QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER BULGARIAN CONTEXT

© **Valentina** Mɪʟᴇɴᴋᴏᴠᴀ
(South West University, Sofia, Bulgaria)

vmilenkova@gmail.com

Development of European higher education, part of which is the Bulgarian, is connected with the whole modernization process of different educational aspects, research activities and innovations, as well as with improving congruence, flexibility, and adaptation to social needs. One of the aims of further education, especially higher education is to stimulate individuals to form a positive attitude towards ICT and a motivation for improving qualification and competitiveness. The paper is concentrated with the relationships between various meso and micro variables and the effectiveness of learning experiences of students in Bulgarian higher education context. The analysis revealed different aspects of the relationship between Bulgarian young people and ICT: positions, opinions, and attitudes; and the significance of computer technologies in education, their effectiveness, as well as an understanding of high-qualified people. The second part of the paper is oriented towards the evaluation process in university education. The paper is based on sociological surveys conducted in South West University during the last few years with students and lecturers at the university. The paper aims to present information about the learners' positions on the provided education, including expectations towards quality of education, facilities in student's environment, support received, etc. So, the evaluation and choices of different individuals are influenced by the specific institutional and structural settings, which have determined student's perception of aspects such as supporting or discouraging personal learning. The paper intends to follow these micro and meso (institutional) level characteristics as part of a complex degree of factors that could stimulate or hamper a persons' motivation to participate actively in further education.

Keywords: higher education, quality of education, assessment methods, ICT, effectiveness

Theoretical framework and Methodology

Development of European higher education, a part of which is the Bulgarian, is connected with the whole modernization process of different educational aspects, research activities and innovations, as well as with improving congruence, flexibility, and adaptation to social needs. In modern society the need for the creation of new elements and ideas is a dominating concept,

based on the values of democracy and free education. One of the aims of further education, especially higher education, is to stimulate individuals to form a positive attitude towards ICT and motivate them to enhance their qualification and competitiveness. The core of higher education in its essence approves an institution which: 1) is oriented towards deeper and more detailed personal instruction, training and qualification in comparison with secondary education; 2) requires the presence of a secondary level educational degree; 3) has a voluntary nature and it can't be enforced upon anyone. In addition, people oriented to higher education "go" there following his/her envy and will, with different motivation, but all of them "go" with the idea, that the higher education is something necessary and important for their life as individual and personal values.

The transformation of higher education into mass education imposes the creation of a large number of institutions and programs as well as the worldwide increase in the number of universities. This growth in interest towards Higher education led to the establishment of new forms and methods of education, which in turn created a number of challenges related with the efficiency and quality of the offered education. The problem with the quality of Higher education is brought forward due to dissent from employers who complain that graduates are poorly prepared as a result of the oversaturation of the tertiary education market (Royal, 2011).

The quality of Higher education reflects the relationship between society and tertiary education institutions; it is also a combination of various scientific, social, cultural and economic factors, revealing the significance of the market economy as a tool for controlling Higher education. In a constantly changing dynamic world the quality of education is a continuous process which depends on a positive outcome in the relationship between the various "actors" involved – lecturers, students, parents, state institutions, private partners.

The present paper is concentrated with the relationships between various meso and micro variables and the learning experiences of students in the context of Bulgarian higher education. The analysis is based on sociological surveys of the education process at Southwest University (Bulgaria) carried out through the last few years. The analysis revealed different aspects of the relationship between Bulgarian young people and ICT: positions, opinions, and attitudes; and the significance of computer technologies in education, their effectiveness, as well as an understanding of high-qualified people. The paper aims to present information about the learners' positions on the provided education, including expectations towards quality of education, facilities in student's environment, support received, etc. Because the system thinking is based on the concept that all key processes in an organization are interrelated, and understanding these relationships is critical to obtaining the desired results (Furst-Bowe, 2011:5).

