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Support Services at Spanish and U.S. Institutions: A Driver for International Student Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Many institutions of higher education are promoting campus internationalization as a core principle through international student mobility and, as a result, have expanded rapidly in enrollment. To effectively serve this growing population, many campuses have had to strengthen their student support services. However, while many have well-developed programs for students in general, not all services are designed to specifically cover the needs of international students. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview on research conducted on the topic of international student satisfaction with university support services as a means to ensure a positive student experience. It also provides a new research approach for comparing how support services for international students are structured at Spanish and U.S. institutions.

Keywords: support services, satisfaction, international students, assessment

Over the past 50 years, many institutions of higher education around the world have seen record-high enrollments of international students on their respective campuses. Globally, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside of their country of citizenship increased more than three times, from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 5 million in 2015 (OECD, 2015). While we must carefully differentiate between the two types of mobility involved, degree-seeking mobility and credit mobility, there is an overall increasing interest in students going to study abroad. The presence of

international students on university campuses can be seen as a major benefit in providing campuses with diversity, pluralism and opportunities for cross-cultural learning and engagement (Willer, 1992) but this continued growth in enrollment is calling for a closer look at the needs of this population and its level of satisfaction with university services.

While international student enrollment is a key strategy and often the measure for comprehensive internationalization at many institutions, it is important that the support services offered match the needs of this population. Doing so allows for the wider university community to benefit from the global perspective these students bring along with them and maintain an inclusive climate that supports the academic and personal growth on campus (ACE, 2015). As Choudaha (2016) points out, a majority of institutions still struggle to allocate adequate resources and expertise needed to meet the university expectations and experiences of their high-paying international students, potentially leading to lower levels of satisfaction and a negative impact on future recruitment. It is therefore imperative for student affairs professionals and support staff to provide essential services to this community and help move “the internationalization of higher education from vision to reality” (ACE, 2015).

This paper discusses the role of support services for international students as an important driver in the internationalization efforts of a university and provides an overview of assessment tools that institutions in Spain and the U.S. are using to measure international student satisfaction. Since support services can be a key factor in attracting and retaining international students, we offer a strong argument for why universities need to better understand the level of satisfaction of these students with the support services they offer.

A review of existing literature was conducted on support services for international students as well as the most-widely used tools and measures by institutions to assess the satisfaction of international students with campus services. Moreover, a quantitative survey focused on international student satisfaction with support services at selected Spanish and U.S. universities was launched. In doing so, it was also important to identify the context of student mobility relevant to universities in both countries. Due to a lack of literature or comparable study addressing similar questions in a Spanish and U.S. context, it was important for us to reflect on the first main difference between both countries—the definition of credit mobility. In Spain for instance, credit mobility, which is described as temporary mobility in the framework of ongoing studies at a “home institution” for the purpose of gaining credit, is the most common type of mobility for international students (Kelo, Teichler, & Wächter, 2006). On the other hand, in the U.S., most international students participate in degree mobility programs, which is described as learning mobility for a degree

purpose, even if only a part of the program is studied abroad (Maunimo Project, 2013).

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: MEANING AND IMPORTANCE

According to several national and local sources such as the UK International Higher Education Unit report (Archer, Jones, & Davidson, 2010) and the Australian Education International report (2015) elaborated by International Education Association, ISANA, most students who have been abroad for a period of their studies will recommend their stay to their peers. In fact, international students look more satisfied with the stay in the country abroad than with the quality of their studies abroad (ESNsurvey, 2013). However, while most international students recommend their experiences abroad, there are a few other aspects to consider in order to improve student satisfaction on campus. Three of the most important concerns about studying abroad are: the academics--professors, lessons in different languages, methods used; city and culture--where the city is located, how is the atmosphere there; and university services--accommodation, counseling, information desk, integration activities (Studyportals, 2013). Figuring out the best way to meet the needs of international students is not an easy process (ACE, 2015). Even international students at any single institution face different issues and might need a diverse set of support services.

