Student destination choices in international education: exploring students' attitudes to study abroad

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In the context of increased cross-border education (Knight 2004, 2006, 2009), there is a growing body of literature about international student destination choice (Bodycott, 2009; Li and Bray, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Padlee, Kamaruddin and Baharun, 2010; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011) including the push and pull model of international student choice (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Furthermore, specific studies explore factors influencing the students' choice such as personal reasons, perceived educational benefits, quality of teaching, finances, culture and social perceptions (Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, 2006; Chen, 2007). Most studies are concerned with the movement of students from East to West with a slowly growing body of research about students moving from West to East. This paper reports the results of a mixed method research project to investigate the barriers and enabling factors involved in Brazilian students' decision making to study in the United Kingdom, as an example of the new movement of students supported by government initiatives. A number of perceived barriers are identified, such as the cost, and negative past relationships. Developing positive relationships with Brazilian institutions, promoting a contemporary view of life in the UK and addressing the misheld perception of the cost of study may help enhance an interest among the Brazilian students in studying in the UK.

Keywords: International student mobility, barriers and enabling factors, Brazilian students studying in the UK

Introduction

Since the second half of the 20th century, the forces of globalisation have encouraged universities to look further afield to recruit students. They have also prompted students to engage in growing student mobility. The transformative process of international education has seen the universities engage in increased cross-border education (Knight, 2004, 2006, 2009; de Wit, 2002) and encourage more student mobility, which grew by 52% over the period of 1998-2004 (King, Findlay and Ahrens, 2010).

Literature on students' motivations to study abroad

Within the context of encouraging students' mobility, there is a growing debate about the benefits of study abroad for the students. A number of studies conclude on the main benefits such as expanding students' outlooks, making them more independent and confident, as well as having increased intercultural competencies (Carlson & Widaman, 1988: Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Nunan, 2006; Vincenti, 2011). Furthermore, there is an abundance of research on the international student destination choice, including factors playing a part in students making decisions where to study abroad such as personal reasons, perceived educational benefits, quality of teaching, finances, culture and social perceptions and (Bodycott, 2009; Maringe and Carter, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Padlee, Kamaruddin and Baharun, 2010; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011).

Push-pull model of international student choice (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) aims to capture the main obstacles and enablers in student choosing a particular study destination. This model encapsulates factors involved in students' decision making grouped as the *push* factors. These include a lack of capacity and opportunities to study in students' home countries, lower educational quality, employer preference for overseas education or political and economic problems in the home countries. The *pull* factors in the host country include the quality of

education, reputation of country / institution, high improved employment prospects and opportunity to experience a different culture (Wilkins et al, 2012).

There are numerous studies into the specific challenges and enabling factors playing a part in students' motivations to study abroad. They can be grouped into four groups of factors: cost, past social relationships, language and homesickness.

Cost

The most commonly cited barrier to student mobility is cost (Brux & Ngoboka, 2002; Calhoon, et al, 200; Doan, 2002; Hembroff & Rusz, 1993; Perdreau, 2002; Raby, 2005;). Studies amongst cohorts of African-American (Brux and Fry, 2010), Asian (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) and USA students (Evans *et al*., 2008) report congruent results. A recent study of factors that inhibited or promoted uptake of study abroad among New Zealand students reported that 60% rated cost as one of their top 3 barriers (Doyle *et al*., 2010). Equally, although Binsardi and Ekwulgo (2003) reported that cost only ranked as the 4th most important factor, international students identified lowering tuition fees and providing more scholarships as being the two most important means of attracting greater numbers of international students.

Past social relationships

Due to established social views on study abroad in a specific country or for specific groups of students, helped by the media influence, students can form a view of study abroad programmes being "something for other students, but not for me" (Burr, 2005: 1). Study abroad can be seen as something elitist, with students failing to make a connection between study abroad and their future employment. Students may filter out or ignore information about study abroad. New destinations could be perceived by the students in the same way.

Language

The language barrier can be a major constrain for students considering study abroad. This means for any host country and/or institution wishing to increase student mobility, they should foster the development of foreign languages among students. Language improvement can be the main attraction for students considering study abroad. In fact, improving English is often quoted as one of the main reasons for their choice (Bodycott, 2009; Forsey, et al, 2012; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). Equally, in the increasingly competitive job market, foreign languages are a sought-after asset, so developing other languages than English through a study abroad period has become one of the pull factors (Chen, 2008; Forsey, et al, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Homesickness

Homesickness, leaving family and friends behind, and moving to a new learning environment remain major barriers to students' participation in study abroad. 17% of students within a study by Doyle *et al.* (2010) reported leaving friends and family to be the most important obstacle of studying abroad and 39% rated it as one of their top 3 obstacles. This idea falls into the framework of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) in which people learn within a social context, however, if there are certain worries or threats, either perceived or actual, they can impinge upon the experience as a whole. There are a number of studies which use Social Learning Theory within study abroad research (McLeod and Wainwright, 2009; Rodriguez and Roberts, 2011; Wildemeerch., *et al* 1998). Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) suggest that study abroad programmes should widen their perspectives to include pre and post stages within a student's experience.

