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# The Changing Shape of International Education

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# The Changing Shape of International Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

Globalization is a major force driving the demand for international higher education. Organizations are seeking potential employees who possess the ability to interact globally, and University faculty is emphasizing the importance of international experience. Still, there are both advantages and disadvantages associated with studies abroad. This objective of this research is to identify and understand the key reasons why students study abroad. Findings from this study may provide helpful direction for developing future international programs, and explore partnerships between Universities in different countries that best fits student expectation and demands. Specifically, this report answers the following questions; “What are the biggest barriers for students towards studying abroad?” “What are the advantages of international higher education?”, and “How should the future international higher education programs be designed?”.

In order to answer these questions, a mixed-method research approach was taken. This includes a review of existing academic literature and databases, individual in-depth interviews with relevant University faculty in the U.S., Sweden and Italy, followed by survey research. This paper presents the analysis and findings for data collected in the U.S only.

The research will help add new knowledge, and provide useful direction for the design of educational curriculum that expands both the reach and efficacy of cross-cultural, transnational higher education in the U.S. At present, the biggest barriers towards students studying abroad seem to be monetary issues and having to leave friends and family. However, one of the gains for students choosing to study abroad can be a competitive advantage in the labor market. Findings from the research show that most students are valuing the practical experience just as high as the academic content of international education. Students also seem to think that the time spent on academia and practical experience, such as field trips and case studies, should be

divided thereafter. This indicates that if universities want to attract more international students, the future design of international higher education should, besides having a good academic standing, take a more practical approach in order to better fit student demand. Universities should also further develop classes with strong international features to those who do not wish to study abroad in the traditional sense.

*Keywords: International programs, study abroad, higher education, student/faculty mobility, future trends, globalization*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Here information about the current state of international higher education and the underlying factors for the report, leading forward to the problem formulation and the aim of the study, will be presented. The research questions and relevant limitations will also be stated. Globalization is a very timely matter driving the demand for international higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007), thus making internationalization of higher education a major trend (Altbach, 2015). Between the years 1997-2007 participation in study abroad programs has increased by 150% (McKenzie, Lopez & Bowe, 2010). A major reason for this is that the demand for students who have obtained an international education has risen among employers. Employers are demanding the ability to interact globally and this is particularly important for business students. According to Altbach (2002), cited in McKenzie, Lopez & Bowe (2010, p59) “the globalization of business school curriculums is not an option, but a necessity in order to achieve the goal of international sensitivity and awareness among graduates.” Study abroad programs also provide students the possibility to apply what they have learned in the classroom to real-world scenarios and to gain a deeper understanding of different cultures. Exposure to and awareness of different cultures are clearly competitive advantages and are crucial for the success of future of students (McKenzie, Lopez & Bowe, 2010). Currently, most study abroad programs are offered through

institutions at large research universities (McKenzie, Lopez & Bowe, 2010). Small universities also contribute to international education, but since they do not experience the same economies of scale, their associated costs can be much higher than those of larger universities. This has led to many smaller universities purchasing pre-packaged programs or taking after already existing programs in order to provide their students with the opportunity to study abroad. According to Juban et al., 2006 (cited in McKenzie, Lopez & Bower, 2010, p60) this approach has amounted to, “lack of control regarding program design, loss of student credit hours and tuition revenue for the institution, and lack of faculty development”.

When it comes to studying abroad, the attractiveness of the destination to students is highly important. “According to Open Doors (2008), cited in (McKenzie, Lopez & Bowe 2010, p61), Europe is the number one destination, with France, Spain, Italy and the UK occupying the top four spots, with all European destinations accounting for 57% of all U.S. students abroad.” However, this does not necessarily mean that Europe is the most suitable destination for all study abroad programs. Study abroad programs should not be seen as vacations and the destination should have a connection to the origin of the educational purposes. The connection can be cultural, personal interests and contacts, institutional interest or contacts or economic linkage. The more connected the experience is to the educational objectives, the more the students will prosper. It is also important for a study abroad destination to have good logistical solutions (McKenzie, Lopez & Bowe, 2010).