Southwest university (in Bulgaria) is a specific higher education state institution that guarantees the admittance of students with different social background, ethnic profile, religion, and family milieu. The students at the university are predominantly from different South West and North West Bulgarian areas, but in addition there are some from neighbouring countries – Macedonia, Greece and Turkey. The team from Sociology department carried out a survey in 2003 "Disposition of foreign students towards the study process at SWU" (*the team leader is M. Serafimova*). All foreign students at the university (390 persons) were interviewed throughout the conducted survey. In the process of our work the idea to create a representative sample from Bulgarian students arose, which would present a control group in order to compare the obtained results.

With the questions used in the survey the respondents were asked to evaluate: 1) specific conditions under which the study process is conducted; 2) the facilities which exist in the study environment at the university. Conventionally this panel of questions was named "Objective conditions for successful training and education" and it included: students' access to computers and Internet, access to textbooks and appropriate materials. At the same time parallel with the real education conditions and environment, the research team had formulated another group of questions, oriented at revealing students' evaluation of real providing study process in auditoria and university halls, which is a function of lecturer's activity, approach to students, lecturers' ambitions and personal characteristics, presuming different levels of engagements through the education situations. This group of questions was named "Evaluation in study process and lecturers' qualities". In addition there were other results and data obtained from surveys carried out in university during the last years presented in the paper, especially a survey with students and lecturers from Southwest University carried out in 2010, with goal to discuss assessment methods used and students' evaluation of the educational process.

Objective conditions for successful training and education
Access to Internet

The implementation of informational technologies is a key element in the process of modernization, that's why computer literacy is one of the basic skills for competency. The young people are the most appropriate age group being mobile and able to respond to environmental changes, a part of which are computers. These changes are needed because computer literacy has become an important part of qualification requirements and are connected with successful professional realization. It is necessity to note that the Southwest University curricula offers education for the most informational' specialties and computer technologies. At the same time the access to Internet is a basic condition required to improve the quality of education and to sustain active communication – between students and professors (through e-mails, chats, blogs, etc.). One of the main reasons for fast growth of the importance of computers in educational communication is the fact that this is the cheapest and the most effective way to contact with students, colleagues, friends, and peers.

In the carried out in 2003 survey approximately 2/3 of all foreign students educated at South West University had access to computers (64.9%) and to Internet (65.6%) – see Figure 1.

The situation with Bulgarian students is identical: 66.1% of all respondents had access to computers and 58.1% had access to Internet, (See Figure 2.). The accumulation of respondents in two groups is indicative for the presence of available conditions for education as well as for the fact that the whole educational process can develop in accordance with the contemporary tendencies in modern higher education.

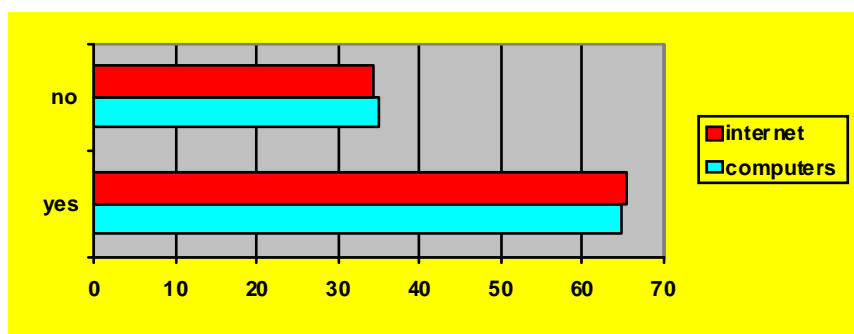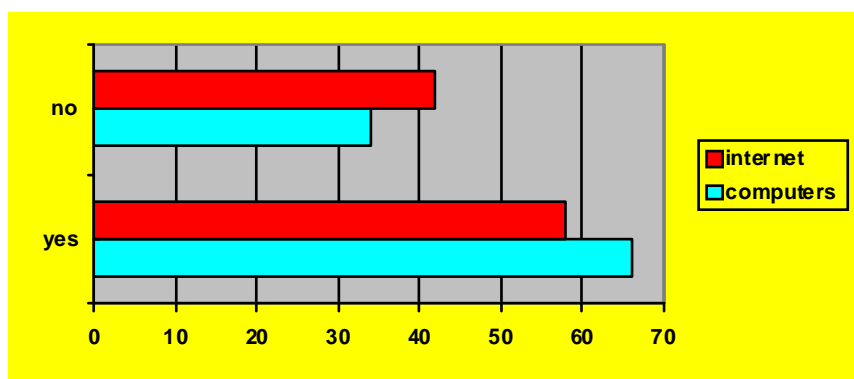Figure 1. *Access to computers and Internet in SWU (Foreign students)*

