



## INVESTIGATION OF THE OPPORTUNITIES OF STUDY PROGRAMME QUALITY ASSESSMENT

*Agnese Līgotne*

*Academic Department*

*University of Latvia*

*Raiņa bulv. 19, Riga, LV-1586, Latvia*

*E-mail: agnese.ligotne@lu.lv*

**Keywords:** study programme quality, assessment criteria, opportunities of assessment, significance of criteria, expert surveys

### Abstract

In the world to assess the higher education quality there are used different methodologies, assessment criteria and various indicators, as a result of which there are ranged higher education institutions and study programmes, however, the results of them cannot be perceived unambiguously. It is clear that the assessment results which higher education institution or study programme will be better or worse is very often detected by the choice of criteria. It is very difficult to find objective criteria which could be used universally for all study programme types and allowed to assess them far and wide. Because of that besides the ranging of higher education institutions there are still made investigations and worked out methodologies to assess study programme quality and improvement.

In the democratic society a person has the right to have different opinion; therefore there is not a single “correct” quality definition. Quality can mean different to everybody. Mostly everybody understands intuitively what the word ‘quality’ means, but it is hard to ground and explain. Probably the different understandings about the higher education quality create doubt in the interested sides about the higher education quality itself. So, one of the research tasks is to clear out how different are the understandings of two main interested sides (students and higher education administrators) about higher education quality and its major criteria.

The aim of the research made is by doing expert survey and using The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method to investigate the opportunities of study programme quality assessment to form the methodological basis of study programme assessment, as well as to clear out main higher education experts’ (students and higher education administrators) understanding of study programme quality. In the research the experts evaluated 24 criteria which characterise both the quality of study programme offer and study programme implementation. Experts’ task was to determine importance coefficients for criteria in study programme quality assessment.

### Introduction

Higher education quality has always been an important precondition for the development and long lasting of national economy. At the moment in Latvia when all the higher education study



## New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

programmes are evaluated centrally, the question of study programme quality assessment criteria is becoming especially topical. Which criteria should be used to evaluate the study programme quality valuably and objectively? Which way should the study programme quality be evaluated: by using experts' assessment, quantitative indicators or students' assessment? Very often the choice of assessment criteria determines the result of quality assessment. In its turn, to select the assessment criteria it is necessary to understand to detect what is understood by the quality in higher education.

The aim of the article is by using expert survey and hierarchy analysis method to investigate the understanding of the main interested sides of the higher education (higher education administrators and students) about the study programme quality and to determine importance coefficients for selected criteria in programme offer and implementation quality.

The first part of the article there are viewed the theoretical aspects of higher education quality definitions. The second part shows the research methodology and informative basis. In its turn in the third part the author summarises the results acquired in the expert survey by using different quantitative analysis methods to investigate experts' understanding of study programme quality and detect the main criteria for study programme quality assessment. Summarising the results of expert survey, there is used AHP method, which allows acquiring each expert's individual assessment about the importance of study programme criteria. To detect if the understanding of the main interested sides about study programme quality is similar, there is done t-test analysis. In its turn, to compare the assessments of expert groups about the significance of criteria in study programme quality more clearly, the criteria are ranged. With the help of ranges there are detected the main and less important criteria, as well as there are detected those criteria which were most differently assessed by the experts.

It is very important to set a right criteria for study program quality assessment because criteria have influence on evaluating purposes and expected results. [3] For example, if learning-outcomes are using like evaluating criteria: they can evaluate student's knowledge and skills, but they can not evaluate content of study program or organization of study process. There were use different source of information about practical experience to choose criteria for this investigation:

- scientific publications of researchers from Griffith University about significance of interpretations of criteria [3];
- policy documents and recommendations from International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) [5] and practical experience from University of Exeter [10] about definitions of evaluating criteria;
- publications from University of Catalonia [9] and Maastricht University [2] about practical experience and recommendations how to set criteria;
- guidelines for quality assurance from Lund University [6, 7] and policy document about accreditation from European Higher Education Area [1] about usability of criteria in higher education quality evaluation and assurance;

Determination of criteria promotes explicit research for investigation. Dictionary of science and technology defines criteria as main sign or indication for classification. But dictionary of foreign words defines criteria as standard, rule, or test on which a judgment or decision can be based. In higher education, for example, University of Exeter evaluating criteria apply to assessment of student's knowledge [10]. Evaluating criteria are defining like description of knowledge and skills, what student will be able to demonstrate after finishing



# New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

study program or course. Purpose of evaluating criteria are to determine clear and unambiguous standards for learning-outcomes. [4] In this investigation is used perception of criteria from INQAAHE [5]: criteria are benchmarks, what allow assessing quality of input and process. Criteria not only assess quality of study program, but also characterize study program in this perception. Wherewith administration of study program can use criteria as describe indicators in making decisions about improving offer of study program or implementation of study program.