In Europe, to ease the mobility for students among participating countries, there is an initiative called the Bologna initiative (The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, 1999). There is also a European Union program called Erasmus+ that gives students the opportunity to study abroad in participating countries for a period of three to twelve months (Studera.nu, 2015), without having to pay any tuition fee (Studera.nu, 2014). All students within the EU, EES or Switzerland have the opportunity to study in Sweden without having to pay tuition fee (Sveriges riksdag, 2013). Students from other countries are required to pay tuition fee. Fees tend to vary among other European universities and countries (Studyineurope.eu, 2016).

In contrast to the programs offered by the EU through Erasmus, the United States offers individual programs for schools throughout the country. With the exception of military academies, the United States federal government does not directly fund higher education. The US has the most expensive higher education program in the world, often leaving students thousands of dollars (\$USD) in debt upon graduation (Wingfield, 2008). The United States does not have an exchange program such as Erasmus; however, there are still countless opportunities for American students to study abroad. For those students wishing to

study internationally, many colleges and universities across the US have established partnerships with specific universities around the world. These semester abroad experiences are often funded through the tuition that the student would typically pay at his or her home school, making studying abroad as costly as attending school in the US. There are, however, private companies that offer grants and scholarships that range from being merit-based to student specific scholarships based on qualities such as race, gender, religion, or financial situation.

The overall price of international education as a student from the United States often factors into the ultimate decision of whether or not to go abroad and more often than not is seen as a great setback. In a more globalized world, many employees are demanding workers with international education experience.. What can be done in order to increase student mobility? Do the international education opportunities on the market today offer what students are demanding? Is there a way for universities that charge tuition fees to cooperate with universities who do not charge tuition fees in order to provide the best international higher education experience for their students? What should the future of international higher education look like in order to attain more students to match the demand for international education on the globalized market and bring benefits to individuals and society as a whole? To shed light on the different reasons for studying abroad, bring forward suggestions for future design of international programs and partnerships between universities in different countries to better-fit student demands.

## 2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In a more globalized world, many employees are demanding workers with international education experience. What can be done in order to increase student mobility? Do the international education opportunities on the market today offer what students are demanding? Is there a way for universities that charge tuition fees to cooperate with universities who do not charge tuition fees in order to provide the best international higher education experience for their students? What should the future of international higher education look like in order to attain more students to match the demand for international education on the globalized market and bring benefits to individuals and society as a whole?

The research for this project was conducted using a mixed-method approach. The specific questions we seek to answer are:

- What are the biggest barriers for students towards studying abroad?
- What are the advantages of international higher education?
- How should future international higher education programs be designed?

### **3 RESEARCH METHODS**

Combining a quantitative strategy in the form of surveys and a qualitative strategy in form of in-person interviews with faculty, respectively conducted in, Italy, Sweden, and the United States. The research is of a deductive approach in that it mainly focuses on empirical studies and makes use of existing theories in order to analyze the findings and lay out new theories regarding what the future of international higher education will look like and how international programs should be designed.

The secondary data was gathered from different articles and websites and put together in the theoretical framework. The purpose of this information is mainly to shed light on the current situation, possibilities, and trends regarding international education today. To some degree the information also worked as a base for reflection when conducting the analysis. However, most of the work has been put into gathering primary and up to date data, by constructing a survey and interviewing relevant faculty, in order to estimate what may be a suitable direction for constructing the future of international education.

The research results presented in this paper reflect data collected in the U.S. only.

### **4 FINDINGS**

The analysis consists of three sections under which one research question each will be discussed and reflected upon in relation to the primary and secondary data. Starting with the “Biggest Barriers for Students Towards Studying Abroad”, thereafter the “Advantages of International Higher Education”, and ending with the topic concerning “the Future of International Higher Education.”

