

GREAT EXPECTATIONS AMONG OUTBOUND SWEDISH EXCHANGE STUDENTS – A CASE FROM UMEÅ UNIVERSITY¹

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Abstract

This paper explores expectations and outcomes for outbound students in Sweden, comparing their expectations with what they actually experienced. Based on an initial sample of 143 students 57 answered both surveys, before and after having the experience of studying abroad. The aim is to investigate to what extent the expectations of outbound exchange students are being met in a population of students who had temporarily studied abroad. In this study, Umeå University, Sweden, is used as a case. This study highlights what incentives students have to become exchange students and most importantly, how they value this experience. The respondents had positive expectations before departing as exchange students and they returned with even more positive attitudes.

Keywords: outbound students, student mobility, experiences and expectations, Sweden.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Europe, the Erasmus Programme has improved students' possibilities to study internationally. The Erasmus Lifelong Learning Programme is the largest mobility programme in the world, and enables students to temporarily study abroad for one or two semesters at academic institutions in Europe. Erasmus networks now cover 90% of Europe's universities [2]. In Sweden and many other countries, there are also options for university students to study abroad outside Europe. For this very reason, student mobility has become an ambiguous area of research [3]. According to Findlay et al. [4], student mobility can be conceptualized theoretically in three ways: as an element of highly skilled migration, as a product of globalization, and as an element of youth mobility cultures and consumption geographies.

This paper covers literature on student mobility and deals with experiences of temporarily studying abroad. After a review of other studies on student mobility, the aim is to investigate how students' expectations and experiences are being met and to test different motives the students might have for temporarily studying abroad. How did their expectations match their experiences, be it for academic purposes or other motives?

1.1 What do exchange students expect?

Travel has become a meaningful part of many young people's lives. Why, how and where you travel says something about who you are and who you want to be [5]. In Jonsson's study, attitudes towards studying abroad were examined among those considering studying at a college or university. The motives given were the expected ones, for example to learn a new language and to learn about another culture. More surprising were the findings that the students wanted a break from the monotony of the daily grind, a bit of time to breathe freely, to do something new and to get away for a while. Moreover, the study showed that young people have very positive associations regarding internationalization and many want to live, work and/or study outside Sweden. The final report of the Professional Value of Erasmus Mobility, VALERA [6], makes a similar observation: Erasmus is gradually losing its uniqueness, as mobility has become the norm among European university students.

¹ See the full length of this paper [1]

Cultural experience is often the major reason students choose to study abroad temporarily [7]. This is, of course, true for exchange students who study abroad for one or two semesters. Thissen and Ederveen [7] emphasize that the motives for fee-paying students coming to Europe to study for a whole degree are somewhat different to those of exchange students who enrol in a mobility programme such as Erasmus. This has to do with differences in expectations regarding experiences and career. Fee-paying international students studying for a whole degree are investing a great deal of money in a career, whereas exchange students are focusing on aspects of personal development [7] [8].

Something that is a motive to study abroad for some students might be an obstacle for others. The Swedish International Programme Office for Education and Training conducted a survey in 2002 [9] and found that students who did not participate in mobility programmes highlighted reasons such as timing, language problems, previous experience of working abroad, travel, studying abroad and being unmotivated as obstacles to studying abroad. Swedish students who did not enrol in student mobility programmes also emphasized ties to family and friends as a reason for staying put. Another study by the Swedish International Programme Office [10], involved interviewing students about their attitudes towards studying abroad. The results of the study confirmed the desire among Swedish students to study in English when studying abroad.

1.2 What do exchange students experience abroad?

Students who choose to study abroad are taking a significant step in setting in motion their own individual life projects and it can be assumed that they dream of and aspire to having a great experience, be it for academic or personal development. It is quite obvious that students have expectations before enrolling in a student mobility programme; other scholars have also designed studies to follow up on students' experiences of temporarily studying abroad [6] [11] [12].

The outcome of students studying abroad has received quite a bit of attention in various studies. However, outcomes can be difficult to evaluate depending on when follow-up studies take place; they can be conducted immediately after a period abroad or up to several years later, but can also depend on whether the studies target exchange students (often Erasmus) or international students in general. In addition, the conclusions that can be drawn from follow-up studies depend on the size of the population studied, which may explain why results from follow-up studies can differ.