## 1. Theoretical Aspects of Higher Education Quality Definition

Before evaluating higher education study programme quality one should understand what exactly we want to evaluate, what characterises best qualitative study programme. Is there evaluated only the ability of a graduate to enter the job market and earn the income as much as possible? Is there evaluated the usage of the knowledge and skills acquired in studies? In both the cases there is evaluated the result of studies which, of course, is very important. However, it does not always characterise study programme quality, because it is affected by a lot of factors outside studies. So, it is important to evaluate also the resources available to study programme and the study process itself.

Table 1

**Higher education aims and interest sides**

Higher education aims	Interested sides in higher education	Aims of interested sides	Higher education tasks
<b>Research development</b>	Higher education institution and academic staff	<u>Higher education institution image:</u> Scientific achievements; Graduates' competitiveness in the job market; International cooperation	Promotion of new scientific inventions; Material and technical supply for science development; Study quality development; Promotion of international cooperation
<b>Personality development</b>	Students as separate personalities	<u>Respectable status in the society:</u> Material prosperity; Certain cultural, intellectual, moral and physical level; Suitability for society	Provide competitive education; Provide good theoretical and professional knowledge; Promote the usage of acquired knowledge in practice; Develop the generally used skills, including communication skills
<b>National economy development</b>	Employers	Increasing business effectiveness; Increasing profit	Prepare highly qualified and knowledgeable specialists
<b>Society development</b>	Society on the whole	<u>Developed society:</u> Creative, Cultural, Physically healthy, Economically, politically and socially developed	Prepare the new generation of scientists researchers; Prepare good specialists; Prepare educated, culturally and virtuously developed personalities

Source: added by the author from [N.Š. Ņikitins and P.E. Ščeglovs]



# New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

To detect what is qualitative higher education and study programme, there should be set its aims and tasks in modern society. Higher education can be divided into four main aims and set four main interested sides; Table 1 clearly shows the connection between the higher education aims and the needs of interested sides. Table arranges the interested sides according to correspondence to one of higher education aims, as well as there are indicated the aims set by Russian researchers Nikitins and Ščeglovs for each interested side. [11] In their turn, looking at the aims of interested sides, there are detected higher education tasks concerning each interested side.

The aims of higher education and interested sides are mutually connected. Therefore the precondition of study programme implementation is qualitative education, because this way there is proved the usefulness of higher education. According to the Table, we conclude that qualitative higher education is a precondition of successful development of any country and its society. Education brings good not only to the individual and higher education institutions, but also to the society and the country national economy on the whole.

## 2. Guidelines of the Research

Traditionally, when evaluating the quality of higher education or study programme, there are distinguished three assessment aspects: first, contribution, to provide study process, or “available resources”; second, study environment and process organisation and third, students’ acquired knowledge and skills or graduates’ achieved results. This approach is suitable to do international comparisons, demonstrate higher education achievements to interested sides and form political development strategies for higher education. However, to assess the quality for study programme it is important to abstract from the assessments, which are not directly referred to its quality. For example, it is practically impossible to evaluate how big is study programme contribution to the student’s newly acquired knowledge and skills or achieved results! They are formed, on the one side mutually interacting study programme offer and implementation, but on the other hand, the student himself getting involved into study process, as well as they are affected by a lot of different factors outside studies. Therefore high study results do not always testify of qualitative study programme and vice versa. So, the quality of students’ study results is not only the responsibility of higher education institution, it is also co-responsibility of students. Students’ achievements in studies and outside studies are not directly referred to study programme quality. Also, straight after completing the study programme the results acquired in studies and their usage are hard to identify, because there is necessary to have real practical action during several years to evaluate the real application of study results and their usability. Taking into account the mentioned above, for experts’ assessment there are offered 24 criteria, which characterise the quality of study programme offer and the quality of study programme implementation.

The quality of study programme offer is formed by study programme workout. There are set certain study programme aims according to higher education aims and needs of interested sides, worked out study courses, attracted academic staff and provided corresponding environment. To characterise the quality of study programme offer, there were set 12 criteria:

- 1) *study programme aims referring national economy (Offer 1);*
- 2) *study programme aims referring research (Offer 2);*