In their report on international student support in European Higher Education, Kelo, Roberts, and Rumbley (2010) suggest that student services have a potentially important role to play in terms of attracting and retaining international students, as well as building momentum for future recruitment of high-quality students. Additionally, the feedbacks of international students have to be assessed in order to identify their needs and provide the best support service to increase their satisfaction. Providing programs and services to more international students is becoming central to the work of all students' affairs professionals at the university, not just those who work in the international office (ACE, 2015). One could therefore argue that support services and international student satisfaction can be achieved if all stakeholders at the university work together to enhance the campus internationalization process, which "has become an indicator for quality in higher education" (de Wit, 2011). In other words, the satisfaction of international students with provided services could be one of the key drivers for campus internationalization.

Diverse studies and reports have agreed with the fact that international students might have different needs depending on their length of studies abroad. In the report on *International Student Lifecycle* by the Higher Education Academy (2015), best practices are gathered and categorized by different phases of experience or periods of time. For

example, issues before arrival or pre- arrival information, arrival support, induction and welcome, learning in the classroom (academics) and learning in a new environment or life outside the classroom and the completion and return (cultural reverse shock). It is therefore key to emphasize the importance of support services in the satisfaction of international students as they are not only influenced by their academic or learning experience in the classroom. According to the last report from i-graduate (2015), student satisfaction is not necessarily correlative with the quality of the programs being taught. They also mention that the analysis is intended to shed light on international student experience, rather than course quality, which it is related to different support services for international students.

One of the well-received services by international students occurs in their very first days at their new institutions. Such programs are usually called orientation programs, welcome days or induction days. According to Evans et al. (2009), the transition to university can be exciting, unfamiliar and challenging for domestic and international students. They arrive to a new culture, environment, climate and usually a different language. For that reason, many universities offer a variety of support services, such as orientation programs.

There are different types of services that universities provide to their international students. The Academic Cooperation Association report (2015) states that the most important support service areas identified by students included information and orientation, integration activities with local students, the institution, and/or surrounding community, language support, other practical considerations, including assistance with visas and other administrative procedures; housing; support for families; and career and internship guidance (Kelo et al., 2010). From a different perspective, the American Council on Education (2015) recommends four key areas to provide the best student experience -welcoming international students, adjusting services and programs to meet their needs, facilitating integration between international and other students, and assessing students' experiences. Depending on the phase international students are in, their needs and service perception might change. A favorable level of satisfaction is important in all phases of their international student lifecycle.

These first few days are critical for international students to engage and integrate with the university, the new culture, environment and new friends. There are different orientation models that have proven to be effective but the successful ones usually involve a collaboration of support offices across campus and participation by their staff. As such, it is crucial for all stakeholders within their university to understand the importance of internationalization and be provided with relevant training and knowledge in order to be able to provide the best services possible to international students. The REACT project (2013), funded by the European Commission,

has developed a project to include and integrate all members of the staff in the internationalization process. Their aim was to put together a compendium of good practices to better understand the needs of international students. The main objective of the REACT project was to provide tools for improving staff members' skills in regards to supporting foreign students, broadening horizons and administrative staff's perception of international students' needs, opening and sensitizing them to their problems, as well as making people aware of the necessity to improve their knowledge of foreign languages, the role of training in cultural differences and student-client care.

The continued growth of mobility numbers in terms of students willing to study abroad has pushed many universities to focus not only on the academic aspects of the student experience but also on the needs that international students might have concerning services and matters related to their stay and comfort. In that sense, it is argued that the European higher education must recognize that student services represent a powerful tool for enhancing the quality and sustainability of the internationalization agenda, not to mention the overall competitiveness of the sector (Kelo et al., 2010).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SATISFACTION TOOLS

In an effort to identify a group of providers that offer a survey instrument for assessing student satisfaction, we found that both Spanish and U.S. institutions use a variety of assessment tools that focus on campus support services. Below, we present five of the most-widely used tools:

International Student Barometer. The International Student Barometer (ISB), developed by the company i-graduate International Insight company, offers a tool that tracks and compares the decision-making, expectations, perceptions and intentions of international students from application to graduation, including the scope of support services (i-graduate, 2015). It enables institutions to make informed decisions to enhance the international student experience and drive successful recruitment and marketing strategies.

Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Ruffalo Noel-Levitz is focused in a survey for international students only in the U.S., asking them to rate their satisfaction with key areas of student life and learning, as well as the importance of each of these issues (Noel-Levitz, 2015). The data reveal what these students value and how they compare to domestic students. These results can help campuses not only understand how to attract international students to their institutions, but how to keep these students satisfied and guide them to graduation.