Figure 2. *Access to computers and Internet in SWU (Bulgarian students)*

Today, eight years later, the data about the access to Internet is quite different due to the increase of computers as a part of the university policy to acquire and enhance computers in university space and guarantee full access to them. The university library, with the readings' halls, computers halls, and laboratories become a part of the natural interior of the university. That means that there is a constant access to computers and Internet for students. In addition, above 85% of all students have personal laptops. The access to computers and Internet for several years has become a compulsory prerequisite for quality study process and in this direction the SWU guarantees to students appropriate environment and conditions. The computers and access to Internet have real significance only if they support the study process as an improvement in conditions. The basic concept in this aspect is: giving and discussing homework and essays, requiring additional students' deliverances, and supporting lecturer-student networks. An important part of the whole process of new forms of modern communication is for students familiarize themselves with Internet publications and materials.

So, the interest of young people towards education is increasing because the sources of information are enhanced, and the real education process is being modernized. The contemporary dimensions of the education process are not connected only with the lecture hall because they change their specific and content; the personal relations between professor and students include particular new aspects, focused on the technology environment and requirements for globalization of the whole higher education space. That's why it is important to expand requirements for teaching qualification through including new methods in education. The education policy reforms are oriented towards guaranteeing flexible and new technology environment. In this direction it is important to note that the syllabuses of all taught courses are uploaded on the Internet. The lectures are taught through

multimedia and new technology facilities. An important part of university communication is the electronic networks, lecturers' blogs, Internet forums and active contacts supported by the university in order to facilitate dialogue between the educational actors and to enhance learning. The students can express their opinions for the study process and particular details of their experience as well as to discuss aspects of student preparation for seminars and exams. In the process of education the development of students writing skills is key because it is the base for quality papers, essays, and all written assignments during the study process.

All these questions are the objectives of two focus groups carried out with students from Sociology department of SWU in 2009. The students have shared that they use computers and have access to Internet and these elements are normal aspects of their university environment. The participants in the focus groups have stated that they communicate with lecturers by e-mails in order to ask questions and to receive recommendations for their assigned tasks, connected with the learning, as readings, delivering presentations, or other kind of students writing activities. According to students, the participation in-group discussions, the using of computers and Internet influences on the specific aspects required of people to participate in the knowledge and information based society that demands creating skills for lifelong learning and constantly improving individual qualification, knowledge and competencies.

Access to study materials

According to the results of last surveys carried out during 2009, the share of students educating nowadays at SWU who have access to Internet and computers is 100%. That could explain why the students have no problems with readings and providing the tasks assigned by lecturers. We can see a process of improvement to the computer settings in university when comparing the present data with those collected in 2003, when the results obtained from the carried out survey note that 20.7% of all foreign respondents and 24.1% of Bulgarian students declared: "I can't find the readings under the course" (See Figure 3 and 4).