## New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

- 3) *study programme aims referring society development (Offer 3);*
- 4) *study programme aims referring personality development (Offer 4);*
- 5) *clearance and accessibility of study programme aims (Offer 5);*
- 6) *correspondence of study course offer to study programme aims (Offer 6), that is, coordination of study course aims and results with study programme aims and results;*
- 7) *study course contents quality (Offer 7);*
- 8) *study programme director's administrative skills (Offer 8), that is, ability to prepare and keep study programme documentation according to the requirements, including study programme self- assessment preparation quality;*
- 9) *academic staff qualification (Offer 9), which is characterised by the position structure of academic staff involved in study programme, existence and correspondence of scientific degrees, length of service, as well as average age;*
- 10) *research activity of academic staff (Offer 10), which is characterised by publications and participation in conferences and projects;*
- 11) *library resources provision (Offer 11), which is characterised by literature sources and available data bases;*
- 12) *material and technical provision of lecture rooms (Offer 12), including laboratory provision and accessibility of computers and internet.*

The quality of study programme implementation is oriented to process to organise as high as possible study result achievement for students. Its main characteriser is education effectiveness, that is, in what amount a student acquires new knowledge, skills and values during the studies. To characterise the quality of study programme implementation, there are set 12 criteria:

- 1) *support in study process and study environment (Impl 1), which includes in itself the accessibility of information in studies, responsiveness of administrative staff and informative system;*
- 2) *dynamics of number of students (Impl 2), which is characterised by the changes in both the number of students and structure (proportion of first year students and graduates);*
- 3) *quality of applicants (Impl 3), which is characterised by applicant selection procedures, applicants' level of knowledge and motivation;*
- 4) *opportunities of study contents selection for students (Impl 4) – possibility to select B and C courses;*
- 5) *study course implementation (Impl 5), which is characterised by study course succession and connection, as well as provision of e-courses;*
- 6) *academic staff involvement in study process (Impl 6) – average academic staff load in study programme, their accessibility to students, as well as academic staff cooperation with students;*
- 7) *studies give good basis of theoretical and practical knowledge (Impl 7), including research skills;*
- 8) *studies promote critical thinking (Impl 8);*
- 9) *studies promote development of communication and generally used skills (Impl 9), which includes in itself working skills of written language, presentations, discussions and teamwork, as well as foreign languages, computer programming and organisational skills;*
- 10) *international experience in studies (Impl 10), which is characterised by students' mobility, guest lecturers and academic staff mobility;*



## New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

- 11) last year students' satisfaction with the selected study programme (Impl 11);  
 12) students' academic involvement (Impl 12) – attendance of lectures and individual work.

In the research the experts compare the criteria mentioned above in pairs within the group of offer or implementation. Experts evaluate which of the two criteria is more significant regarding the quality of study programme offer or implementation. To evaluate the differences of criteria importance, The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method provides using *Scale of relative importance*, which allows change word information into numbers.[8] Summarising the results of expert survey and doing the calculations provided in AHP method, each of the criteria is set the relative importance coefficient (see Table 2), which in its turn allows forming unite system of study programme quality assessment.

Table 2

### Calculated coefficients of study programme (SP) quality criteria relative importance

	Criteria	Experts – higher education administrators					Experts – students				
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Criteria for SP Offer quality	Offer 1	0.053	0.043	0.077	0.083	0.049	0.087	0.028	0.073	0.037	0.048
	Offer 2	0.042	0.066	0.071	0.03	0.035	0.058	0.07	0.053	0.059	0.034
	Offer 3	0.048	0.031	0.065	0.051	0.06	0.038	0.027	0.023	0.03	0.02
	Offer 4	0.035	0.102	0.038	0.047	0.093	0.11	0.042	0.061	0.085	0.061
	Offer 5	0.045	0.147	0.051	0.047	0.038	0.135	0.042	0.035	0.108	0.097
	Offer 6	0.121	0.084	0.074	0.068	0.042	0.161	0.03	0.05	0.087	0.037
	Offer 7	0.257	0.113	0.166	0.198	0.225	0.117	0.033	0.241	0.209	0.147
	Offer 8	0.186	0.03	0.026	0.037	0.067	0.022	0.118	0.013	0.055	0.039
	Offer 9	0.073	0.093	0.139	0.198	0.114	0.126	0.05	0.242	0.105	0.145
	Offer 10	0.067	0.135	0.139	0.086	0.104	0.07	0.075	0.14	0.047	0.14
	Offer 11	0.04	0.111	0.077	0.104	0.094	0.061	0.169	0.043	0.11	0.156
	Offer 12	0.033	0.045	0.077	0.051	0.079	0.015	0.318	0.024	0.068	0.076
	<b>Total (Offer)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	
Criteria for SP Implementation quality	Impl 1	0.069	0.039	0.022	0.028	0.181	0.115	0.104	0.054	0.056	0.025
	Impl 2	0.057	0.116	0.024	0.198	0.029	0.032	0.151	0.024	0.061	0.105
	Impl 3	0.014	0.025	0.018	0.032	0.017	0.037	0.198	0.017	0.016	0.022
	Impl 4	0.041	0.023	0.029	0.038	0.133	0.138	0.057	0.157	0.091	0.043
	Impl 5	0.044	0.122	0.094	0.062	0.161	0.158	0.044	0.18	0.118	0.058
	Impl 6	0.187	0.1	0.122	0.024	0.017	0.092	0.085	0.056	0.073	0.049
	Impl 7	0.122	0.104	0.122	0.1	0.066	0.11	0.027	0.095	0.139	0.067
	Impl 8	0.112	0.137	0.122	0.074	0.044	0.081	0.09	0.101	0.146	0.153
	Impl 9	0.074	0.133	0.122	0.08	0.048	0.041	0.072	0.049	0.162	0.072
	Impl 10	0.03	0.051	0.122	0.064	0.085	0.033	0.085	0.031	0.06	0.132
	Impl 11	0.041	0.039	0.145	0.268	0.2	0.131	0.03	0.118	0.017	0.156
	Impl 12	0.209	0.111	0.058	0.032	0.019	0.032	0.057	0.118	0.061	0.118
	<b>Total (Impl)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	