Summary

While increased student mobility features on the universities' agenda, it is vital to recognise a range of factors involved in student decision making when it comes to the participation in the study abroad, their destination choice and the nature of the study abroad. The factors can exert a negative influence on students' choice but if addressed for specific groups of students, they can be less of a barrier and may be even turned into a *pull* factor.

Encouraging new destinations for student mobility

The push-pull model has been mostly applied to students choosing to study in Western countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Over the last decade or so, students began to move in new

directions: for example, east to east, to Singapore and Malaysia, the new educational hubs (Knight, 2011). Further development of the new 'flows' of students is encouraged by the host countries who receive a range of economic, social, cultural and political benefits, however, attracting international students has become ever more challenging, with universities competing against each other in an attempt to attract students.

As an example of an initiative encouraging new study destinations, Brazilian government is presently committed to providing funding to enable Brazilian students to undertake periods of overseas study through programmes such as Science without Borders, which is expected to bring 10,000 Brazilian students to the UK over the next four years (UK Higher Education Unit, 2012). However, just as the range of benefits that overseas study can bestow upon students is diverse, the motivations which underpin students' choice of destination are complex and multifactorial. In order to gain an insight into the motivations of Brazilian students towards studying in the UK, a study has been designed to explore the motivations of Brazilian students' towards studying in the UK.

Study Design

From the theoretical perspective, this study sought to explore to what extent the challenges and the *pull* or enabling factors mentioned in the empirical studies also apply to Brazilian students considering the potential of study in the United Kingdom.

The study took place in three Brazilian Universities: Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Federal University of Sao Paolo, Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paolo. These universities were selected as they represent students from varying academic and socioeconomic backgrounds to ensure a rich data. *Federal University of Rio de Janeiro*, is one of the oldest universities and the largest federal university in Brazil. The students at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro are largely middle class. *Federal University of Sao Paolo* is a public university in the greater Sao Paolo. The profile of the students can be characterised as middle to lower-middle class. *Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paolo* is a private, non-profit, high ranking university. It is one of the largest and most prestigious universities in Brazil with middle to upper-middle class students who pay fees.

The participants in the study were undergraduate students of Languages (Federal University of Sao Paolo and Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) and postgraduate students of Applied Linguistics (Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paolo). These two subject groups were selected as they represent students who are likely to have fairly high levels of motivation to study abroad and some awareness of the benefits of the study abroad due to their language study backgrounds and motivation to develop their skills.

Method

The study adapted a mixed-method approach, collecting both quantitative data from a survey and qualitative data from focus groups. Employing two methods of data gathering allowed for the convergence of results (Golafshani, 2003). The data from the questionnaires was further developed by the narrative from the focus groups, enabling the inclusion of the participants' perspectives and stories (Forsey, 2008).

The survey had nine questions including a question whether the students would choose to study in the UK, followed by questions identifying the enabling factors such as getting a better job back home or in the UK, improving English language, networking, possibility of postgraduate study, having an experience of study abroad; and the barriers to choosing the UK to study there including being away from home, weather, food, cost, lack of scholarships and language issues.

A total of 117 questionnaires were returned. Following the questionnaires, two focus groups were held at Federal University, Rio de Janeiro and Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paolo in order to add greater depth and richness to the data obtained by the questionnaires.

Survey findings

Of all the students taking part in the survey, 93% said they would consider studying in the UK. From the responses about the enabling factors or benefits of choosing to study in the UK, it is clear that improving English is the main motivator (91%), followed by having an experience of study abroad (73%) and doing research at postgraduate level (53%). The least often selected enabling factor is networking or making an international friend (13%). In the world of the Internet and social networking it seems less valued by the students as an enabling or pull factor in relation to study in the UK.

The results regarding the barriers were topped by cost (79%) which seemed by far the most common concern for the majority of the surveyed students. Being away from home (35%) and difficulty to obtain scholarships (28%) follow. Only 21% of students pointed to potential language barriers, which is probably due to the fact that most of the surveyed students are Languages students with a good command of English.

The above findings indicate that, to some extent, the students in this study recognise similar barriers and enabling factors when considering study abroad as students from other empirical studies. However, the participants give much more attention to the cultural experience of study abroad and possibilities for postgraduate study in the UK as the main motivating factors, apart from improving English. The main barrier identified by the participants is the cost.

Focus groups findings

Following the transcription of the tape recordings using Audio Notetaker version 2.5, thematic analysis of the focus groups was performed using Nvivo software, version 9.