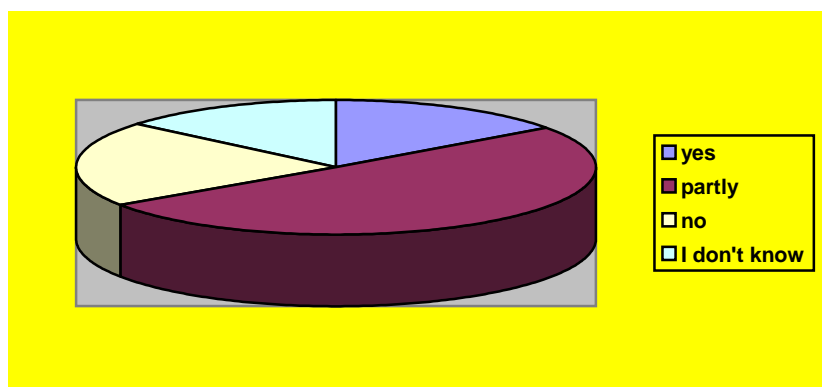Figure 3. *Providing of required materials and readings (Foreign students)*
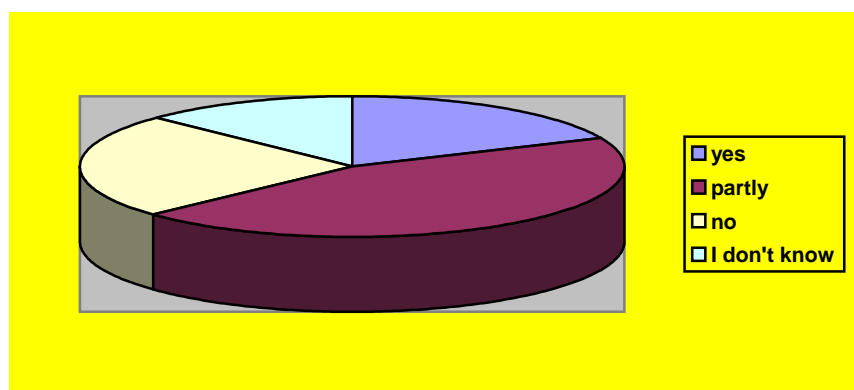
Figure 4. *Providing of required materials and readings (Bulgarian students)*

We have identified that indifferent position towards education is stated by the answer: "I can't find the needed readings" and "I don't know": under Bulgarian respondents the share of aggregated group answers is 37%, and under foreign students this share is 34.5%; or 1/3 of whole surveyed sample has declared in 2003 that they can't find the need readings and study materials, or these students had difficulties to prepare themselves for the seminars and exams.

In this context, in order to avoid the tendency towards increasing the share of students who become indifferent to the study process, lecturers must find different ways to orient their students to a particular piece of information as an effective base for preparing themselves for their assigned tasks.

The access to any sort of required materials which may prove necessary for tasks assigned during particular courses can be viewed as a proof of conditions available for lectures and the studying process during the last few years in the SWU. At the same time it is necessary to note that the advantages of Internet are not used efficiently enough in the educational university process and there is more potential that can be utilized in the university communication and networks in order to perfect teaching and learning methods, benefiting both sides of higher education society (students and lecturers).

The improvement of the conditions and study environment is connected with the access to computers and Internet and all this has influenced the level of higher education bringing it up to date with European requirements. A vital part of the education quality is the evaluation of the university as a whole and we begin with some theoretical reasons.

Evaluation in study process and lecturers' qualities

The evaluation in education is a two-way process between: 1) lecturers-students; 2) students-lecturers. Evaluation is carried out on the students' achievements and it should be impartial, without sympathy/antipathy; or evaluation brings into focus the real student abilities and personalities. The final mark is a result of accumulation and interpretation of gathered information. As a consequence the evaluation reveals the degree of correspondence between achievements and the established standards. The evaluation gives a clear notion for the educational practices and their effectiveness. From this point of view it is vital for the evaluation system to

be reformed and renewed, to improve the old methods and to implement new ones.