Source: calculated by the author



Table 3

## The division of criteria in groups according to differences of expert group assessment

Group characteristics	Criteria and their codes	Maximum probability (H <sub>i</sub> )
<b>Group 1 – averages of groups do not differ essentially</b> , there is assumed zero hypothesis with maximum probability 80-100%	Support in study process and study environment ( <i>Impl 1</i> )	6%
	International experience in studies ( <i>Impl 10</i> )	7%
	Students' academic involvement ( <i>Impl 12</i> )	13%
<b>Group 2 – averages can not differ</b> with probability 20-80%	SP aims referring national economy ( <i>Offer 1</i> )	36%
	SP aims referring research ( <i>Offer 2</i> )	51%
	SP aims referring personality development ( <i>Offer 4</i> )	26%
	Clearance and accessibility of SP aims ( <i>Offer 5</i> )	35%
	Study course offer correspondence to SP aims ( <i>Offer 6</i> )	22%
	Study course contents quality ( <i>Offer 7</i> )	67%
	SP director's administrative skills ( <i>Offer 8</i> )	35%
	Academic staff qualification ( <i>Offer 9</i> )	22%
	Academic staff research activity ( <i>Offer 10</i> )	47%
	Provision of library resources ( <i>Offer 11</i> )	73%
	Material-technical provision of lecturing rooms ( <i>Offer 12</i> )	50%
	Dynamics of number of students ( <i>Impl 2</i> )	21%
	Quality of applicants ( <i>Impl 3</i> )	66%
	Opportunities of study contents selection for students ( <i>Impl 4</i> )	70%
	Study course implementation ( <i>Impl 5</i> )	25%
	Academic staff involvement in study process ( <i>Impl 6</i> )	48%
	Studies give good basis of theoretical and practical knowledge ( <i>Impl 7</i> )	53%
	Studies promote critical thinking ( <i>Impl 8</i> )	37%
	Studies promote development of communication and generally used skills ( <i>Impl 9</i> )	31%
	Last year students' satisfaction with selected SP ( <i>Impl 11</i> )	56%
<b>Group 3 – averages differ essentially</b> , there is declined zero hypothesis with probability 0-20% and assumed alternative hypothesis with maximum probability 80-100%	SP aims referring society development ( <i>Offer 3</i> )	96%

Source: calculated by the author



## New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

In the research were questioned experts who represent two most important interested side groups in higher education: higher education administrative staff and students. It is important not only to take into consideration the opinion of higher education administrators about study programme quality assessment, who are experienced professionals in this field, but also students. Exactly students are involved in the formation of higher education results, therefore they are the most tightly connected with study programme quality; we can say that they feel it “on their skin”. In the study programme quality criteria assessment there took part 10 experts, half of which are higher education administrators: a representative of Higher Education Board, the heads of University of Latvia (UL) administrative departments and leading staff who are responsible for study quality and programme accreditation. The other half of the experts is students who represent different faculties of UL and are members of UL Student Board and Latvian Student Association. The aim of expert survey is to determine relative importance coefficients for criteria of study programme quality, as well as to detect what in their opinion is the most significant thing in study programme quality. It allows clearing out if the understanding about the main criteria of study programme quality between expert groups is similar or differs essentially.

Before detecting the average relative importance of each criterion, there is done t-test analysis to compare mutually dependent average selections. Its results show if the assessments of expert groups about study programme quality criteria do not differ essentially, which in its turn indicates if the relative importance of study programme quality criteria must be analysed separately by expert groups or together. In the beginning of analysis there is set the zero hypothesis ( $H_0$ ), that the averages of the groups do not differ essentially, and alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ), that the averages of the groups differ essentially. The results of t-test analysis are shown in Table 3, where study programme assessment criteria are divided into three groups according to the maximum probability with which we can assume the alternative hypothesis that the averages of the groups differ.

