

Qualitative study III: What Makes Foreign Students Happy?

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Introduction

When you talk about studying abroad, you immediately wonder what the goal of the student might be. Is the student an exchange student seeking some away from home experience and some fun, or might there be other triggers? There are different triggers because we can already see significant differences between German and Polish students' motivations, perceptions and attitudes towards studying abroad which is already food for thought in further analysing the question at hand (Glaum & Rinker, 2002). Despite these differences, the two student groups do not differ markedly in their satisfaction with the studies, and perhaps the impact it has on their happiness (Glaum & Rinker, 2002). With the data at hand, much more variation and analysis is available, but from this example perhaps already the most important point to realise is that the foreign student is not a uniform kind of person.

How people define happiness is not homogenous either; it depends on different characteristics (Lu & Hu, 2005). Lu and Hu (2005) found that extraversion significantly correlated with almost all kinds of leisure involvement and that extraversion was significantly positively correlated with leisure satisfaction while neuroticism was significantly negatively correlated with leisure satisfaction. Furthermore, while extraversion and neuroticism were significant predictors of happiness and leisure

satisfaction, this did not seem to be very significant in a controlled research setting. However, Fave et al., (2010) have found evidence on the concept of happiness in a student context and split it in hedonistic and eudaimonic forms of happiness. Fave et al., (2010) also found that the domains of family, relations and health are deemed the most important. For Western respondents, apparently well-being is prominently pursued and found in meaning and feelings confined to the home environment or to a close circle of friends (Fave et al., 2010) Similar results are found by Lu & Hu (2005) who discovered that many people find their leisure more satisfying than their work. Leisure can be a major source of pleasure and sense of achievement; we now have more leisure time than ever before in human history; however, many people who have a lot of spare time fail to find satisfying forms of leisure. (Lu & Hu, 2005) This poses a challenge for people. With these findings in mind we can interpret the data and make a distinction between Western and non-Western respondents.

Being in the international environment at universities abroad entails some elements of long-distance travel or escape from one's current life, to start a new one. Studying abroad can also prolong the perceived youth of individuals (Waters et.al, 2011). Generally speaking, we can divide the international students into two major categories based on the differences of values searched by the international students (Jamaludin et.al., 2016). To illustrate this difference, Jamaludin et.al. (2016) showed evidence from Norway where the main focus has been on geographical proximity, and apparently short-term students are staying in the country for one semester up to one year, while long-term students are staying for the full programme, in other words more than two years. The author also commented on the

country of origin of the students, where the short-term students are from west Europe, and the long-term from more developing countries. Waters et.al. (2011) states that most of the international students are among the privileged students - the focus is more on the background within this article, while Jamaludin et.al (2016) is more concerned about what students search when searching for happiness, what values add up to well-being. On one hand, Jamaludin et.al. (2016) say that long-term students are searching for a better life, and maybe a future career in the country – but the authors do not consider the background of the pupils, which might also be driver of happiness.

This leads to the initial model:

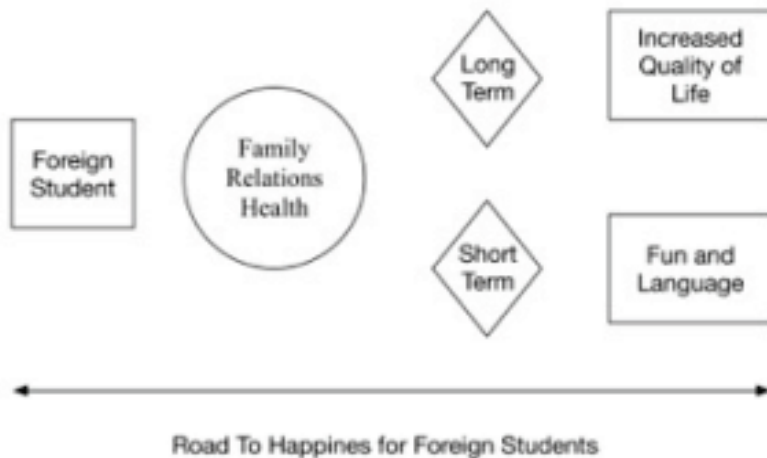


Figure 1: Initial model

Methodology

This paper focuses on empirical research on happiness among exchange and foreign students at universities. The analysis was conducted using a qualitative method, where data was collected from exchange and international students at the University of Kristianstad. The data was gathered through various channels such as interviews, focus groups and observations.

