Motivations of Students to Study Abroad

A Case Study of Moldova

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Motivations of Students to Study Abroad: A Case Study of Moldova

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Abstract: In this paper we explore students' motivations to study abroad. A decision to study abroad is not only a complex decision-making process a student goes through, but at the same time is among the most significant and expensive initiatives a student undertakes. Specifically we explore push and pull factors that influence students' decisions to study abroad in the context of students from Moldova. Drawing on extant literature, we developed a conceptual framework of decision-making process and factors influencing study abroad decision, and subsequently designed a questionnaire consisting of 56 items on a 4-point rating scale. Without any ready-to-use dataset of Moldovan students studying abroad, we employed non-probability snowball sampling strategy. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms over a four-week period, generating 151 usable responses. Our findings emerged from the analysis support to a certain degree earlier studies on students' motivations to study abroad, but also provide new, alternative insights into this decision-making process. We also discuss implications for internationalization of companies to emerging economies and home institutions and conclude by providing future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we explore students' motivations to study abroad. A decision to study abroad is not only a complex decision-making process a student goes through (Mazzarol, 1998; Davey, 2005; Eder et al., 2010), but at the same time is among the most significant and expensive initiatives a student undertakes. It is a decision driven by a series of pull and push factors as well as internal, personal aspirations and qualities (Sirowy & Inkeles, 1984; McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Eder et al., 2010; Lee, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2016). Building on extant research on students' motivations and decision to study abroad (e.g., Joseph & Joseph 2000; Shanka et al., 2005; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Wu, 2014; Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016), in this paper we explore push and pull factors that influence students' decisions to study abroad in the context of students from Moldova.

In recent years the exodus of prospect students from Moldova reached an alarming level. Between 2014-2017 the number of prospect students decreased annually on average by 8.5%, compared to an average decrease of 3% between 2010 and 2014, reaching a total number of 74,700 students in 2017 (www.anacip.md). This negative trend is amplified by emigration of Moldovan citizens: according to the 2016 census, the number of citizens decreased by 600,000 in the last 10 years to 2.9 million (https://goo.gl/2OxMgd). A number of factors exist that motivate young Moldovans to study abroad. For example, every year Romania alone offers up to 5,000 higher education scholarships (https://goo.gl/3xTJVL). Or, a large number of Moldovan citizens have dual citizenship – of Republic of Moldova and Romania – the latter offering the opportunity to freely apply and enroll as EU students to EU higher education institutions. These and other push and pull factors to study abroad are explored in this paper in the context of Moldova.

Drawing on extant literature, we developed a conceptual framework of decision-making process and factors influencing study abroad decision. Following the discussion of the framework, we introduce the method we employed to explore the motivations of Moldovan students to study abroad. Borrowing constructs from the literature, we designed a questionnaire consisting of 56 items on a 4-point rating scale. Without any ready-to-use dataset of Moldovan students studying abroad, we employed non-probability snowball sampling strategy. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms over a four-week period, generating 151 usable responses. We next present and discuss our findings that support to a certain degree earlier studies on students' motivations to study abroad, but also provide new, alternative insights into students' decision-making process. We conclude by discussing implications for home and host institutions, and providing future research directions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We conducted a review and synthesis of thematic literature to learn how and why students decide to study abroad (Table 1). Most common model employed by the researchers to investigate these questions is the push-pull model that was borrowed from migration literature (e.g., Lee, 1966). According to Sirowy & Inkeles (1984, p. 65), the motivation to study abroad and the choice of study destinations are "a function of the combined 'pull' factors and 'push' factors as influenced by intervening obstacles". Overall, researchers employ the push-pull model to understand for example flow of international students (McMahon, 1992), motivation to study abroad (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Ahmad, 2016), and selection of a study abroad destination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Eder et. al. 2010). Usually push factors are associated with the home country factors and reinforce student's decision to

undertake international studies. Pull factors are associated with host countries dimensions and make those countries more attractive for students in comparison with other countries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). According to Lee (2014), push factors have more power in shaping incipient motives for studying abroad, while pull factors play a more important role when deciding upon the host country and institution.

Table 1 about here

The literature points to a number of pull factors responsible for the attraction of students to the host country: economic links between the home and host country, size of the home country's economy compared to the one of the host country, interest of the host country in the home country by means of foreign assistance or cultural links and by means of scholarships and other types of assistance, international recognition of qualifications from western higher education institutions, straight-forward and easy application process, excellent teaching and learning environment, job placement after graduation (McMahon, 1992; Broekemier & Seshardi, 2000; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Lee, 2014). Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) suggest clustering the pull factors by: (i) level of knowledge and awareness of the host country in students' home country; (ii) level of personal recommendations that the host country receives; (iii) cost issues including financial and social costs; (iv) environment which relates to physical and study climate; (v) geographic proximity; and (vi) social links which include family/friends living or studying in the host country.

