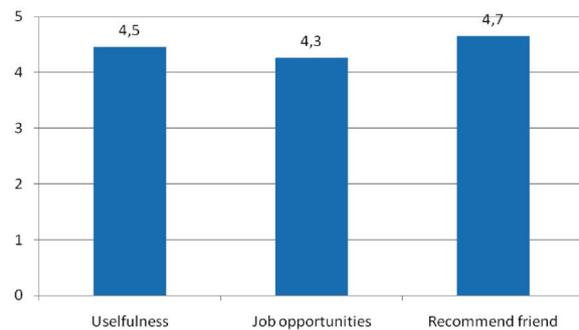
- (A) Facilities (classroom, library, computer resources).
- (B) Administration of the iMBA program at UV.
- (C) Academic experience: Academic performance measured for each module.
- (D) Overall evaluation of the master.

The questions were measured on a 5 point Likert (1, totally disagree; 5, totally agree). The annex shows the items of the questionnaire obtained with the above procedure which was used in the survey of 26 students, that is, all the students registered on the Master's course (see annex).

The first consideration in the light of the questionnaire is that many of the items considered would probably not have been there if the questionnaire had been produced by the management or the board responsible for quality control. Students, especially when they are foreign, can have very different service expectations to Spanish students and consider aspects of little significance for Spanish students to be important and vice versa. This approach to questionnaire construction based on student expectations generates a considerable wealth of nuances. We provide a selection of the results to show the type of satisfaction indicators which the tool can provide. Annex shows the mean and standard deviation of each item. It can be noticed that the means are highly representative of the group as the dispersion is minimum as been reflected by very low standard deviations.



Graph 3. Evaluation of one of the course modules



Graph 4. Global evaluation of the iMBA

3.1. Facilities

As a matter of example, graph 1 shows satisfaction levels with different aspects of the library. In general satisfaction is medium-high, higher in book availability and databases and slightly lower for books specifically in English and opening hours.

3.2. Administration of the iMBA program

In the section on course organisation, students attached particular importance to the evaluation of aspects which are not normally evaluated on Master's courses. As foreigners, aspects such as the management of visas and assistance with finding accommodation are particularly important for them. As Graph 2 shows, according to their criteria the university has an important area for improvement in managing such aspects, especially when internationalisation of academic courses is a strategic challenge for the university.

3.3. Academic experience

The field where this method of designing instruments to evaluate satisfaction can be particularly valuable for evaluating teaching. As the questionnaire shows, the amount of nuances introduced in the evaluation of each course module is extraordinary: consideration of the teacher's mastery of the language, great emphasis on the amount and quality of feedback from the teacher on the individual work, perceived fairness of the classification system, teacher's capacity to feed the debate in the classroom, workload, teacher availability in tutorials, evaluation of the practical application of the content, contribution of the module to student employability, quality of the materials and teaching methodology, etc.

Graph 3 shows by way of example, satisfaction levels with one of the modules on the course, showing a very high level of student satisfaction and the ability of the method to locate areas for improvement, given that scores are not indiscriminately the same but reflect nuances for each item.

3.4. Global evaluation of the Master

Finally, the students provide a general evaluation of course satisfaction which they base on three indicators: their perception of having received training useful for their career, their perception of whether or not the course facilitates their employability and their intention to recommend the course or not. Graph 4 illustrates this global evaluation which can be interpreted in fairly positive terms.

4. Conclusion

Universities are being affected by many changes in their environment, making the present moment a critical period in which they must deal with these opportunities and threats to ensure their competitiveness. An initial starting point consists in determining their main interest or stakeholder groups to subsequently explore their demands in depth.

Lifelong learning through higher education institutions is an essential aspect for citizens, local communities and regional, national and European economic, social and cultural development. One of the routes universities can take to achieve this objective is to promote relational aspects that foster closer, strong, lasting relations with the institution. In order to achieve such relations it is important to deal with the variables that intervene in student satisfaction with their university, and loyalty behaviour such as extending their education, or positive word-of-mouth.