Interviews were performed in one-on-one sessions, which took from 33 minutes to 80 minutes. The gender distribution in interviews was five female and three males. The age of the individuals ranged from 23 to 35 years old. Five of the interviewees were foreign exchange students and three full-time foreign students. The nationalities of the respondents were distributed in the following way: Swedish, Finnish, Syrian, German, Dutch, British and Danish.

Focus groups were formed in sessions that lasted from 42 minutes to 64 minutes. The gender distribution was two females and eight males, while the approximate age varied from 22 to 41 years. The nationalities of the respondents in the focus groups were distributed in the following way: Italian, Syrian, Dutch, Liberian, Egyptian, Czech and Chinese.

The students were observed in their natural environment such as in dormitories, data lectures and public health lectures. The duration of the observation was from one hour and 45 minutes to two hours. The number of observed individuals was 44 pupils. It should be noted that observations were also performed on native Swedes, who had no experience of exchange or foreign studies. Public health lecture observations were performed just on native Swedish students, due to the fact that the

international and exchange were on school trip. The approximate distribution of nationalities or continent of origin was in the following order: 12 Swedish, six Africans (hard to specify country from observation), five Italians, four Syrians, four Australians, four Iranians, three Eastern European, two Indians, one Brazil/German, one Chinese, one American and one Greek.

Supporting the background knowledge about the topic of happiness, the paper used articles acquired from the University of Kristianstad Summon library.

The analysis of the data was done in systematic way, all of the sessions were recorded and afterwards transcribed into full text documents. These documents were closely analysed and afterwards the researchers looked for patterns in the text that could be coded. This paper has coded the main themes in the following way: general aspects, academic aspects, external environment aspects, cultural aspects, personal aspects, social aspects, and economic aspects.

Results

In this section the results will be presented with additional context.

General aspects

In the general aspects of the data the researcher was looking for different indicators. This section is about the general background of the student, which could possibly contain some general triggers of happiness for a selected group of students. The background of the student is important, and as Jamaludin et.al. (2016) argues, people from diverse backgrounds have different triggers of happiness.

The first topic coded was safety and comfort – what kind of role does it play in their happiness? Overall, 12 of the respondents said it was a positive factor affecting their happiness.

Therefore, the motivation for studying abroad is also a key factor for students and a trigger of happiness; eight respondents seem to agree and one responded negatively.

The topic of life outside the university walls seems to be a challenge for the happiness of the students. Seven said that it had positive effects on their life, but eight claimed that it had a negative influence, which probably comes from their past bad experience.

Academic aspects

The academic aspects affecting student happiness are important for the students according to Waters et.al. (2011), where it is argued that education offers students new possibilities for fun. Therefore, it is important to investigate these aspects, to search for the triggers of happiness.

The possibility to transfer grades and degree at their home universities was perceived as beneficial by many of the students. According to the data, seven students found it positively important for their future life; however, one did not care and saw it negatively. It is likely that transferability can have an effect on happiness, especially for the exchange – short-term students.

The quality of the studies was relevant for the future graduates; however, most of the observed trends were that students were negative about their studies and their quality. It is likely

that more demanding students can find triggers of happiness in a demanding education system.

The students' level of English was important for students, and we can see that exchange students were more likely to try to do something new and improve their language skills according to Jamaludin et.al. (2016). Five saw it as a positive aspect of their academic life and one as negative.

For some of the students might be important to follow similar studies in order to stay in their comfort zone. Our data showed that four of the students were happy about the similarities and five evaluated it negatively – for different reasons.

The quality of the students in general is important in most of the observed patterns, where the results were five positive, that the collective of students matters, and one against.

The diversity of students can be a trigger affecting the international experience, therefore nine people touched upon the fact that diversity matters in a positive way and one saw it negatively. It seems that the diversity of people at university is important.

External environment aspects

Aspects of the external environment were significant to pupils. The climate of the country of study is important for most of the students for their happiness; however, the climate was mentioned seven times as a negative aspect of happiness, but also four times as positive. We can see that the pattern of cold weather in Sweden affects students' happiness.

Generally speaking, the living space has lower importance for the students than the climate; however, it has triggered five

positive answers and one negative. When it comes to the crowdedness of the living space, five of the respondents saw it positively and four negative.

The facilities of the university were mostly seen as positive; however, some modernisation would be beneficial according to the data as it was mentioned as a positive environment by seven people and by two as negative.