Push factors emerged in the literature include, better quality of overseas courses compared to local ones, difficult to gain entry at home, unavailability of courses at home or incapacity to meet the demand for HE in home institutions, a better understanding of West, and intention to

migrate, political instability, personal growth, improved employment opportunities (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Eder et al., 2010).

Overall, the decision-making process to study abroad is seen being comprised of three stages (e.g., Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007). Predisposition stage: being influenced by the push factors, the student decides to study internationally instead of locally. Search stage: the student decides upon the host country; here, pull factors 'make' one country more attractive than another. In the last stage, choice stage, the student decides upon the host institution; here, additional pull factors balance the situation favouring a particular foreign higher education institution.

Over the years, replication studies in different contexts allowed to enhance the push-pull model. Li & Bray (2007) introduced into the push-pull model internal factors or personal characteristics that also play a role on prospect students' decision to study abroad. These include for example, socio-economic status, academic ability, gender age, motivation, and aspiration (see also, Cubillo et al., 2006). Li & Bray further distinguish between negative push factors that force students to pursue an international higher education and positive pull forces which encourage students to study at home. That is, prospective host countries and institutions do not only attract international students through positive pull forces but also discourage them through negative forces. Eder et al. (2010) introduced into the push-pull model structural factors, arguing that these factors may prevail over the attractiveness of a country and include for example visa issues, changes in regulations, monetary issues, and scarcity of part-time-job opportunities (see also, Maringe & Carter, 2007. This type of factors could be either barriers or facilitators, motivating or constraining a student from selecting a specific destination. Based on the above review and synthesis, we have developed a

conceptual framework that we employed to guide our data collection, analysis and discussion of findings (Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

Factors Affecting Student's Decision to Study Abroad

The decision to study abroad is assumed to be influenced by three groups of factors. The first group consists of push factors, incl., unavailability of a particular study program (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007), lower quality of education, intention to migrate (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, Bodycott, 2009), prestige of foreign degrees (Chen, 2007). The second group of factors – students' characteristics – comprises the following individual factors: personal satisfaction, valuing a foreign degree, enhancing job and earning prospects (Chen, 2007), living in a different culture (Lee, 2014), improving language skills (Chen, 2007; Lee, 2014) and gaining freedom from family (Chen, 2007). The last group of factors consists of recommendations from friends, family and/or professors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Lee, 2014).

Factors Affecting Student's Country Selection

The selection of a host country is conjectured to be influenced by five groups of factors. The first group of factors, level of knowledge and awareness, includes factors such as easiness of obtaining information about the country, knowledge of the host country, quality of education in the host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Lee, 2014). The second group of factors contains cost issues such as lower tuition fees, travel costs, cost of living, as well as factors related to the possibility of finding a job in the host country after graduation, a safe environment, and the established community of (Moldovan) students in the

specific host country (Broekemier & Seshardi, 2000; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Lee, 2014). In addition to these, we have included in the second group the possibility to combine studies with a part-time job and the financial support from host country's government. The third group of factors, environment, includes comfortable climate, exciting place to live and studious environment (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Following Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Eder et al., (2010) and Lee (2014), geographic proximity is another factor influencing country selection. The final set of factors - significant others – consists of level of referrals coming from friends and family, as well as, the social links, meaning family and friends living and/or studying in that specific country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Lee, 2014).

Factors Affecting Students Choice of Institution

Factors which influence the selection of an institution are divided into three groups: academic, administrative, environment/location. Academic pulling factors include institution prestige, reputation for quality of education and staff (Broekemier & Seshardi, 2000; Chen, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011, Lee, 2014), and links with other institutions (Lee, 2014). Administrative pulling factors comprise recognition of previous qualifications, abroad range of courses, lower entry requirements, accommodation offered, availability of detailed information about the institution or the efforts of marketing the institution in Moldova (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Lee,2014). Environment/location group of factors include a large number of international students, institution safety and security, location, facilities and social life (Broekemier & Seshardi, 2000; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, Bodycott, 2009).

RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore pull and push factors as well as internal, personal aspirations and qualities that influence students' decisions to study abroad we surveyed students from Moldova who were studying or recently graduated from higher education institutions in Europe. For this purpose, we designed a questionnaire drawing on extant literature. It was designed and administered in English and pre-tested on several Moldovan students who were studying in Europe; these respondents were excluded from the survey. Without any ready-to-use dataset of Moldovan students studying abroad, we employed non-probability snowball sampling strategy. This sampling strategy implies that the researcher establishes a connection with a small group of people who are relevant for the subject under research. The next step is for those people to identify other people relevant to the research and so on till either new persons are not identified or the sample is large enough (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Sunders et al., 2009). The questionnaire we designed was distributed via Google Forms over a four-week period, generating 151 usable responses.

The designed questionnaire consists of 56 items on a 4-point rating scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In addition to these items, the questionnaire comprises of closed questions related to demographic aspects and two open questions related to degree and place of study. Following Allen (2017) who maintains that the midpoint in a Likert scale could be eliminated due to (i) different interpretation which respondents may give to meaning of the midpoint, (ii) respondent's desire to easily select a midpoint neutral answer without analysing well the answers, and (iii) positioning on the middle out of fear of expressing a potential unpopular attitude, especially in the case of controversial topics, we eliminated the midpoint for the questions related to motivation to study abroad, country selection and

institution selection, but kept it for the questions related to the quality of higher education in Moldova.

Cronbach's α was employed to measure the internal consistency. At an acceptable value of 0.7 (Field, 2009), Cronbach's α score is 0.9 suggesting high reliability of data collected from 151 respondents. Tables below present frequency distribution of demographic characteristics (Table 2), academic disciplines (Table 3), and countries in which respondents study/studied (Table 4). In the next section, we present and discuss our findings.

Table 2 about here

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Factors motivating to study abroad

Moldovan students identified at least four factors which motivated them to study abroad (Table 5). Investigation of the student characteristics which motivate students to study abroad highlighted four influences. The first one was the perception that an international degree would enhance their job prospects and earning prospects. This factor was the highest rated factor not only out of student characteristics, but as well out of all factors that motivated Moldovan students to study abroad. The next factor was related to students valuing a foreign degree. Two other factors that were found to influence students' decision to study abroad was the desire to improve their language skills and to live in a different culture (see also, Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). At the same time, Moldovan students did

not decide to study abroad because of the opportunity to gain freedom from family (see also Chen, 2007).

Table 5 about here

From the second category of factors, the "push" factors, only one strongly motivated students to study abroad, namely, the lower quality of education in Moldova. All the other push factors, like unavailability of a particular study program in Moldova, reputation of foreign degrees in Moldova and intention to migrate, motivated some students to study abroad, but less than the above-mentioned factors. Intention to migrate was not assessed as an important push factor in the study of Bodycott (2009).

Moldovan students seemed to be influenced the least by recommendations coming from family, friends, or professors. These factors scored low in students' decision to study abroad. But Moldovan students are not the only ones to assess recommendations as a less significant influence in their decision making. Studies of Joseph and Joseph (2000), Chen (2007), Lee (2014) also found that students give less importance to the recommendations coming from family, friends and professors as regards their decision to study abroad.

All in all, Moldovan students in their decision to study abroad paid more attention to student characteristics which include their socio-economic background, personal characteristics and preferences, academic ability. In reviewing the push factors related to Moldova, it is worth mentioning that negative push factors, as for instance the lower quality of education in Moldova, exert more influence in study abroad decision. Also, students reported little influence of encouragement coming either from family, friends, or professors.

Factors influencing country selection

The choice of a host country was influenced by five groups of pulling factors: (1) level of knowledge and awareness, (2) cost issues, (3) environment, (4) geographic proximity, and (5) significant others (Table 6). Keeping in mind that among the most motivating factors to study abroad was the lower quality of education in Moldova, there is no surprise that when deciding upon a particular host country as a study destination, students placed a significant importance on the quality of education in the host country. Out of all the factors influencing the country choice, the quality of education exerted the strongest influence in selecting a particular country. The better knowledge and awareness a student has of a particular study destination the more likely he or she will select that destination (see also, Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka et. al., 2006; Lee, 2014).

Table 6 about here

As concerns the cost issues, Moldovan students agreed that they decided to study in the countries they do because of the lower tuitions fees (similar to Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009), but tended to disagree that they have decided to study in those specific countries because of the lower travel costs or lower costs of living. This is not surprising, keeping in mind that the majority of the respondents study in developed countries, which imply higher costs of living. At the same time, students placed more importance on the possibility to find a job in that country after graduation and less on the possibility to combine studies with part time jobs. We assume that this may be so either because students received a scholarship and consequently were less preoccupied with the financial aspects or were subsidized by parents who would like their children to focus more on the education part itself.