Studyportals. StudyPortals is the global study choice platform. Their first priority is to have the most comprehensive information on study opportunities all over the world. They have analyzed the satisfaction of international students with a unique insight into what students think about studying abroad, gained by reviewing the comments made by international students on the student experience exchange platform.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE survey, launched in 2000 and updated in 2013, assesses the extent to which students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development (NSSE, 2015). The questionnaire collects information in five categories: participation in dozens of educationally purposeful activities; institutional requirements and the challenging nature of coursework; perceptions of the college environment; estimates of educational and personal growth since starting college; and background and demographic information.

QS Student Satisfaction. The QS Stars university rating system (QS Top Universities, 2015) evaluates an institution against over 50 different indicators and awards universities between one and five + stars over eight wider fields, as well as an overall rating. One of the indicators measures overall student satisfaction with the university as well as its quality of teaching.

On a national level, governments across the world have launched initiatives to assess and evaluate the quality of education. The Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, in partnership with the International Education Association, carried out a project as part of the Study in Australia 2010 initiative. The project aims to present principles of good practice for enhancing international student experience outside the classroom. The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), UK's national advisory body serving the interest of international students and those who work with them, launched a comprehensive report and guide for international students in relation to their mobility status and support services, such as accommodation information, along with a webpage that contains a wealth of information and practical guides for students and staff.

COMPARING BOTH PERSPECTIVES: SPAIN AND U.S.

Spain Perspectives

In Europe and especially in the Spanish context, the Erasmus program keeps the mobility record and their well-known position as an exchange program. This type of mobility has grown significantly in the last

years. According to the European Commission report Erasmus Figures and Facts (2013), more than 3 million students went abroad for a part of their studies in the 2012-13 academic year. Spanish mobility has been famous for the last years to be the first country with the most incoming and outgoing students under the Erasmus program, according to EC data from 2012-13. Credit mobility is predominant at Spanish institutions as compared to the U.S., where most international students are degree-seeking. According to the *Strategy for Internationalization of Spanish Universities* (2014), Spain receives 2.5% of international students studying worldwide, as compared to the U.S. that has 16.5% of the market share.

In October 2014, the Spanish government launched a *Strategy for Internationalization of Spanish Universities 2015-2020*, which includes the following objectives: gather together staff with international experience, raise the number of mobile students (incoming and outgoing), provide internationalization at home for those students who do not study abroad, increase the attractiveness of the universities and therefore the attractiveness of the campuses, create welcome services (support service for arrival, stay and departure) and identify the potential demand sources for university products and services as well as intensify the Spanish presence as a supplier of university services in other parts of the world. Beyond the directive to formalize the internationalization process at Spanish institutions, these objectives also point to the importance of identifying the needs of international students that can in turn provide them with a satisfactory stay during their program.

Along with service provision and student satisfaction, it is also important to take into account the influencers that impact in the international student experience. Studyportals' 2013 study entitled *Key Influencers of International Student Satisfaction in Europe* states that no Spanish institutions appear in the Top 20 of European universities rated for the level of their international student satisfaction. This is a key factor for institutions to consider as they set their strategic priorities for attracting and retaining international students on their campuses.

Most Spanish universities are set up to have an international relations office with admission, enrollment, and general administrative responsibilities. Co-curricular activities and extra-curricular activities are not centralized in one office at universities but mainly organized by volunteer-based student organizations. There is a strong sense of collaboration and co-ownership at Spanish universities in how support services are provided. Responsibility is spread across the institution as opposed to one dedicated office.

While some institutions use general feedback-oriented surveys that were developed in-house to measure student satisfaction, few use well-grounded benchmarking assessment tools such as the International Student

Barometer (ISB) or QS. There is also no assessment carried out nationally on student support services and international student satisfaction as they relate to the internationalization of Spanish universities (Kelo et al., 2010).

United States Perspectives

The number of international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities has increased drastically over the past 50 years and enrollment continues to grow. According to the Institute of International Education, 974,926 international students studied in the U.S. in 2014-15, representing a 10% increase from the previous academic year (Open Doors Report, 2015). This makes the United States the premier destination for international students, from a degree mobility standpoint, and their presence on university campuses brings to administration a whole new set of responsibilities and challenges for providing effective support services.

