INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOTIVATIONS AND SATISFACTION WITH THE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

A. Mucsi, E. Malota, A. Török

Corvinus University of Budapest (HUNGARY)

Abstract

The current research investigates the initial motivational factors that drive students to study abroad and explores the connection between the initial motivations and satisfaction with the higher educational institution by the end of the program.

For our exploratory research, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with international students of various nationalities who participated in study abroad programs across the globe.

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed 6 different groups of motivation that are rooted in social pressure, life experience, career building, cost-efficient education, educational immersion and country specific.

The satisfaction is more likely in case the life experience or the country specific motivational groups were dominant, while the prevalence of other categories may decrease international student satisfaction.

All together those international students who thrive to collect life experience and learn about the host country generally handle study abroad difficulties as challenges to be solved, that further increases their satisfaction.

Based on the suggested model, higher educational institution can forecast the amount of support needed for international students to maximize their study abroad satisfaction.

Keywords: international students, study abroad motivations, push-pull factors, satisfaction in higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of international education was already established in the Middle Ages, but it was only in the second half of the 20th century that it gained ground because of the exponentially growing number of international students. In 1975, only 800,000 foreign students enrolled worldwide, while in 2015, the number of foreign students exceeded 4.5 million (OECD, 2017). Several sources draw attention to the fact that in addition to the general educational content, the specialization of given courses will become more and more necessary [1]. This process also highlights and valorize the importance of international education [2].

The aim of the research is to understand to what extent and how each motivational factor is fulfilled and how it affects the satisfaction of the students, and due to the above mentioned factors how their willingness to use positive word of mouth changes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Motivations

McMahon [3] was among the first ones to investigate the motivation of foreign students. He identified global push factors and pull factors that vary from country to country. Students’ decisions about studying abroad are influenced by many push motivations and pull factors. The student first decides whether he or she wants to study abroad (push factors) instead of choosing domestic higher education, then selects the host country (the role of pull factors increases), and then decides on the host institution, which is dominated by pull factors [4].
2.1.1 Push factors

The most important push factors include for instance the desire of understanding different societies [5], low tuition fees and living costs in the host country, the reputation, the perceived quality and facilities of foreign institutions [6], the perceived value of a foreign diploma, the difficulty of getting into Hungarian higher education, and the chance of settling abroad. According to Leutwyler and Meierhans [7] the motivations of foreign students are based on personal, professional and cultural backgrounds.

According to a survey of 1566 foreign students in Hungary, the three most frequently mentioned reasons for the decision to study at a Hungarian higher education institution are the high quality of the education (46%), the desire to learn about another culture (46%) and affordable prices (43%). These three factors stand out high on the list, the other mentions were only below 25% [6], [8].

2.1.2 Pull factors

The biggest pull factors include the knowledge and image of the target country, the social and cultural relationship between the sending and receiving countries, the geographical proximity, the development of the alumni network and the possibility of accepting student's previous results [4]. Word of mouth and family relationships also play a role in selecting an institution [9]. Institutions can engage in this organic referral process through the early involvement of potential students [10].

2.1.3 The role of motivational factors in higher education

Push and pull motivational factors highlight why foreign students choose a target country or higher education institution over another. Based on this, the strengths and weaknesses of individual countries and institutions can be assessed and the most appropriate marketing mix for internationalization of higher education can be developed [11].

2.2 Satisfaction of foreign students

The host country and the host institution have a fundamental influence on the satisfaction of foreign students. Based on the expectation-disconformity paradigm [12], the level of satisfaction with the institution is determined by the direction and the difference in the perceived quality expected before and during the study abroad. If the perceived quality reaches or exceeds the expectations, the student is satisfied with the institution, otherwise he or she will be dissatisfied, which could be expressed actively or passively. According to Bernd Wächter [13], for students studying in their home country, academic factors (level of education and knowledge of professors) determine satisfaction, while in the case of foreign students, the possibility of personal development, the local atmosphere (city, country) and career building also appear as an influencing factor.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

In the research qualitative approach was used. 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews were made with foreign students studying in Europe, which were processed with qualitative content analysis. Based on Horváth and Mitev [14], purposive sampling was used, however, in order to increase diversity and for the possible generalization of the research results, the proportion of European and non-European interviewees was determined at 50-50%.