The evaluation gives information about: 1) the knowledge of the learning groups; 2) the progress of the educational milieu – the lecturers' professionalism, the classes' organization; 3) the goals set which are in need of fulfillment. These are the reasons due to which evaluation is a complex process. Object of evaluation is the whole system in different aspects of its functioning – practices, experience, innovations, policies, reforms. Evaluation does not have only controlling functions; it also has an encouraging and prognostic role. The goal is to reveal student's potential. From this point of view the students' achievements are a function of: 1) personal and social characteristics (sex, age, social origin); 2) the educational milieu (organization of the study process, lecturers' qualification and skills).

The effectiveness of the system is connected with comparing resources (human, financial, norms) and results. Interpreting the educational milieu and the student's attainments as mutually related characteristics outlines possibilities for the optimization and the improvement of results.

Assessment methods

When choosing methods it is important to offer variety to students in the way which they must demonstrate what they have learned, and to help them to develop a well-rounded set of abilities by the time they graduate. Assessing student learning in ways that offer students, institutions and systems with sound information is a considerable challenge for higher education (Coates & Seifert, 2011).

Assessment is a continuous, ongoing process that involves examining and observing children's behaviors, listening to their ideas, and developing questions to promote conceptual understanding. We will discuss some of the assessment methods used under Bulgarian conditions.

The *test* is a way to achieve impartibility in the assessment process; it should include topics and questions, which have been studied during the length of the course (Aleksieva, 2002). It is the same test for everyone with the same answers and it is known which the correct answers are; the goal is to achieve complete lack of subjectivism in the final mark.

Popular assessment methods are the *written exams. U*nder the *L*aw of higher education the implementation of written exams is mandatory under Bulgarian higher education space.

Another method is the *group discussion* – it is based around the consideration of a specific problem using texts, which are part of the course as arguments. Group discussions encourage critical thinking, including the skills necessary to form and present arguments and comments of the read through the course texts. This method is aimed at the development of academic speech and the verbal culture of the students.

The *essay* is an assessment method that is directed towards the students' academic writing. It encourages the analytical skills and creative thinking. In essays students must express ideas or opinions and support them with facts and empirical data.

Another popular assessment method is the *student paper,* which is oriented to the presentation of a specific book or a part of it. In this method it is imperative for the student to properly organize the information, which he/she intends to put into his/her paper – the ability to synthesize and extract the most important part of the author's ideas.

Group work is also an assessment method in which a specific topic is given to students and they work together in teams - discussing and analyzing various problems. It is also important for group members to be able to properly divide work between participants, to be able to coordinate their efforts and to follow the lines of the academic process.

Every mentioned method motivates and encourages the broadening of student knowledge and understanding. A survey was carried out with students and lecturers from Southwest University in 2010. The goal was to discuss the assessment methods used.

Interpretation frame of the results from the survey

Written exam: 97% of the students said it as the most popular choice for assessment used by the lecturers. The exam is on one, two or parts of several questions that have been discussed during the course. The students develop their answers in written form. Advantages: a chance to concentrate and freely demonstrate knowledge on the subject and analytical thought. Disadvantages: it examines knowledge only on one or parts of several questions and the lecturer doesn't know the full extent of the students' knowledge.

Tests: 62% of students point out that their lecturers use tests. Advantages: Swiftness of assessment and impartibility. Disadvantages: the tests aren't always relevant about the knowledge of the students; often enough the students try to guess the answers or copy someone else's answers. Another problem is that not all of the topics can be turned into test format or to properly display the analytical student's thinking.

Essay – 87% of students answered that this assessment method is applied in their education. The essay encourages creative and analytical thinking. The problem is that the essay is not always able to properly give information about knowledge on a given subject. A serious problem in this context is: the usage of already developed essays; either by students from previous years or by direct (or partial) copying from the Internet and presenting them as their own which renders the idea for independent and creative start of student thinking as pointless.

Papers - they supplement about 62% of assessment according to the students. It is a widely spread method because it is possible to present different and important for the course texts through them, mainly used during seminars.

Group text discussions: this method is used according to 96% of the students. It is mainly applied during seminars but it has become more popular during the lectures; the goal is to implement an interactive approach and achieve a more fluid and untraditional educational process; to seek the opinion of the students in regards to the taught subjects and problems.