Erasmus students' mobility has not attained the scale anticipated, particularly for UK students [13]. To learn more about students' experiences of temporarily studying in Europe, King et al. [13] conducted a study, which showed that the experience of a year abroad led to linguistic improvement, the cultural experience of living in another country and further general personal development. While career prospects improved after studying abroad, academic learning experiences were less significant. These findings are similar to those of many other studies of student mobility [6] [14] [15].

Bracht et al. [6] concluded that former Erasmus students cannot count on higher income and status than their immobile peers but that they were being employed in international work assignments and were often internationally mobile. Only former Erasmus students from Central and Eastern European countries could generally expect better career opportunities than their immobile peers. Studies by Maiworm and Teichler [14] showed that Erasmus-students found work that allowed them to exploit the special skills they had gained during their experience of studying abroad. Norris and Gillespie [16] found that studying abroad truly changed lives, as the respondents' career choices were affected by the experience of studying abroad. In addition, mobile students more frequently had jobs with international work assignments [17]. A comprehensive study by Norris et al. [16] on the experience of studying abroad also confirmed its impact on career choices later in life. Their study showed that studying abroad affected the career choices of nearly two-thirds of the respondents. However, some studies indicate the extent of loneliness and/or isolation among international students [18] [19] [20]. Therefore, to fully understand the totality of the experience of studying abroad we need to learn more about whether and how expectations are met.

2 THE STUDY

2.1 Research method

The focus of this study is the expectations that outbound exchange students have when they depart for one or two semesters of studying abroad. Hence, the analyses are based on data from a survey monitoring their expectations prior to leaving and a follow-up survey after their stay abroad. The survey was carried out as web-based questionnaires directed at outbound exchange students from Umeå University, a comprehensive university in northern Sweden with 32,000 students, during the academic year 2007/2008. A total of 143 students from Umeå University enrolled in an exchange programme in the autumn term of 2007. Two-thirds were Erasmus students and the rest were bound for studies in North America and Australia. A hundred and twenty-three had signed up for one semester at a university abroad, and the remaining 20 were to spend a full academic year abroad.

The design of the survey was inspired by Plog [21] [22]. This model was chosen in order to understand why students make different decisions when choosing study destinations, especially when they have such a wide range of options. In accordance with the model, the respondents were divided into two groups: those studying in 'English-speaking countries' and those studying in 'non-English-speaking countries'. Plog's studies examined tourists choosing tourist destinations and this study examines the potential for applying tourism research to studying the choices exchange students make when choosing study destinations. In addition, this model was used to test 'academic' purposes with other motives for student mobility and choice of study destination.

The questions in the survey were about the students' abilities in a second and third language, how much they had travelled, the parts of the world they had visited, their expectations before studying abroad, and finally their motives for choosing a foreign university.

In the present study, outbound exchange students were studied in order to be able to draw conclusions from what they had experienced after having temporarily studied abroad. The self-constructed survey about their expectations, previous experience of travelling, etc. was not validated, which is a weakness of the study. Further limitations are, for example, the study's reliance on a relatively small group of outbound exchange students, and the fact that the students were followed up after a relatively short period of time. Moreover, this study lacks a control group of students studying on campus. In addition, these limitations of course mean that any conclusions drawn from the study are tentative.

2.2 Research procedure

Before leaving for their studies abroad, the 143 students received a self-constructed questionnaire in which they were asked about their previous experiences concerning travelling and living abroad, their motives for enrolling in an international study programme, their choice of study destination, and their expectations (such as learning another language, getting to know another country and culture, a sense of adventure, etc.). A Likert scale was used in the survey to scale responses to the questionnaire on seven levels from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In relation to the return to Sweden the students were once again approached with a web-based survey and asked questions about how they had perceived their stay abroad. The data set therefore constitutes a panel.

For exchange students an agreement between Umeå University and an international partner university is fundamental. Without an agreement the students' only option is to study abroad on their own, without a scholarship or support from their home university. Umeå University has more than 700 agreements with partner universities worldwide, but most of the agreements are within Europe (i.e., within the mobility programmes Erasmus and Nordplus).