The city of residence was seen as positive and as a trigger of happiness for ten respondents and was seen as negative by two. We believe that transportation can be an explanation as nine respondents mentioned transportation as a positive trigger, while six respondents saw it negatively.

Cultural aspects

When travelling abroad it is the culture that changes the view for the student, and as Waters et.al (2011) explain, the major reason for going abroad is to experience a different culture. That is why the paper believes that new culture was seen as a trigger of happiness for 12 people, but was also seen negatively for six – with different explanations. The adaptation to the culture was difficult in the case of distant cultures but was mainly seen as a positive aspect of the international experience, with eight positive responses and five negative. The intercultural relations might be one of the essential aspects, since as argued before it is one of the triggers to go abroad; according to our results 12 respondents were positive and four negative.

Concerning difficulties regarding cultural adaptation five respondents mentioned positive experiences while six of the respondents reported negative experiences.

Within the cultural aspects, also social gathering at night was considered and two people saw it as important for their happiness with none seeing it negatively.

Personal aspects

From the data we have assessed we can say that personal characteristics are mentioned quite often as important to success in academia and social life. From the eight people that talked about these, six of them were positive about their own personal characteristics and five of them mentioned that they were usually extrovert people. Two of those eight mentioned that their personal characteristics made it more difficult; this had either to do with a failure to adapt in some way or a lack of confidence in their capability to face new cultures. These findings are in line with the findings of Lu & Hu (2005) that we presented earlier in the problematisation.

Another thing of importance seems to be the previous experience of students. Some of them had studied or lived abroad before and that appeared to have some effect. However, only three respondents mentioned this as a relevant topic and both negative respondents had already been in Sweden for a long time and had problems fully integrating with the people. We should not be in a rush to use this data since it largely relates to integration and the Swedish culture.

Students that were interviewed were unanimous that their foreign student experience, regardless of the duration, had a positive impact on their personal development. Ten people regarded this as one of the main positives about their time spent as a foreign student. When we look at the text, most people talked about development regarding social skills, cultural knowledge, English language, and lastly academic skills.

Social aspects

Many of the respondents appeared to live in so-called dormitories, often large old buildings with the purpose of housing as many students as possible. The dormitories usually come with shared kitchens and living areas with low standards of hygiene and lots of noise at times that most people would deem inappropriate. However, students do not seem to be most people since seven out of eight respondents hailed the dormitories as a main source of happiness. During the data collection, most people were extremely positive about living close to people from various cultural backgrounds, which increased cultural knowledge and understanding.

Life outside of the dormitory was mentioned by nine different persons, and six of those saw the experience outside of their dormitories as a positive addition to their foreign experience. However, it is very interesting that three people found life outside their dormitories to be a negative experience. This confuses the writers because life outside of your dormitory should involve continuous exposure to new culture, which is something many foreign students seek, according to Glam & Rinker (2002).

Networking was another topic that was mentioned by three respondents; they saw their foreign student life as a way to increase their professional network. Three people is not many, but this might be the type of group that is investing in their careers and looking for these kinds of opportunities. Perhaps, other students would think the same but were simply not asked the relevant question.

To be more straightforward, we asked students if their foreign experience increased their happiness and the results tended towards a positive point of view. Seven out of nine candidates experienced increased happiness due to their foreign study experience. One student mentioned that the experience abroad was a lot of fun, but also the time before going and the time after coming back were moments of joy due to the social correspondence, excitement and memories.

Three persons, surprisingly women, were very positive about their host countries' policies and cultural norms on gender equality. This was not surprising when all three respondents were hosted in Sweden which is well-known for the equality of human beings regardless of gender.

Economic aspects

The last topic we will discuss is the economics of foreign students and how these influence their behaviour and ultimately their happiness.

A sensitive topic was the funding for studies and it came up 13 times. Nine of the people mentioned that they got some kind of funding for their studies and four expressed in an agitated way that they had not and worked hard to fund their studies. It became very clear that finances are important for this group of young people because their full-time studies do not allow them to work much and earn money.

This is also supported by the fact that seven out of eight respondents that talked about the topic mentioned that they faced restraints in their social or leisure activities due to the lack of financing. However, even though the foreign students

did not have the luxury of a normal income, and faced restraints, eight out of ten respondents said that studying in another country was worth the money.