The local environment also seems to influence the attractiveness of a host country. Respondents tended to agree that they have decided for a specific destination because of it being an exciting place to live but also a quiet-studious environment. Nevertheless, some other studies (Joseph and Joseph, 2000; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, Maringe & Carter, 2007) found this factor being more important for the respondents as if compared to the respondents from the current study.

Students paid less attention to geographic proximity while deciding to study abroad destinations. Some studies also found this factor as being of less importance for students (Broekemier & Seshadri, (2000); Mazzerol and Soutar, 2002; Lee, 2014), while other (Shanka, 2006, Bodycott, 2009) assessed it as being an important one. As in the case of the study abroad decision, Moldovan students while deciding upon a host country, were least influenced by the recommendations coming from family and friends as well as by having family/friends living or studying in that specific country. In the same order of ideas, of little importance for the respondents was the community of Moldovans established in that particular study destination. Similar results were obtained by Chen (2007), Lee (2014).

Factors influencing institution selection

The three key influences in the selection of an institution are: (1) academic pulling factors, (2) administrative pulling factors and (3) location and environment (Table 7). The academic pulling factors were appreciated with significant importance, followed by environment and location, and administrative pulling factors. The current findings suggest that, in concordance with the above stated in relation to the quality of education, students one more time stressed the importance of quality of the education. In addition to the quality of education, another

important academic pulling factor was the prestige of the institution. Similar results were obtained by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Chen (2007), Wilkins & Huisman (2011).

Table 7 about here

Students reported that the most important administrative factor was the scholarship provided or the exemption from the tuition fees, but also a broad range of course and programs. Additionally, respondents tended to agree that in their decision of selecting a specific institution they were influenced by the easy application process and access to detailed information about the university. Similar findings were revealed by other researchers (Chen, 2007, Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). At the same time, the administrative factor which influenced the least Moldovan students to select a specific institution was the marketing of the institution in Moldova (similar to Chen, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). The main reason for such a response would be lack of or the extremely limited marketing of international universities in Moldova.

As concerns the environment/location group of factors, the findings show that students tend to agree that this group of factors motivated them to select a specific institution, even though, there is no strong influence coming from one specific item. Students placed comparably similar importance on factors like university safeness, excellent facilities, or a large number of international students. As concerns other findings in the area, Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), came to the conclusion that the large number of international students is an important pulling factor, while Lee (2014), on the contrary, stated that this factor is o little importance for students, while facilities were assessed as an important factor in the studies of Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Bodycott (2009).

Decision making process

While the study focused on the factors that determined Moldovan students' decision to study abroad, influenced the selection of a specific country, and institution, it also touched upon other significant aspects related to the subject under investigation. One of them was the decision-making process. As some authors mention (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007), the decision-making process through which students pass in order to select a final study destination seems to imply three stages. In the first stage, the students decide to study internationally rather than locally. In the second stage, students have to decide upon the selection of the host country. Finally, students choose a host institution. However, as argued by Chen (2007), students may by-pass certain stages, for example choose a host institution directly by-passing the process of choosing a host country. We have decided to see the extent to which students follow the standard three stages decision-making process. Students' responses were divided, 51% of the respondents stating that they have decided upon the country after their decision to study internationally, while the rest of the respondents, 49% stated that after their decision to study abroad they have selected the institution. From the cross tabulation table of study destination and decision-making process, we can state that in case of respondents studying in Latvia, Poland and The Netherlands students skipped the country selection stage and decided directly upon the institution. While the majority of students studying in Germany, France, United Kingdom and Sweden decided initially upon the country and after that upon the institution. The respondents studying in Denmark and Romania were somehow equally divided in their responses, while some decided initially upon the country others decided upon the institution. We assume that in the case of students who decided directly upon the institution after deciding to study internationally, mainly Moldovan students in Latvia and Poland, it was to a great extent because of the bilateral agreements on