#### **4.1 Biggest Barriers**

The biggest barrier toward studying abroad seems to be that students view it as being too expensive. This was derived from the survey results and in part corroborated by the fact that the majority of the survey respondents stated that they would only “maybe” consider studying in a country where a tuition fee is charged. Tuition fees have always been charged in the U.S., which is why it came as no surprise that the majority of respondents from the U.S. stated that they would consider it. The interview conducted with faculty from Molloy corroborates with the survey answers: Many students from Molloy seeking to study abroad find the experience too expensive. The majority of respondents who previously had participated in international studies also stated that their biggest disadvantage with their abroad studies were expenses.

#### **4.2 A Clear Advantage**

A clear advantage for individuals who obtain an international education is in the labor market, where the demand among employers for workers who have obtained experience abroad has risen substantially. This theory is strengthened by the example in the United States, where 97% of students who had studied abroad found a job within twelve months after graduation, in difference to

49% of those who did not study abroad. The survey results also showed that one major reason for students to participate in international education is that they consider it to be a good merit to put in their CV. However, according to Altbach (2015) the quality that employers are particularly looking for is the ability to be able to interact globally. Companies are looking to hire people that are tolerant, curious and confident problem solvers, which according to Erasmus Impact, are abilities often acquired when studying abroad. Klooster (2014) also explains that students who study abroad acquire management skills by improving their cross-cultural competencies, making them more independent, flexible and self-aware. All of this supplements the claim that the competitive advantage students obtain from abroad studies is not just the merit in the CV itself, but the experience and qualities they have obtained from their studies overseas. Therefore, it should be important for students to know how to best make use of what they have learned from their international studies and to present their new abilities to employers in an attractive way.

#### **4.3 Future Outlook**

There are a number of outlooks on the future of international education. With the increase in technologies that are available to universities, there are more options created for all types of students who may or may not wish to study abroad in another country. In the surveys, there was an overall consensus among all three countries that both the practical and academic experiences of studying abroad are of equal importance. In order to experience both of these components of international education, one must allow them to be fully immersed in the culture of the country where they are studying. For those who do not wish to study abroad in a different country, yet wish to receive some form of international education, there are methods such as online courses and distance courses that allow students to collaborate with international students without having to leave their home institution. This could perhaps start to become a trend in international education as the Internet makes it easier for people to interact across the globe. In the survey, a moderately strong interest in online international courses was found among all three countries, with Italy showing a slightly higher interest than Sweden and the US. These courses could perhaps provide options for students who cannot afford to go abroad or who do not wish to leave their family and friends behind for a long period of time.

### **5 CONCLUSIONS**

The biggest barriers towards students studying abroad today are the costs associated with the experience, as well as skepticism over leaving behind friends and family and finding accommodations abroad. However, these obstacles can be overcome, and for those who do choose to study abroad there is a lot to gain. These benefits include a greater understanding of different cultures, a competitive advantage in the labor market, a fun experience, and an increase in the student's language and communication

skills. Furthermore, when students are studying abroad, they are often provided with the opportunity to create valuable contacts and develop management skills that could boost their future career. Besides international students experiencing benefits from their experiences abroad, the students who remain at their home university are also affected positively by the international students' stay. By interacting with the international students, the local students to a small extent experience the other person's culture, gain new cultural perspective, and are able to practice their language skills.

The universities who participate in international programs experience monetary benefits, a higher attraction value for potential students, and an increased quality of the education due to the addition of new insights brought in by international students. For society as a whole, international education can be a key factor when dealing with unemployment issues, immigration issues, and conflicts between countries. An increased recognition in university merits in combination with increased language skills and mobility between countries make it possible for academics to move where their professions are demanded and pursue a career there. The expansion in cultural understanding, brought about by international education, should favor mediation when dealing with conflicts between countries. In the long run, the benefits associated with international education may lead to a more unified, peaceful global society.

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