Duration aspect

The duration aspect is one of the elements within the model, as Jamaludin et.al. (2016) claim it is important to see the difference between short-term and long-term students. The triggers of happiness differ in each group of students: therefore, the distribution of the students was been researched.

According to the data, it seems that most of the foreign students were full-time students, while only three students claimed that they were exchange students.

Discussion

In this chapter, we will discuss the data and pinpoint the relevant aspects that came to light in our results section. The structure is somewhat fuzzy because we want to mix up the results in order to extract the most relevant points, which will then be supported by qualitative data.

With the knowledge in mind, that many people come to Sweden to be a foreign student we will see that some arguments brought forward have to be considered with this country's specificity in mind. For example, many people that come to Sweden, and come from places where the average climate is warmer perceive the climate negatively. To illustrate this view we have given a quote:

We can observe that the international environment in this class is supported by students from various countries, the sources of happiness seem to be for the group,

when discussing personal issues or personal experience in their student life. Despite the happiness of the group there has been observed a drawback from happiness of most of the international students attending the class on that day; it has been the cold weather outstretched by the cold blowing wind.(Observation 5)

However, a second point of interest that we can identify as a driver for foreign students' choice of country to pursue their academic study was safety and comfort. Comments such as "I preferred Sweden to Denmark to be close to my family and because I lived in Sweden earlier" point out the desire to choose a country that has implications for daily comfort. But to go more in-depth into safety and basic human needs, the following comment is really relevant:

Here you find, the system - everything is well organised, it is very rare that you are treated unfairly, because the transactions here are very transparent. You can claim for corruption and inequality. This is what mainly differentiates Sweden from my home country (Syria). It gives you more appreciation of being a citizen. I am not citizen yet, but I am starting to feel like one. You live the feeling of having that appreciation of your human status." (Interview 4)

Next to the unanimous fact that students were seeking a foreign adventure, we found this particular reason to choose the country to be of great significance.

The pursuit of exposure to different cultures is an interesting aspect in the way people perceive it. Some talk about the exposure to the culture of the host nation, but a majority of people mainly elaborate on the confined intercultural exposure that dormitories and similar environments offer. This means that most of their intercultural exposure involves people that are

also foreign students in a different country. The data suggests that some people prefer this bubble of international students than the culture of their host country since a significant number of the respondents talked in a negative way about life outside their dormitory. This is supported by the comments from many of those respondents that found it especially hard to “crack” the Swedish culture and integrate with the locals.

People do seem to find their academic environment very important. This is in line with Glaum & Rinker’s (2002) finding that Polish and German students were equally satisfied with their studies and their academic environment, even though they had very different reasons and expectations upfront.

“It was a very demanding school and programme in general. And here I didn’t really have any expectations because I think that bachelor’s and master’s level are two different things. I knew that it would be demanding, but I didn’t know how demanding.” (Interview 3)

One thing that got our attention was that people were unanimous in applauding their host university, but only half of those people were happy with the quality of the other students. Even though the quality of students might be a point of discussion, people still perceive the diversity among the students as positive. This intercultural character thus comes back into every aspect of the daily life of foreign students and continues to increase the overall happiness of those people.

The duration of the abroad studies varied between short-term and long-term students, where the short-term were the exchange students e.g. Erasmus and long-term students were those who studied for a full degree in foreign country. It seems

that short-term students are searching for more fun and language exploration. However, the long-term students are searching more for personal development, and benefits for their long-term future life.

Another thing that caught our attention was the fact that only 60% of the people responded positively about their host city itself. This is interesting because it shows that many students find ways around this unsatisfying environment to thrive and have fun. Perhaps it also says something about the environment in which they operate because that is usually limited to the academic environment and their dormitories, as we have seen in the data.

Overall, we find it very interesting to see that people are unanimously positive about their own development. Despite all the negativity about the country of some students and the safe zones students operate in, they still see clear development in their ways of thinking and acting. However, dealing with new and sometimes unpleasant situations does not, of course, hinder personal development in any way, rather the opposite.

Limitations

Like all empirical research, this paper has its limitations. One limitation can be seen in the time pressure of gathering data and analysing it within the period of one week. This was limiting in terms of the depth of understanding and analysis achieved.

Given the period there was a limitation regarding the quantity of data collected, especially the variety of the exchange and foreign students and number of them. Another limitation is the guides for the observations, focus groups and interviews,

where there is a possibility that elements were missed that the researchers did not think about.