Taking into account the results of t-test analysis we can conclude that assessments about study programme quality criteria differ between expert groups. Therefore indicating the coefficient of average relative importance the assessment of both expert groups are evaluated separately.

### 3. Relative Importance Coefficients for Criteria of Study Programme Quality

Doing statistical analysis calculations using data in Table 2, it was stated high coefficients of variation between coefficients of relative importance of study programme quality criteria. Therefore there are stated expert competence coefficients which are used as weight when calculating coefficients of average relative importance of study programme quality criteria within expert groups. Coefficients of relative significance show which part of study programme offer or implementation quality is stated by the certain criterion, for example, criterion “*Quality of study course contents*” determines almost one fifth (19%) of study programme offer quality (see Table 4).



Table 4

## Average relative importance coefficients and ranks for criteria of study programme quality

Criteria codes	Administrat. Aver. relat. sign. coef.	Students aver. relat. sign. coef.	Rank (admin. value)	Rank (students' assess)	Rank difference	Average calc. rank	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
<i>SP offer quality criteria</i>	<i>Offer 1</i>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.04</b>	6	11	5	<b>8.5</b>
	<i>Offer 2</i>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.06</b>	8.5	9	0.5	<b>8.75</b>
	<i>Offer 3</i>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.03</b>	8.5	12	3.5	<b>10.25</b>
	<i>Offer 4</i>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.08</b>	11	6	5	<b>8.5</b>
	<i>Offer 5</i>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.10</b>	11	4	7	<b>7.5</b>
	<i>Offer 6</i>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.08</b>	6	6	0	<b>6</b>
	<i>Offer 7</i>	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.19</b>	1	1	0	<b>1</b>
	<i>Offer 8</i>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.05</b>	11	10	1	<b>10.5</b>
	<i>Offer 9</i>	<b>0.14</b>	<b>0.12</b>	2	2	0	<b>2</b>
	<i>Offer 10</i>	<b>0.12</b>	<b>0.07</b>	3	8	5	<b>5.5</b>
	<i>Offer 11</i>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>0.11</b>	4	3	1	<b>3.5</b>
	<i>Offer 12</i>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.08</b>	6	6	0	<b>6</b>
<i>SP implementation quality criteria</i>	<i>Impl 1</i>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.06</b>	10	9.5	0.5	<b>9.75</b>
	<i>Impl 2</i>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.07</b>	8.5	7	1.5	<b>7.75</b>
	<i>Impl 3</i>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.03</b>	12	12	0	<b>12</b>
	<i>Impl 4</i>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.09</b>	11	5	6	<b>8</b>
	<i>Impl 5</i>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.12</b>	6.5	3.5	3	<b>5</b>
	<i>Impl 6</i>	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.07</b>	4	7	3	<b>5.5</b>
	<i>Impl 7</i>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>0.12</b>	2	3.5	1.5	<b>2.75</b>
	<i>Impl 8</i>	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.14</b>	4	1	3	<b>2.5</b>
	<i>Impl 9</i>	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.13</b>	4	2	2	<b>3</b>
	<i>Impl 10</i>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.06</b>	6.5	9.5	3	<b>8</b>
	<i>Impl 11</i>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.05</b>	1	11	10	<b>6</b>
	<i>Impl 12</i>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.07</b>	8.5	7	1.5	<b>7.75</b>

Source: author's calculations

Looking at the calculated coefficients of average relative importance of study programme quality criteria (see Table 4), we can state that their amplitude is from 0.02 to 0.19. To detect more significantly the criteria which have been assessed by experts as more important and less important in study programme quality, it should be useful to range the criteria according to the calculated average relative coefficients of importance within the group and calculate the average rank for each quality assessment criterion. Using the ranks there are also stated the study programme quality criteria, the average assessment of which differs essentially by expert groups, which in its turn indicates different understanding between the interested sides in the higher education.



## Average Relative Importance Coefficients for Criteria of Study Programme Offer Quality

Looking at ranks shown in Table 4 assigned to study programme offer quality criteria, we can see that both expert groups have assessed as the most important the following criteria: „Quality of study course contents” (Offer 7) and „Academic staff qualification” (Offer 9). The average relative importance coefficients of these criteria are correspondingly **0.19** and **0.14-0.12** (see Figure 1), that in average makes together one third (32%) of study programme offer quality assessment. As important there have been assessed the criteria „Provision of library resources” (Offer 11) and „Research activities of academic staff” (Offer 10), for them average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.11-0.08** and **0.12-0.07**, that in average makes together one fifth (19%) of study programme offer quality assessment. So we can say that the four criteria mentioned above determine one half of study programme offer quality assessment. Therefore a qualitative study programme offer is mainly characterised by qualitative study courses and correctly selected academic staff, as well as the provision of library resources is significant.