Group work is popular assessment method, because it gives specific tasks in the boundaries of the process, which is assigned to students to do. According to 58% of the students group work is used as an assessment method. It develops teamwork and resourcefulness. Disadvantage: the students do not make an equal amount of contribution: there are some who take no part but are still considered a part of the common team project. Group work comes into being when there is a specific topic; not during the whole course.

All of the lecturers have shared that they do not rely on a single assessment method but want to implement all of them since every method develops a different set of skills, valuable pieces of knowledge or important qualification for the students. This is where the complex evaluation

approach, which takes into consideration not only the learned material but also focuses on creativity and analytical skill of the students, is implemented. From this point of view the lecturers believe that all evaluation methods act their roles properly and can be used according to a specific situation.

One of the major problems, which the lecturers point out, is the inability to motivate all of the students to study and prepare their tasks during the semester. It is most common in the frame of the course that there is a core consisting of about 25-30% of all students in the stream who make effort and work hard. The rest are passive, with no ideas or incentive to learn which slows down the whole educational process as the goal of the lecturers is to acquire specific ideas, habits and skills. On the other hand, students share that the lecturers have too high standards; they are very critical and give more than the required amount of texts to learn and work on outside of lectures and seminars.

It may be said that three aspects stand out in the social function of the evaluation system – to account for, to inform and to assist in the making of choices. These functions of the system are viewed as a source of control and a tool, which encourages and supports. In this way the field of related subjects and academic results are thought in their causation with factors such as pedagogical practices, lecturer qualification, and efficiency of educational policies. In this relation it is important to note that evaluation as a process is integrated into the education system, a way in which educational improvement is properly encouraged.

All of this shows the complexity and the multi aspect nature of the evaluation as academic and practical problems in education system, which requires thorough research.

Student's evaluation

Feedback is an important part of evaluation. When a lecturer assesses a specific student and gives him/her a mark he/she correlates it to the personal standards, what the students have shown to him. The lecturers evaluate student's knowledge, way of thinking, ideas and skills. It is important however that the grade has not only an informative plan but must also have a two-way communication.

Student evaluation of teacher performance is one of the most controversial techniques used to identify teacher effectiveness (Marsh et al., 1979). Aleamoni (1981) offers the following arguments to support the use of student ratings of teacher performance:
- ✓ Students are the main source of information about the learning environment, including teachers' ability to motivate students for continued learning, rapport or degree of communication between instructors and students.
- ✓ Students are the most logical evaluators of the quality, the effectiveness of, and satisfaction with course content, method of instruction, textbooks, homework, and student interest.
- ✓ Student ratings encourage communication between students and their instructor.

To know how the students themselves react to their grades and in what degree do they take them into account, do they accept them or reject them, do they strive forward to enhance their skills and widen their knowledge on the topics. This is the main idea of evaluation – rewarding and helping the development of the persons who are evaluated. In a survey carried out in 2003, the students evaluated different characteristics of lecturer'