As such, attention is increasingly being drawn to the role of U.S. universities in providing support services to international students particularly in the form of a welcoming campus environment, sufficient infrastructure and resources for learning (Burdett & Crossman, 2012). As Choudaha & Hu (2016) point out, international students “often receive less despite paying more” for their educational experience, and their integration and acculturation to the larger campus and local community has become an issue and challenge at many U.S. universities.

Increased immigration regulations and compliance requirements implemented by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in recent years have created a need for more services for international students. Most colleges and universities in the U.S. have specialized offices dedicated to assisting students with navigating complex rules and regulations, in addition to providing cultural programming and engagement opportunities. These services, often referred to as a one-stop shop, along with the need to survey students, are essential to the initial and ongoing success of international students and scholars (Wang, 2007). University support services are important for international students’ successful lives in the host university and society (Cho & Yu, 2014).

It is common for institutions of higher education in the U.S. to centralize support services for international students through one office, unit or department. Such offices, often named Office for International Students and Scholars, Office of International Services, or Office of Global Programs, serve as the designated office at the institution to provide support on immigration and student advising, cross-cultural adjustment, housing, English proficiency, and opportunities to integrate in the campus and local community, to name a few. The role of international student advisors and personnel is critical in sustaining the mission of these offices and ensure a

positive experience for students as they provide assistance across different cultural, social and academic expectations (Dalili, 1982).

In their study, Lee, Abd-Ella and Burks (1981) developed 12 categories to assess the needs and satisfaction of international students at colleges and universities in the United States. These categories were grouped into sections labeled as academic needs, student support services, and psycho-social needs. Lee et al. found that perceived importance exceeded satisfaction for all the categories. Munoz and Munoz's study (2000) focused on the current support services provided at a Southern postsecondary U.S. institution to international students, such as admission information, immigration advising, orientations for new arrivals, personal counseling, housing assistance, contact family program, and social activities. They found that international students agreed that they had received substantial support from the international office for their most important needs. However, they were not as interested in increasing the variety of services provided by the office but mostly in improving the quality of these services.

Table 1: *Survey categories to assess support services at Spanish and U.S. institutions*

Demographics	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Location of institution2. Number of enrolled international students3. Percentage of international students at institution
Support services	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Name of designated office for support services2. Organizational structure of office3. Number of personnel employed4. Types of support services provided by office
Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Development of assessment tool2. Process evaluation3. Data quality and effectiveness
Usefulness	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Ability to implement findings2. Challenges involved with implementation3. Impact of changes on support services

There are several research studies on assessment that was developed internally and conducted at U.S. colleges and universities to measure international student satisfaction with campus support services, namely at Iowa State University (Korobova, 2012), Delaware State University (Ikwuagwu, 2010), University of Southern California (Wongpaiboon, 2008),

Claremont University (Otsu, 2008), and Kent State University (Nieman, 1998). Each one of them highlights the importance of assessing student satisfaction as an international recruitment, retention and student experience tool at their respective institutions.

In addition to the previous findings, the authors conducted a pilot survey to assess and analyze issues related to support services. The pilot study contextualizes both Spain and U.S higher education. A limited sampling of 40 institutions from Spain and the U.S. were invited to participate in a 15-item, anonymous online survey. A response rate of 68% was achieved (15 institutions from Spain and 12 from the U.S.), representing different types of institutions ranging from privately to publicly-owned, small to large student population, low to high percentage of international student enrollment, and different reporting and organizational structures. Survey items were chosen carefully to provide an overview of and assess the main types of support services used in both countries. The survey was developed around 4 primary components—demographics; type of support services; effectiveness; and usefulness.

A scarce body of literature specific to our research interest draws attention to the importance of this pilot study. Our findings reveal how support services are organized and how student satisfaction is assessed at these universities. As discussed in the results section later on, we found that not all universities use a standard assessment tool or an external service provider to measure support services and international student satisfaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative perspective in assessing international student satisfaction on university campuses highlights the importance of how terms are being defined globally. While this paper only looks at support services at institutions in two countries, it identifies multiple differences that need to be addressed. Results presented are based on the literature review done and the preliminary findings on the pilot study.