co-operation in education and science conducted between the governments of the Republic of Moldova and for instance Latvia or Poland. Such agreements usually result in scholarships for students (https://goo.gl/WAOdfJ). In order to partly test this assumption, we have performed a cross-tabulation for study destination and two items related to financial aid: (1) Financial aid from (host) country's government, (2) Scholarship provided and/or exemption from tuition. The results showed that the majority of students studying in Latvia strongly agreed that they have decided to study in this country because of the above mention reasons.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper we explored the motivations of students from Moldova to study abroad. We employed two conceptual frameworks: decision-making and push-pull models. It was interesting to observe that almost half of the respondents skipped the second stage in the decision-making process, which is the country selection, and went directly to the institution selection stage. This might be due to the selection bias which we will address below. Nonetheless, this finding warrants further research to explicate, fine-grain the decision-making process of prospect students to study abroad. As in earlier studies, our findings point to quality of education being the strongest factor that motivates the students to study abroad. This push factor consists of two types: lower quality of higher education in Moldova, which is a negative push factor, and high quality of education in host countries. In addition to this country selection factor, the respondents pointed to lower tuition fees, easiness of obtaining information about the country and the possibility to find a job after graduation there as important factors in choosing a destination country. Students' decision to study abroad was influenced by future job and earning prospects, value of a foreign degree, desire to improve language skills and experience different cultures. While choosing a higher education institution, students assessed as important the scholarships provided by the institutions,

exemption from tuition fees, and prestige of the institution, the range of courses and programs and the easy application process.

Overall, the respondents assessed the quality of higher education in Moldova as being poor to acceptable. The only item which was appreciated as acceptable was the qualification of academic staff. The quality of teaching and the relationship between staff and students were appreciated with a tendency towards acceptable. At the same time, research, development and innovation in universities, as well as the match between what study programs have to offer and the employers' requirements were assessed as poor.

The above points to the existence of weak institutions in an emerging market such as Moldova that according to Khanna et al. (2005) give birth to institutional voids that not only push prospects students to seek education abroad, draining the intellectual capital of a country, but also deter in-ward internationalization and in-flow of foreign direct investment, and hamper implementation of domestic and international companies' growth strategies. In other words, such weak institutions and massive exodus of young talent in the context of emerging markets affect negatively the quality and the quantity of the labour market, making the country unattractive or less attractive to foreign companies and investors. While in the country, such voids and trends demand from the international companies extra funding to invest in the professional education and/or re-education of their labour force. In the context of Moldova – and in similar emerging contexts with such institutional voids and weak institutions – it is critical for policy makers, academics and businesses to rationalize, restructure and modernize the education sector that eventually – as one of the efficiency enhancers (Schwab, 2017) – will contribute to the country competitiveness and attractiveness for foreign direct investment and international business.

In our approach to explore students' motivations to study abroad we relied on two existing models to develop our instrument and on snowball sampling to identify the respondents. In the absence of a database of Moldovan students studying abroad, the snowball sampling strategy was the only viable approach to identify the respondents. At the same time, it generated a sampling bias as respondents were likely to identify other potential respondents similar to them, for instance Moldovan students studying in Denmark may identify other Moldovan students studying in Denmark which would result in a homogeneous sample. To mitigate this bias, researchers may also explore students' decisions and motivations to stay home and pursue education in the home country; and/or employ in parallel several snowball sampling strategies with various points of origin. Given our findings, the two models employed – push-pull and decision-making – warrant further enhancements. Researchers may conduct focus groups with various target segments of students, incl., those pursuing higher education at home to identify new push-pull constructs and variables and decision-making processes e.g., taking into account the impact of social media on students' motivation to study abroad.

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Figure 1: Conceptual framework of students' motivations to study abroad