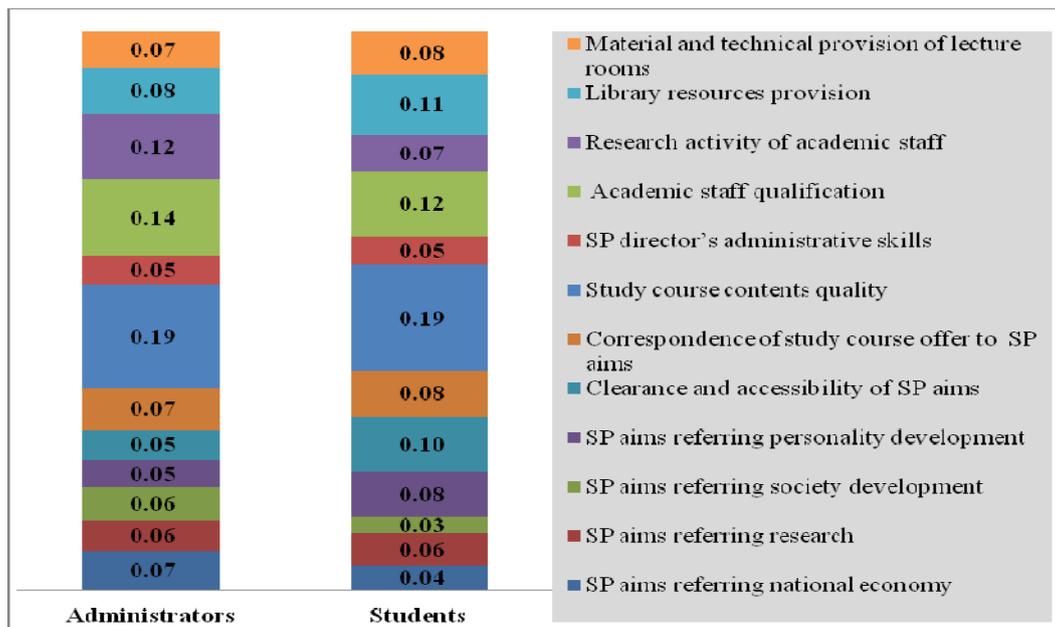


Figure 1. The average relative importance coefficients for criteria of SP offer quality

Source: created by the author

As the next most important one there have been selected the criteria “Correspondence of study course offer to study programme aims” (Offer 6) and „Material and technical provision of lecture rooms (Offer 12), the average relative importance coefficients of which are from **0.08 to 0.07**, which in average makes together 15% of offer quality assessment. In their turn the other six study programme offer quality criteria have been evaluated with lower importance



## New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

coefficients. The lowest average rank has got the criterion “*SP director’s administrative skills*” (Offer 8), the relative importance of which makes 5% of the offer quality. The average relative importance coefficients of the other criteria: “*SP aims referring national economy*” (Offer 1), “*SP aims referring research*” (Offer 2), “*SP aims referring society development*” (Offer 3), “*SP aims referring personality development*” (Offer 4) and “*Clearance and accessibility of SP aims*” (Offer 5) vary from **0.03-0.10**, and these criteria have got one of the two lowest assessments from one of the experts’ groups, which got correspondingly Rank 11 or 12.

Comparing the ranks assigned to the criteria between experts’ groups (see Table 4, Column 5), we can see that there are differences in rank division for each criteria. The sharpest differences between the ranks has the criterion “*Clearance and accessibility of SP aims*” (Offer 5), highest education administrators give Rank 11 to this criterion, but students Rank 4; also, the average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.05** and **0.10**. Perhaps the administrators consider that clear and understandable aims do not affect the quality, but the students evaluate it as one of the quality features. Assessments of experts’ groups also differ about the criterion “*Academic staff research activity*” (Offer 10), where students give Rank 8 to this criterion, but administrators consider it as the third most important criterion in study programme offer quality, also the average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.07** and **0.12**. Perhaps the administrators consider the research activity as the precondition to work out and manage a qualitative study course, in their turn students most probably do not connect the research activity with the academic staff knowledge development, but rather than some additional load which, as their experience shows, takes away time from the implementation of study course. Also, there are different experts’ assessments for criteria “*SP aims referring national economy*” (Offer 1) and “*SP aims referring personality development*” (Offer 4), where the calculated average relative importance coefficient differs by 3% points. It seems understandable that students evaluate study programme aims referring personality development higher than aims referring national economy development, but higher education administrators evaluate the significance of these criteria vice versa. In this case both expert groups evaluate the quality as usefulness; however, students evaluate it as usefulness for themselves, but administrators – as usefulness to the society on the whole.