professionalism and qualification, as followed: systematic organizing of the study contents; lecturers' erudition; lecturers' creativeness during the classes; particular materials in lecturing; constant dialogue with students; providing interactive education; fairness and objectivity during assessment. All these aspects of lecturers' professionalism are evaluated by students under five-degree scale, from "completely agree" to "completely disagree". The option "lecturers' professionalism" is a result of additional data processing. It is necessary to note that most students (72%) have marked the answers: "completely agree" (25%) and "agree" (48%) with the professionalism of professors and their qualities. This result has signed high student evaluation of lecturers at university as active involved specialists (See Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Student Evaluation of lecturers' professionalism*
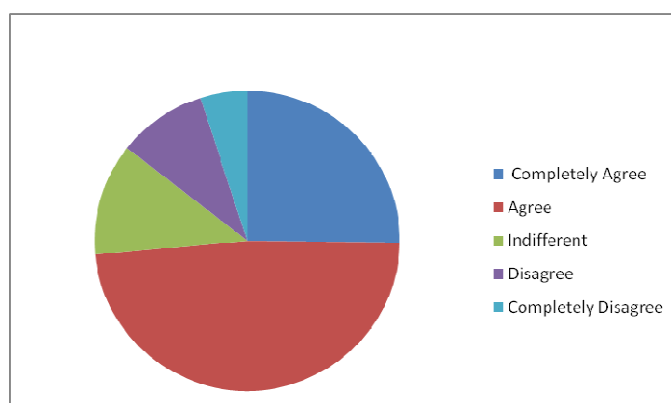
Approximately 1/3 of the inquired (under the 2003 survey) : foreign students (23.3%) and Bulgarian (20.0%) have declared that the lecturers are not objective in their assessment and position towards all students; meaning that in the process of assessment fairness and equity are not the main values shared by lecturers at the university.

It is necessary to note that according to our respondents – Bulgarian and foreign students, the lecturers don't sustain interactive education and open relations with students. Bulgarian students demonstrate higher critical approach towards the study process in comparison to foreign students at Southwest University. This active students' disposition improves the quality of education, since it creates a framework based on different student demands towards the whole education and lecturers' qualification. The education criteria are built on a set of interrelated core values and concepts, including visionary leadership, learning-centered education, and systems perspective (Furst-Bowe, 2011:3).

In addition there can be seen opinions from a carried out in 2007 sociological survey of students' evaluation of quality of education (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Student evaluation of quality of education under the scale from 1(the highest) to 4 (the lowest)*
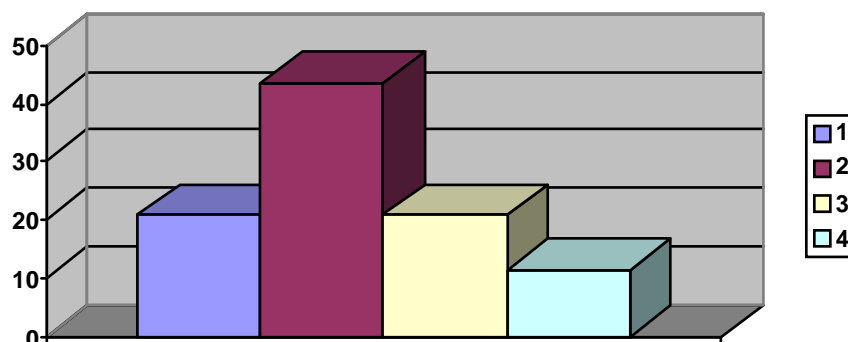
"1 – Excellent" "2 – Good"; "3 – Satisfactory"; "4 – Bad". The results are as follow: 1 - 20.8%; 2- 43,4%; 3 - 20,8%; 4-11.3%. The results reveal students' evaluation of quality of education as "Very good", which confirms the positive impressions presented in the text and the other data obtained from the 2003 survey.

Conclusion

If I have to summarize the results obtained from our surveys, oriented towards teaching and assessment provided at Southwest University and different options of the environment as computers and technologies as well as students' evaluation of lecturers' professionalism and quality of education, it is necessary to note that at this university the objective conditions and study process are at a high level. Students note that they have access to Internet and computers, that the education is influenced by all elements of new informational technologies.

Creating conditions appropriate to interactive education, an important part of which are technologies and all traits of effective pedagogy milieu are connected with basic reforms and advanced aspects of European higher education space. Quality of education including university environment and lecturers' professionalism is connected with the modernization of higher education. In this context emerge the basic elements in the Strategy of the European Commission for supporting European higher education, connected with: improving information quality, enhancing attractiveness and competitiveness of universities, sustaining partnerships, enforcing the dialog and improving mechanisms for mobility. So, the opportunities for individuals are influenced by the specific institutional and structural settings, which have determined student's perception as supporting or discouraging a person's desire for learning.

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