The area of research has limited the study to mostly exchange or foreign students, who have experience only in Sweden that is why it can be hardly generalised.

The literature review on this topic might have been influenced by the researcher's personality and previous experiences and therefore it may have been driven in one desired way.

Conclusion

In this small but comprehensive study we have stumbled upon some triggers of happiness that really contribute to the foreign students' happiness in a broad sense. Although the information is somewhat biased and assessed from a Czech-Dutch view we have found some empirical data that was strong enough to be generalised within the scope of the limitations. The student's personal characteristics in combination with their nationality have a direct effect on the student abroad, and so do economics. The dormitory life and the climate are major triggers that have to be assessed independently but have a great impact overall. Then we have to distinguish between long- and short-term students because their ambitions are different. However, they both seek a new experience, and that connects them in a positive way. Then we found that family, relations and good health are universal triggers for happiness. Overall, this leads to the overarching model of how a person's general state of happiness can be assessed.

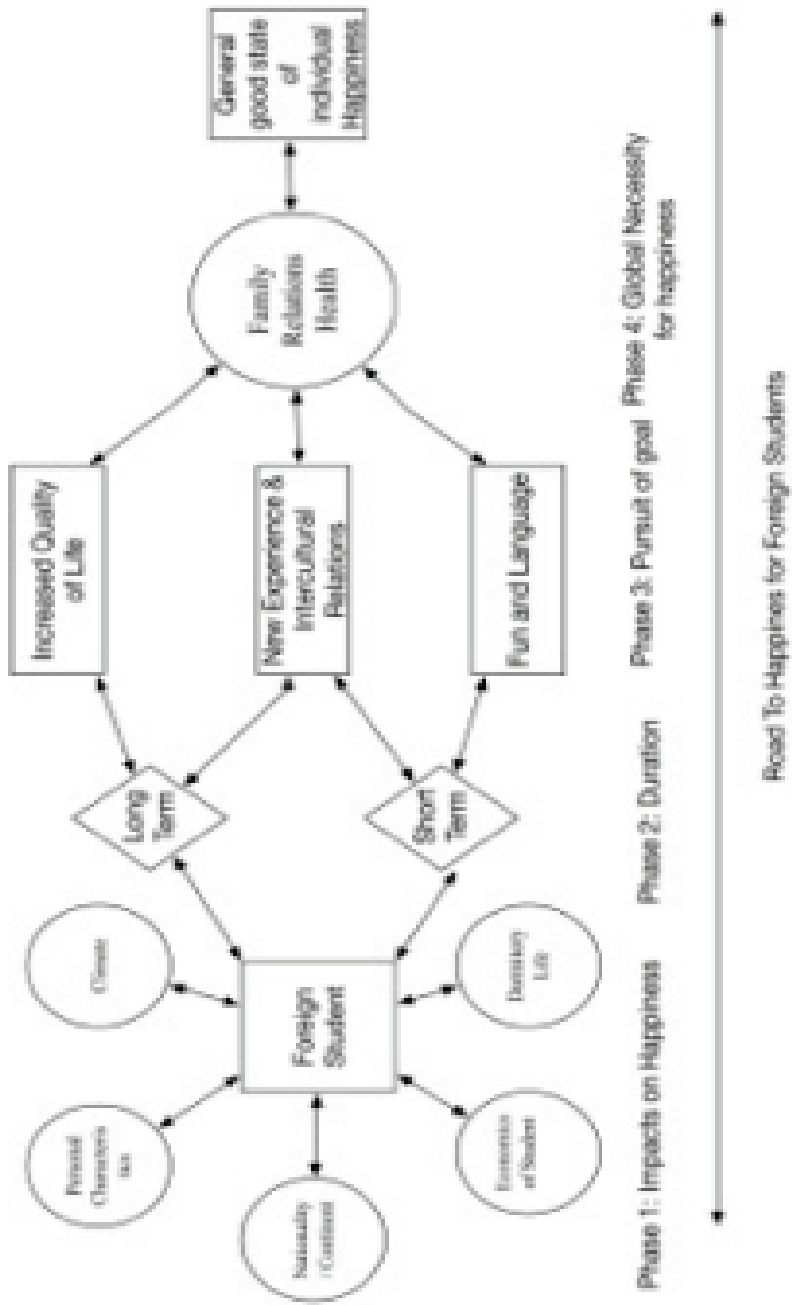


Figure 1: Final model

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