Interviews were conducted in two phases with double-expert coding [15]. The qualitative content analysis was inductive, therefore it was done according to unspecified categories, but in case of necessity, deductive elements were also included on the basis of the literature. [16]. The above approach allows a new modeling and grouping of motivational factors of foreign students based on the collected data, also relying on existing literature, with aim to expand it.

Due to the qualitative nature of content analysis, the thoughts of the interviewees were systematically analyzed in a given context based on a predetermined coding system [17]. The quantitative analysis of interview transcripts, which measures the frequency of words and phrases, is not part of the research.

4 DISCUSSION - DEFINITION OF THE MOTIVATIONAL GROUPS

Satisfaction with the host country and the host institution is greatly influenced by the extent to which initial motivations and those ones after the start of the semester are met at the end of the foreign study program. The initial motivation of the students was categorized in 6 groups based on the level of
satisfaction. The motivation categories identify foreign study goals along which students have assessed as the success of their foreign study abroad program. If the student succeeded in these motivational categories, other negative experiences soon became insignificant, for example, the student was generally satisfied despite the lower level of the education.

4.1 Social compulsion
In the case of motivations based on social constraints, the student did not decide based on personal interest on the beginning of the foreign semester, but tried to satisfy an external pressure. Students spoke about this kind of motivation for instance in the following fashion: "Most of my colleagues have a foreign diploma, so it was time for me to think about it."

4.2 Cost-effective education
Mobility programs are receiving more and more support which makes foreign study programs more attractive. Some of the students can only travel abroad through scholarship programs: "I heard about a European scholarship opportunity and I applied for it. The scholarship was the most important, I wouldn't have gone abroad without it".

4.3 Career building
Only a quarter of the 20 students surveyed mentioned career development as the main motivating factor: "I study in Germany in order to work later in Europe" or "The job opportunities are better abroad, but first I have to experience life there".

4.4 Deepening studies
For those students who were focusing on academic outcomes, the quality of education, the wide range of subjects, the reputation and prestige of the institution were the most important factors, in line with the pull factors defined: "I just wanted to go to a very well-known university having a good reputation worldwide".

4.5 Getting to know the country
For most of the students, getting to know the country appeared in some form at least as secondary motivation. Most often, the aim was to learn the local language, and to get to know the lives of local people, to travel in the country or visit a city: "I chose Prague because it is a beautiful city and I wanted to get to know Central-European culture, including the history of the country and the current political background."

4.6 Gaining life-experience
For most foreign students, the desire for gaining personal experience dominated: "I wanted to meet new people, I wanted to do something else. The point was to go to a country where they don't speak English, so I'll be out of my comfort zone. This category is often coupled with the need to know a particular country.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
As the result of the research 6 motivational groups with the following levels of satisfaction were identified. In summary, among the initial motivational groups of students, those who pursue to get to know the country and to gain life experience are more flexible in dealing with the difficulties encountered during the study program abroad, and in many cases they see them as challenges, which further increase their satisfaction (if the solution is successful). It is recommended to draw the attention of these students to the free university programs and cheap travel options (group travel). In the case of students focusing on career building and studies, networking and the attention of the professors are the most important factors, so the international office could coordinate with the appropriate lecturers regarding the different type of motivations of the students. Foreign students seeking to gain life experience and to get to know the country are expected to be the most satisfied, and they should be involved in helping the work of international coordinators and student organizations.
Future research direction may be to investigate the impact of student satisfaction on the functioning and effectiveness of higher education institutions, and how the classical satisfaction-loyalty relationship can be interpreted in the context of universities [18].

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REFERENCES