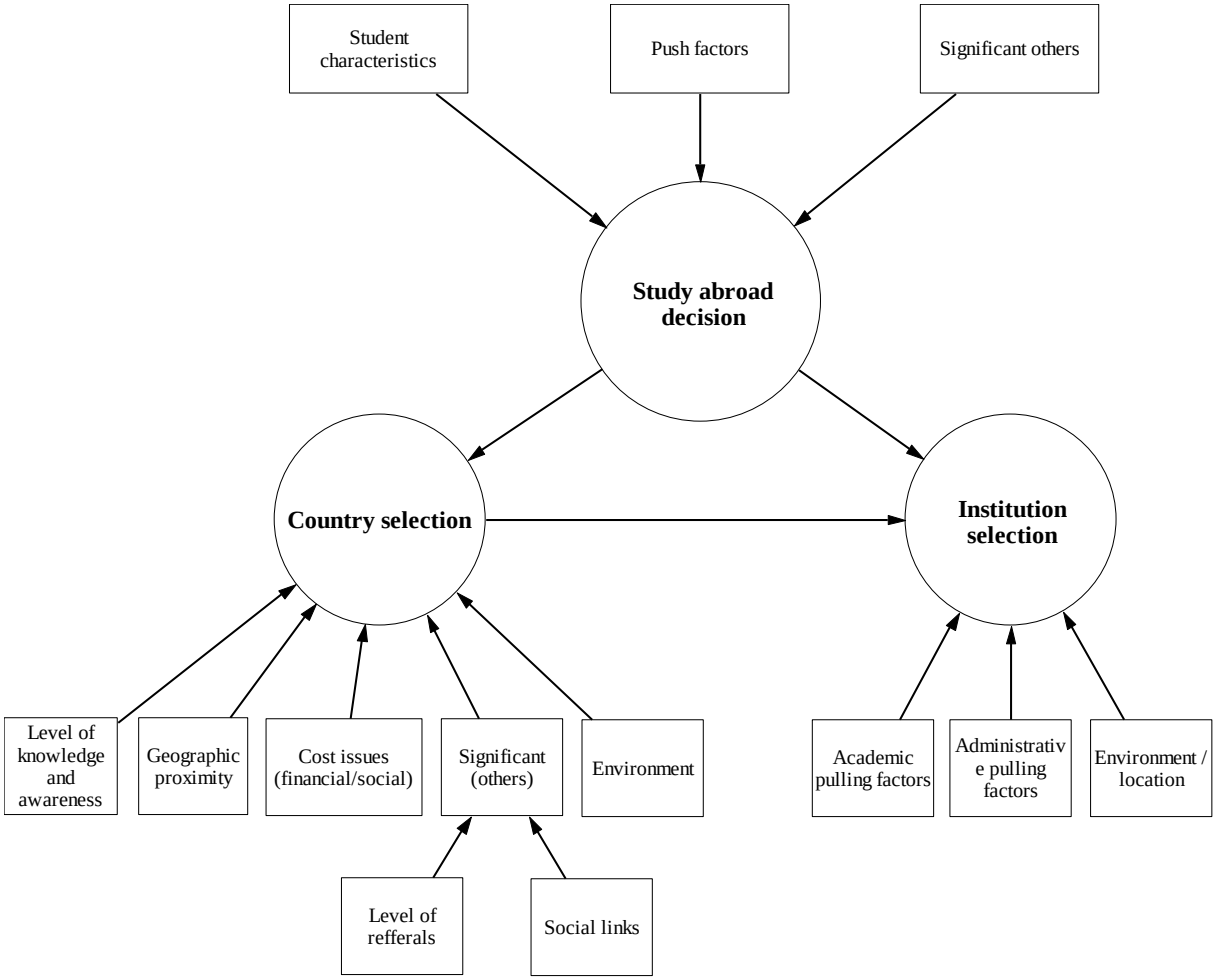

Table 1: A synthesis of thematic literature

Author/year	Purpose	Findings
McMahon, 1992	To explore the ratio of Third World students overseas worldwide and the concentration of these students in United States.	The flow of students overseas for higher education was due to economic weakness of home country but also country's greater involvement in global economy. More specifically, concentration of trade with United States influenced the number of international students in U.S., meaning that, of great importance are economic and cultural links between source countries and host countries.
Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000	To find out whether there are differences in rating college choice criteria by parents and students, as well, if there are any differences between male and female students.	The most important choice criteria for students are program of study, financial aid/scholarship, job placement after graduation. While, for males on the second place is cost issue, for females is campus safeness. Also, there are significant differences between the importance ratings of parents and students. Parents allocated higher importance to campus safeness, academic reputation, and very little to social life, athletic programs or friends attend.
Joseph & Joseph, 2000	To identify the choice criteria Indonesian students consider important when choosing an educational institution.	The most important factors which are influencing the choice are: reputable degree value, necessary resources available, environment conductive to learning, clean and safe environment, information given on career opportunities
Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002	To identify reasons why students from Taiwan, India, China and Indonesia decide to seek overseas education.	Factors that motivate the student a student to study abroad: overseas courses better than local, unavailability of particular study program at home, the desire to get a better understanding of the "West" and intention to migrate after graduation. Student's choice of a particular country is influenced by: reputation/profile of the country, knowledge about the host country, personal recommendations, cost issues, social factors. Factors influencing the attractiveness of a particular institution are: institution's reputation for quality and for high-quality staff, number for students enrolled at the institution, willingness to recognize students' qualification.
Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2005	To examine the major reasons why international students chose an Australian higher education institution (located in Perth,) as a study destination.	The main reasons for choosing Perth as a study destination were: proximity to home, quality/variety of education, cost of living. Other factors were friends studying there, family recommendation and safe place.

Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2006	To propose a theoretical model that integrates the different groups of factors which influence the decision-making process of international students, analysing different dimensions of this process, and explaining those factors which determine students' choice.	The factors identified are: personal reasons (higher status, living in a different culture, improve language skills), country image (cost of living, academic/social reputation, opportunity of working during the course), institution image (institution prestige, ranking position, academic reputation, quality reputation) and programme evaluation (international recognition, recognition by future employers).
Li & Bray, 2007	To study the motivations and factors which determine mainland Chinese students to study in Hong-Kong and Macau.	The dominant motivations for mainland students in Hong Kong and in Macau were: academic ability, social and cultural experience, economic income and competitive ability in the employment market.
Chen, 2007	To explain why and how international graduate students from East Asia choose to come to Canada, to assess the strengths of the factors influencing the enrolment decision.	The decision to study abroad is influenced by students' characteristics and motivations (the desire to have a degree for personal satisfaction, improving job prospects and earning prospects), by push-pull factors (desirability of foreign language skills, opportunity to experience a western culture, appreciated work experience from abroad in the home country), encouragement from significant others (family, friends, professors, alumni). Factors that influence the choice of an institution are: the reputation of the university/program, the quality of the university/program, availability of financial aid.
Maringe & Carter, 2007	To explore the decision making and experience of African students in United Kingdom higher education.	The authors created a six-element model of decision making based on the identified range of push and pull factors. The most important pull factors are: recognition of gained qualification, easy application process, quality teaching and learning environment, opportunities for part time work.
Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010	To understand why and how international students decide upon United States as their study destination.	The authors determined three factors which influence the decision to study abroad – push, pull and structural factors. Structural factors regard visa and monetary issues which very often may discourage a student from deciding for a specific country.
Wilkins & Huisman, 2011	To identify the factors that influence an international student's decision to study in United Kingdom and the factors that determine their choice of institution.	Authors identified the following factors to influence students' decision to study abroad: improve employment prospects, experience different culture, improve English, quality of education, family recommendation. The factors influencing institution selection are: reputation of university, quality of the programme, university ranking, content of programme, and professors' expertise.

Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012	To discover whether the motivators of international student destination choice also apply to students at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates.	The study found that factors that pushed students to branch campuses were safety reasons and ineligibility to enrol in state/public higher education. Pull factors that emerged in this study focus on intra-host country quality differences, improved regional labour market prospects and comfortability with culture/lifestyle.
Lee, 2014	To explore how and why international students come to Taiwan with the purpose of study.	The results of the study revealed that the most important dimensions influencing international students' decision-making process of selecting Taiwan as an abroad study destination were cost issues, physical and learning environment, personal improvements, and institution image. At the same time, the most important factors were friendly and supportive learning environment, quality of education, and recognition of host qualifications.
Wu, 2014	To study the reasons that motivate Chinese students to pursue post-graduation abroad, based on a case study performed at three British universities.	According to the results of the study, the decision on studying abroad was driven by three factors: the desire to experience different cultures, the native English environment, the future career aspirations. Also, Britain was preferred to other countries because of the quality of academic program, short duration of master's program, but also the fact that qualifications are recognized by Chinese employers and highly appreciated at home.
Ahmad, Buchanan & Ahmad, 2016	To find the motivations for study abroad and to examine the influence of personal criteria in the decision process of selecting a host country and institution.	The results tell us that students are attracted by economic and political stability of the country and job opportunities after graduation. Also, students paid attention to country's characteristics such as security and safeness of the environment, economic growth. As concerns the institution –the educational standards, international recognition, these are secondary criteria for decision making.
Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016	This study identified determinants of student destination decision for transnational higher education, specifically, international students' choice for studying in Malaysia.	Findings from interviews with students that are currently enrolled at international branch campuses indicated key influences in their choice decision – comparatively low cost of living, low tuition fees, safe country for living, stable government, modern amenities, proximity in culture and religion and freedom from discrimination.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics

		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	70	46.4
	Female	81	53.6
Age	18-21	44	29.1
	22-25	81	53.6
	26-30	23	15.2
	31 and over	3	2.0
Studying abroad	Yes	114	75.5
	No, already graduated	37	24.5
Education level	Bachelor	90	59.6
	Master	61	40.4