The biggest difference was in mobility type and mobile student numbers in global terms. While Spain is the premier destination for credit mobility in Europe, the U.S., on the other hand, is primarily host to degree mobility seeking students. The definition of terms used in Spain versus the U.S. is another challenge. In the U.S., an international student is defined as one who holds a non-immigrant visa to study in the U.S. This excludes visiting scholars, employees, permanent residents, refugees, asylees and other immigrant visa holders. Contrastingly, in Spain, all the students from other countries studying at Spanish Universities are defined as international students. They include short-term, transfer students who participate in programs like Erasmus Mundus (Project Atlas, 2001).

Support services provided by institutions in each country were defined by and aligned with the type of student mobility. In the U.S., while some international student support offices also include enrollment management functions, most focus on providing immigration and employment advising services, and programs that promote academic success, international understanding, acculturation sessions and campus and community engagement. Support service offices in Spain are primarily set up to provide services on admission, enrollment, and other administrative issues and, in some cases, health and accommodation information. Language support service was also a common and important service offered to not only international students but also for Spanish students planning to study abroad, a service not widely available across U.S. institutions.

It is common for U.S. institutions to have centralized offices on their campus to serve their international student community. The staff members of such offices have the mission, responsibility and accountability to provide support services to international students. In Spain, however, there is more of a collaborative and co-ownership approach in how support services are provided, where responsibility is shared across the institution as opposed to one specialized office.

How institutions in Spain and the U.S. were assessing the level of international student satisfaction with support services is still unclear as many survey instruments and assessment tools were developed in-house and not available to the general public. Many U.S. universities measure the general satisfaction and engagement level of their students but few instruments focused specifically on international students. Results from the pilot survey showed that 66% of participating institutions (60% Spain, 75% U.S.) used an assessment tool of some sort to measure the level of international student satisfaction with support services on their respective campuses. Most instruments were developed in-house. Others used external services such as the International Student Barometer. 33% of support offices found their assessment tool to be effective in providing important feedback to university officials and were, in turn, able to implement necessary changes based on the received recommendations. These changes occurred in the areas of customer service, student advising, programming and outreach and educational training. When asked what challenges were faced in development and deployment of their satisfaction surveys, several offices indicated issues around the definition and goals of the survey and ensuring that survey items were aligned to these goals. Length of the survey, response rate, language barrier and data analysis were other constraints mentioned.

While it is clear that service quality and general satisfaction studies were common at some institutions, others were doing very little to seek feedback from their students as a way to improve support services. Those actively surveying their students were using different assessment tools to

measure level of satisfaction. That said, there was a limited number of options, in terms of assessment tools, available and many of them were specific to a specific country or audience. Many institutions also chose to develop their own survey instrument and conduct their data analysis in-house.

Table 2. *Comparative framework: Spain and U.S.*

	SPAIN	U.S.
Predominant mobility type	Credit mobility	Degree mobility
Premier destinations	First country in Europe in receiving international students	First country in the world in receiving international students
Definition of International Student (adapted from Project Atlas, 2001)	Students from countries other than Spain studying at Spanish Universities. This includes short-term, transfer students who participate in programs such as Erasmus Mundus.	Students studying in the U.S. on a non-immigrant visa. This excludes visiting scholars, employees, permanent residents, refugees, and asylees.
Global mobility numbers	2.5%	16.5%
Type of University Support Services (in ranking order)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Admission (acceptance letters)2. Academic issues3. Language support4. Practical information5. Community resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Immigration and visa compliance2. Academic success3. Cultural adjustment4. Employment options5. Community resources
Management of services	Decentralized Collaborative and co-ownership approach	Centralized
Assessment tools for international student's satisfaction	Mostly developed in-house	Mostly developed in-house

To further explore how institutions of higher education, both in Spain and in the U.S., are assessing the level of international student satisfaction with university support services on their campuses, the authors

are devising a research study, that will be deployed to a larger number of institutions in both countries. They hope to contribute to further literature on this topic by presenting findings that support a better understanding of what assessment tools institutions are currently using to assess the satisfactions of international students with support services on their respective campuses.

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