### Average Relative Importance Coefficients for Criteria of Study Programme Implementation Quality

Looking at ranks assigned to study programme implementation quality criteria, we can see that experts have assessed as the most important the following criteria: “*Studies promote critical thinking*” (Impl 8), “*Studies give good basis of theoretical and practical knowledge*” (Impl 7) and “*Studies promote development of communicative and generally used skills*” (Impl 9). The average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.14-0.12**, **0.12-0.11** and **0.13-0.10** (see Figure 2), which in average makes together one third (35%) of study programme implementation quality assessment. Therefore experts of both groups admit that the most important thing in qualitative implementation of a study programme is not only to give good basis of theoretical and practical knowledge, but also promote critical thinking and the development of communicative and generally used skills.

As important there are also evaluated the criteria “*Study course implementation*” (Impl 5), “*Academic staff involvement in study process*” (Impl 6) and “*Last year students’ satisfaction with*



# New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

the selected SP” (Impl 11), the average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.12-0.09**, **0.10-0.07** and **0.16-0.05**, which together makes almost another one third (29.5%) of study programme implementation quality assessment. According to this we can say that the six criteria mentioned above determine two thirds (64.5%) of study programme implementation quality assessment. It is interesting that very big differences can be seen between expert group assessments about the criterion “Last year students’ satisfaction with the selected SP” – higher education administrators evaluate it as the most important and essential criterion of study programme implementation (assigned Rank 1), but students have evaluated it the unimportant (assigned Rank 11 of 12). Perhaps we can explain the high administrators’ assessment of this criterion by their understanding of a student as a client of higher education, so students’ satisfaction is evaluated as the most important criterion in programme implementation quality. What is more, students’ low assessment of this criterion can be explained by the lack of their confidence about the ability to evaluate study programme implementation quality objectively.

As partly significant study programme implementation quality criteria experts evaluate “International experience in studies” (Impl 10), “Dynamics of number of students” (Impl 2), “Students’ academic involvement” (Impl 12) and “Opportunities of study course selection for students” (Impl 4). The average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.09-0.06**, **0.07**, **0.07** and **0.09-0.04**, which in average makes together a little less than one third (28%) of study programme implementation quality assessment. Also as less important criteria experts have evaluated “Support in study process and study environment” (Impl 1) and “Quality of applicants” (Impl 3), the average relative importance coefficients are correspondingly **0.06-0.05** and **0.03-0.02**.

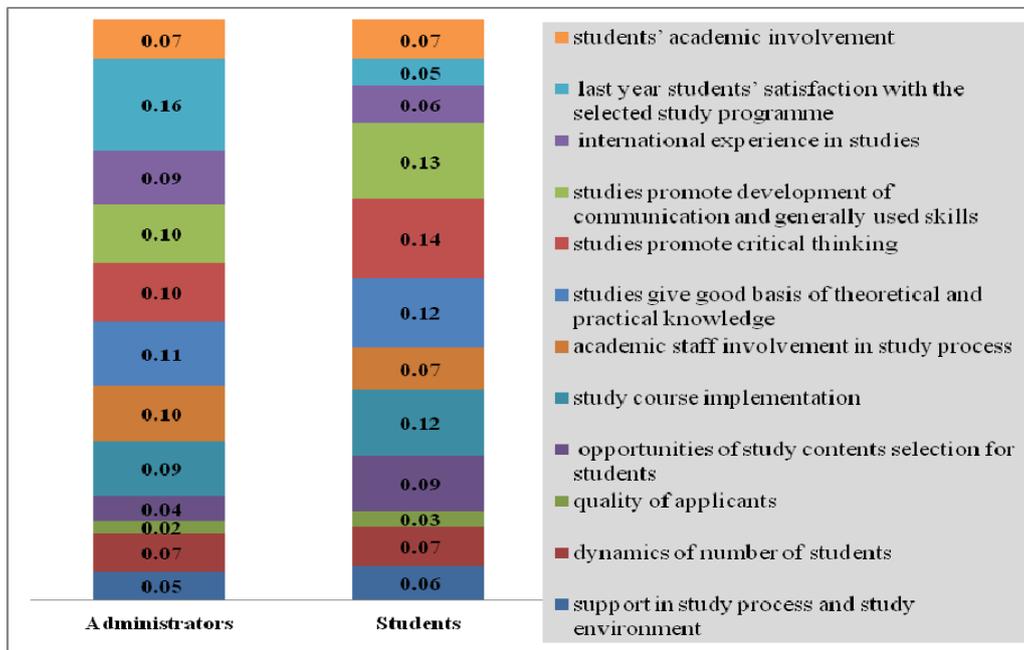


Figure 2. The average relative importance coefficients for criteria of SP implementation quality

Source: created by the author



# New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

Comparing the assessments between expert groups about programme implementation quality criteria, we can see a lot more essential differences among ranks, for example, in the criterion “*Last year students’ satisfaction of the selected SP*”. The second most different assessment is in the criterion “*Study course implementation*”, which is evaluated by administrators as comparatively unimportant (assigned Rank 11 of 12), but students evaluate it as the fifth most important criterion in study programme implementation quality. These differences can be explained by the different understandings between expert groups about study programme implementation quality.