Table 3: Academic disciplines

	Frequency	**%**
Social sciences		
Economics	53	35.1%
Political Science	15	9.9%
Law	14	9.2%
Economics and Business administration	13	8.6%
Communication sciences	4	2.6%
Management Science	5	3.3%
Sociology	2	1.3%
Psychology	1	0.7%
Total	**107**	**70.9%**
Applied sciences		
Engineering & Technology	17	11.3%
Medicine and health sciences	6	4.0%
Computer science	8	5.3%
Agriculture and agricultural sciences	1	0.7%
Total	**32**	**21.2%**
Arts		
Visual arts	8	5.3%
Performing arts	2	1.3%
Total	**10**	**6.6%**
Humanities		
Languages and literature	2	1.3%
Total	**2**	**1.3%**
TOTAL	**151**	**100%**

Table 4: Countries in which respondents study/studied

	Frequency	**%**
Romania	36	23.8%
Denmark	30	19.9%
Latvia	16	10.6%
Germany	15	9.9%
France	15	9.9%
United Kingdom	10	6.6%
Sweden	6	4.0%
The Netherlands	5	3.3%
Italy	3	2.0%
Poland	3	2.0%
Belgium	3	2.0%
Czech Republic	3	2.0%
Other countries	6	4.2%
TOTAL	**151**	**100.0%**

Table 5: Factors influencing the decision to study abroad

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Student characteristics		***3.07***	
I want a foreign degree for personal satisfaction	151	2.89	0.861
I value a foreign degree	151	3.38	0.709
Future job prospects and/or future earnings prospects	151	3.59	0.646
I want to live in a different culture	151	3.03	0.812
I want to improve my language skills	151	3.04	0.855
The opportunity to gain freedom from family	151	2.48	0.893
Push Factors		***2.89***	
Unavailability of particular study programs in Moldova	151	2.81	0.955
Lower educational quality in Moldova	151	3.33	0.862
Intention to migrate	151	2.72	0.912
Foreign degrees are prestigious or valued in Moldova	151	2.69	0.818
Significant others		***2.22***	
Family's recommendation	151	2.26	0.812
Friends' recommendation	151	2.30	0.847
Professor's recommendation	151	2.10	0.839

Note: Mean is calculated based on a four-point Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-agree; 4-strongly agree

Table 6: Factors influencing the choice of a country

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Level of knowledge & awareness		***2.98***	
Knowledge of country	151	2.63	0.914
It was easy to obtain information about country	151	2.97	0.748
Quality of education	151	3.35	0.665
Cost issues (financial/social)		***2.62***	
Lower tuition fees	151	3.10	0.957
Lower travel costs	151	2.40	0.895
Lower cost of living	151	2.33	1.005
Financial aid from (host) country's government	151	2.74	1.016
Possibility to combine studies with a part-time job	151	2.48	0.908
Higher possibilities to find a job in this country after graduation	151	2.94	0.842
Safe environment (e.g. low crime)	151	2.86	0.833
Established community of Moldovan students here	151	2.09	0.926
Environment		***2.72***	
Comfortable climate	151	2.52	0.878
Exciting place to live	151	2.82	0.784
Quiet-studious environment	151	2.81	0.789
Geographic proximity		***2.40***	
Geographic proximity	151	2.40	0.810
Significant others		***2.14***	
Family's recommendation	151	2.18	0.841
Friends' recommendation	151	2.23	0.875
Family/friends studying here	151	2.11	0.939
Family/friends living here	151	2.03	0.938

Note: Mean is calculated based on a four-point Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-agree; 4-strongly agree

Table 7: Factors influencing the choice of an institution

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic pulling factors		***3.01***	
Institution prestige	151	3.03	.879
Reputation for quality education	151	3.16	.809
Reputation for excellent staff	151	2.85	.875
Administrative pulling factors		***2.67***	
It recognized my previous qualifications	151	2.81	.789
A broad range of courses and programs	151	3.04	.799
Links with other institutions known to me	151	2.53	.855
Easy application process	151	2.97	.871
Lower entry requirements	151	2.31	.953
Accommodation offered	151	2.55	.957
Scholarship provided and/or exemption from tuition fees	151	3.05	.965
University marketing in Moldova	151	1.87	.786
Access to detailed information about the university (e.g. on their website)	151	2.92	.837
Location/environment		***2.80***	
It has a large number of international students	151	2.85	.934
University safety and security	151	2.81	.852
University location	151	2.67	.838
Excellent facilities	151	2.87	.843
Social life at university	151	2.77	.793

Note: Mean is calculated based on a four-point Likert scale: 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-agree; 4-strongly agree