Cost

The survey results showed the main barrier being the cost. Cost was also the first barrier mentioned by both focus groups: '*Money, cost - it cost more than studying in Australia or Canada, for example. When you think about studying I think about cost first.*' (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)

Participants in both focus groups were under the impression that studying in either USA or Australia was cheaper than the UK. However, after looking at the tuition fees and living costs for universities of a similar academic standing, it is actually cheaper to study in the UK. This perception could be down to a difference in currency, as Sterling currency is less known in Brazil, whereas America, Australia and New Zealand all use dollars, which is more familiar to the students (Brazilian Real - R$).

Mazzarol and Soutar) 2002 reported that availability of part-time work to support study was of far greater importance than the tuition fees. In the study, only the Federal University group mentioned the uncertainty of being able to find part- time work as being a significant factor in destination choice for overseas study '*What I think is that we also have to deal with the uncertainty about not knowing if we will be able to find a job or if the job is going to be able to support us while we study.*' (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) This reflects the differences in socio-economic background of the two groups of students, as Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found the importance of part-time work to be indicative of socio-economic status.

Past Social Relationships

Relationships were mentioned quite extensively in the focus group from the private Pontifical Catholic University in Sao Paolo and past social relationships between Brazil and the UK seem to exert an even greater impact on students' decision making. The students within that particular focus group considered the British to be pompous, speaking down to Brazilians: '*Normally people from the UK think they are coming to Brazil to teach and that we are going to be there to learn and there is not this relationship that believes that we Brazilians have something to teach as well, we have something to offer.*' (Pontifical Catholic University)

It seems that the past relationships can contribute to perceived barriers but a better understanding of the opportunities new and current collaborations could offer can reduce this barrier to student choice. The participants are quite verbal about the need for more information on why and where to study in the UK: '*There is a lack of advertising... More information on the current opportunities in the UK would help. People choose to study at London, Oxford and Cambridge because of the cultural events, shopping and stuff but we don't really know what life is like for students in the UK.*' (Pontifical Catholic University)

Language

Both focus groups agreed that few people in the UK speak Portuguese, therefore not going to come over to Brazilian universities to study: '*the students from the UK should be encouraged to learn languages, Portuguese, then they could come and stay here as we do not teach in English, and benefit from the exchange.*' (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro).

This could be a contributory factor to the perception that British people feel they are superior and do not need to learn Portuguese. On the other hand, due to the native language of the host destination, English is of interest to the students, despite the fact that generally speaking they have a good command of English: *'we all speak English but don't use it a lot in everyday lives so going to study to the UK would help us practice and become confident with our English.'* (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)

Homesickness/Family and Friends

Another highly reported barrier in the focus groups was homesickness. Homesickness is a substantial barrier as Brazilians are a society based on patriarchal and family relations. A number of students pondered on the feeling of being away from family and friends: '*being so far away from your family is hard*" and "*In our class we are like family. If I don't go to a class then I can rely on help from the others. When I was abroad I didn't have that.'* (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)

However some students in the focus groups, especially in the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, showed signs of recognising the need to developing independent skills whilst maintaining their family ties: '*it's not good to rely on others all the time. We can learn to be self-reliant from being abroad.' (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)*

Discussion and recommendations

The study has revealed that the key factors involved in the participants' decision making regarding study abroad overall represent areas similar to the factors identified in other empirical studies. However, there are also some distinguished areas of barriers and motivators displayed by the participants in the study.

The main barriers in the study involve cost, past social relationships and homesickness. These barriers, especially those pertaining to cost, although exerting a very strong influence, appeared to have been founded upon perceptions and assumptions, which do not reflect the reality of studying within the UK. This may indicate that the reason Brazilian students have historically tended not to choose the UK to study has been based upon the lack of information about the opportunities involved in study abroad in the UK. It highlights a timely necessity for awareness rising and information campaign to help limit the perceived barriers.

The key enabling or *pull* factors are improving English, having an experience of study abroad and doing research at postgraduate level. There is also an underlying interest in learning about the host country's culture at national and regional level. This would not only help limit the negative stereotypes but add an important value to the study abroad for any Brazilian students considering study in the United Kingdom. English language is clearly an enabling factor, and Portuguese is a barrier to fostering UK students exchange with the Brazilian students. Any universities looking to enhance student mobility should consider these factors by promoting opportunities to develop both languages respectively and stress the benefits of doing so for professional and personal purposes.

Students should be encouraged to consider study abroad in the United Kingdom as an opportunity to develop their independent skills for professional purposes. The careful wording of this advice should stress that independent skills together with experiencing new culture and developing a sound inter-cultural knowledge should be promoted to the families as the major benefit from study abroad.

Limitations

Although this study involved participants from three institutions with a diverse ranking and student profile, there is a need to include a wider spread of institutions across Brazil and even across Latin America to further investigate the key factors shaping students' decision making about study abroad. Additionally, further studies with students representing a wider selection of disciplines are required to achieve a spectrum of views. Finally, further studies with other stakeholders, such as staff, parents and government institutions such as the British Council, and the Brazilian Ministry of Education, could further inform this study's findings and contribute to a better understanding of the complex factors involved in students' motivations to choose to study abroad.

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