The differences between expert group assessments testify of the necessity to form the dialogue between the interested sides in higher education to create the unite understanding about the education quality and to detect what is understood by a qualitative study programme. Therefore everyone who is involved in higher education system can have united understanding about higher education quality, and everyone is responsible for the quality achievement and maintenance.

## Conclusions

As a result of the research we can make the following conclusions:

1. Study programme offer quality is mainly characterised by qualitatively worked out study courses which correspond the study programme aims and correctly selected academic staff, which not only have necessary qualifications, but also actively continue to develop their knowledge and skills. Also important is the provision of library resources and material and technical provision in lecture rooms.
2. The most important thing in study programme implementation quality is not only to give good basis of theoretical and practical knowledge, but also to promote critical thinking and the development of communicative and generally used skills, which is not possible without qualitative study course contents and corresponding academic staff. That will promote students’ satisfaction with the selected study programme; as a result of that there will be promoted the feedback of higher education with the other interested sides including the society on the whole.
3. Students in their assessments about study programme offer and implementation quality criteria importance are guided by their intuitive understanding and their actual needs referring higher education. The most often is the satisfaction of these needs to detect students’ satisfaction of study programme quality, therefore higher education administrators should realise and take into account students’ actual needs when creating programmes and organising study process in higher education institution. At the same time students do not really understand their main role in the provision of study programme quality.
4. Higher education administrators when evaluating study programme offer and implementation quality criteria, base on the acquired knowledge and experience of the higher education quality. However, administrators’ knowledge about students’ needs is not complete, because nowadays a student’s needs are very variable.
5. The two involved expert groups’ assessments about study programme offer and implementation quality differ in several criteria importance. It can be explained by the



## New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

different understanding and knowledge of these two expert groups about the education quality, as well as insufficient research of students' needs and their realisation. In its turn that testifies of the necessity to form the dialogue between the interested sides in higher education to form a unite understanding about the quality of higher education and study programmes.

### References

1. Accreditation in the European Higher Education Area, [http://www.aic.lv/bologna/Bologna/contrib/State\\_m\\_oth/ECA\\_on\\_Bergen.pdf](http://www.aic.lv/bologna/Bologna/contrib/State_m_oth/ECA_on_Bergen.pdf).
2. Baartman L.K.J., Bastiaens T.J., Kirschner P.A., & Van der Vleuten C.P.M. (Maastricht University, Netherlands) The wheel of competency assessment: Presenting quality criteria for Competency Assessment programmes, *Studies in Education Evaluation*, No. 32, 2006, pp. 153-170.
3. D.Royce Sadler (Griffith University, Australia) Interpretations of criteria – based assessment and grading in higher education, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30, No. 2, April 2005, pp. 175-194.
4. Dr Declan Kennedy Writing and Using Learning Outcomes. A Practical Guide, Quality Promotion Unit, University College Cork (Ireland), 2007, 100 p.
5. International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), 2001, Annex: Clarification and Glossary, <http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/definitives.htm>, [http://www5.lu.se/upload/EQ11/Policyforqualityassuranceandqualityenhancementofeducation2009\\_2012.pdf](http://www5.lu.se/upload/EQ11/Policyforqualityassuranceandqualityenhancementofeducation2009_2012.pdf).
6. Lund University's policy for quality assurance and quality enhancement of education, 2009-2012.
7. Quality Assurance at Lund University: Guidelines for the period 2006-2008, Office of Evaluation Lund University (Sweden), Report No. 2007: 243.
8. T.Saaty. The Analytic Hierarchy Process. New York: Mc Graw-Hill International, 1980.
9. Teresa Guasch, Ibis Alvarez & Anna Espasa. Criteria for ICT – supported Higher Education Teachers Training, University of Catalonia, Spain, 2006. [http://www.tlcentre.net/resource\\_files/resources/94/Criteria.pdf](http://www.tlcentre.net/resource_files/resources/94/Criteria.pdf).
10. University of Exeter, 2004, TQM Manual, Learning and Teaching Definitions, <http://admin.exeter.ac.uk/academic/tls/tqa/Part%203/3Amodapp1.pdf>.
11. Никитина Н.Ш., Щеглов П.Е. Качество высшего образования. Риски при подготовке специалистов. Журнал „Университетское управление: практика и анализ”, 2003, No. 3.