The proposal for integral measurement of teaching service quality for evaluating student satisfaction with an international postgraduate course is user-oriented, where users determine the main determinants of their satisfaction. Over the five years of application, some of the advantages detected with this experience are:

- The results show questionnaires particularly focused on the special features of the course but which do not omit the basic areas on which evaluation must always be based.
- Many of the questions, while core issues for students, are unlikely to have arisen with the traditional "top-down" approach.
- Students become highly involved in the process because it simultaneously combines various interests: they are being asked about an issue that concerns them, they are being asked for their opinion, they see the practical application of a subject and their evaluation also depends on their interest in the process.

In short, the proposal being presented provides the benefits of a broader, enriched vision of student perceived quality and a high degree of student involvement in the evaluation of quality. This facilitates understanding of higher education services user behaviour and consequently greater capacity to satisfy them and gain their loyalty in the current competitive context of convergence in the European area.

The implications of the results for university managers are in line with the change in strategic orientation that is currently taking place in higher education and the importance of continuing to strengthen that change in the near future, moving from a production orientation based on own internal resources to a public service orientation where public institutions are more sensitive to the needs of their various stakeholders (Cervera et al. 2001).

In this paper, students have been chosen as university stakeholders, but other stakeholders could be considered like the ones pointed out in our definition, i.e. graduates or

companies. Their attitudes towards higher education institutions also constitute an information source that university managers must take into account.

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Annex 1. Items of the questionnaire and descriptive analysis

	Mean ¹	Stand. Deviation
Section 1: Facilities (classroom, library, computer room)		
<i>Classroom</i>		
The seating arrangement encourages interactions	3,2	0,37
All computers in the classrooms are adequate	3,1	0,27
In general the classrooms are well facilitated for learning	3,5	0,51
<i>Computer room</i>		
The computer is available anytime I need it	2,6	0,50
I can always print the documents I need	2,9	0,33
I can always find a computer available in the room	2,5	0,51
The facilities available in the classroom are suitable for an MBA program	4,0	0,28
<i>Library</i>		
Opening hours of the library are sufficient	3,5	0,86
In the library I can find all the books and journals that I need	4,3	0,67
There are sufficient books and journals available in English	3,9	0,48
The library staff is willing to help	3,8	0,40
The library's online database is easy to use	4,4	0,50
In general, the library's facilities are satisfactory	4,0	0,53
Section 2: Administration of iMBA programme		
The enrollment process was well managed by the University	2,5	0,51
The University helped me to find an accommodation	2,4	0,50
The University was helpful in arranging my visa	2,4	0,50
The University staff made me feel welcome from the first day	3,0	0,00
The University staff is sufficiently available to assist me when I need help	3,1	0,33
I am satisfied with the amount of social activities organized by the university	2,6	0,50
The coordination between the university staff was sufficient	2,7	0,45
Important information was communicated to me promptly	2,8	0,40
Important information was communicated to me clearly	2,8	0,37
Section 3: Academic experience²		
Feedback provided was beneficial to my learning	4,1	0,27
I am satisfied with amount of feedback provided during class	4,1	0,27
The teacher helped to facilitate discussion during class	3,6	0,58
Teaching methods used were conducive to my learning	4,1	0,27
Materials provided for assignments and projects were adequate and helpful	3,9	0,33
Teacher's English level was comprehensible	3,5	0,51
Professor responded to emails promptly	4,9	0,33
I am happy with the level of respect I received from the teacher	4,7	0,49
Tutorial hours were available when needed (scheduled and by appointment)	4,0	0,00
The grading criteria outlined by the teacher were clear	4,0	0,45
Student feedback was appropriate	4,3	0,67
Grades were returned at a time which allowed them to be helpful	4,2	0,63
Grading was done fairly	4,1	0,33
The workload was manageable	4,0	0,00
The work given contributed significantly to my learning	3,9	0,48
Information given was relevant to the class	4,1	0,27
Section 4: Overall master evaluation		
I have gained useful and relevant information through this program	4,5	0,51
This program will help me with future job opportunities	4,3	0,67
I would recommend this Masters program to a friend	4,7	0,49

¹ 5-point Likert scale (1, totally disagree; 5, totally agree).² The subjects taught in the second semester are specified: Service Marketing Management; International Distribution and Logistics; Integrated Marketing Communications; International Marketing Research. Data is provided about one of the subjects.