Umeå University students can choose among many countries for studying abroad as an exchange student; the choice is dependent on the student's main field of study. There are many possibilities: for instance, a law student can choose between 17 countries, and a business student between 24 countries. Students have many more options than they are willing or able to exercise when it comes to studying abroad, especially within the Erasmus Programme. Many students from Umeå University

prefer to travel far from Sweden when studying abroad. Countries such as Australia, South Africa, Japan and the US are popular among students, but there are relatively few places available. The demand from Umeå students to study abroad is very different from what Umeå University can actually provide, and the places available at universities in many countries are not very popular among students. One thing to keep in mind is that the students' home university can only nominate students, while the hosting universities admit them. For example, many more students from Umeå want to study in Great Britain than can possibly be accepted by the admitting study institutions, due to the popularity of this particular country among a large group of potential international students. Thus, there is a discrepancy between what the students perceive as the best option and what Umeå University can actually provide.

Of the initial 143 outbound students, 80 answered the first questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 56%. The follow-up survey was directed at the 80 students who had answered the first questionnaire, and yielded 62 answers, and 57 of the respondents could be matched and linked between the responses in both surveys. The panel therefore encompasses 40% of the population. An analysis of the non-participants does not indicate any bias with respect to gender, age or study programme. However, the results of this study are limited to 62 students who participated in an international programme, and cannot be generalized to all students at Umeå University who chose to study abroad (a substantial but unknown number of students choose to study abroad for shorter or longer periods outside a mobility programme administered by the university).

All statistical analysis was performed using SPSS, version 17.0 for Windows. The Wilcoxon signed ranked test was used for the study of paired observations, e.g. for the comparison of answers to the questionnaires after returning to Sweden with those before leaving for studies abroad. The Mann-Whitney test was used to compare differences between groups. The level of statistical significance was set to $p < 0.05$.

2.3 Results

The following section presents the results from the two surveys. Of the respondents answering the first survey ($n=80$), the average age was 24 and the majority were women. The vast majority of the students were studying social sciences and law, which also included students from the business school. The rest of the students were studying natural sciences and technology, medicine, dentistry, education, humanities, and fine arts.

A large majority were about to study in Europe and wished to study in an English-speaking country; about half of the respondents studied in the UK, Ireland, Australia, Canada or the US.

In the first survey the students were asked how they rated the importance of the study destination, i.e. the city or region where the university was located. Seven of ten said that the study destination was more important than the university itself. The students were also asked to rate the importance of the country, and 76% of the respondents felt that the country was more important than the study destination.

2.3.1 *The students' back ground*

An analysis of the results from the first survey showed that a large majority (89 %) of the respondents had grown up in Sweden, and half had some previous experience of living abroad for a period. Many of the students who had enrolled in the mobility programmes were experienced travellers. All had visited at least one European country outside Sweden. A majority had been to North America and Asia. Fewer students had been to Africa, South America, the Middle East, Oceania or Central America. In other words, the students had visited many countries and had good knowledge of languages. They had university backgrounds that could strongly benefit from the experience of studying abroad, such as law school and business school, especially when it came to further career planning and choosing a country for their studies. Most students preferred an English-speaking country. Over half of the students had studied in English; another four students had studied in English and the language of the country. Six had only used Spanish for their studies. One had used Chinese (Mandarin) when studying abroad, another German, and one French. It should be emphasized that not being proficient in a third or fourth language does not seem to be an obstacle to student mobility. One might add that most of the students had studied for quite some time at the university level: the majority of them had earned 121 ECTS or more at Umeå University before temporarily studying abroad as an exchange student.

2.3.2 Choosing destination

The survey respondents were divided into two groups: students who studied in an English-speaking country (n=44) and those who studied in a non-English speaking country (n=36). In both groups, female students were the majority. Students who went to non-English-speaking countries had a more international background, i.e. the answers from the survey showed that they (n=6) had grown up mostly outside Sweden and, additionally, 23 students responded that they had lived abroad at some point during their childhood. They were also looking for an academic challenge. Students who went to English-speaking countries had less experience living abroad. Three of the students had lived outside Sweden for most of their upbringing, and 17 had lived outside Sweden for part of their lives. The ones who studied in an English-speaking country were looking for an adventure to a higher degree than those studying in a non-English-speaking country. One thing that is noteworthy is the fact that 18 of the 36 students in a non-English-speaking country studied in English. One can also observe that the students preferred to improve their already high proficiency in English rather than investing in learning a third or a fourth language.

Different motives were compared between students who studied in an English-speaking country with students who studied in a non-English-speaking country. The percentage of students in a non-English-speaking country was significantly higher than that of students in an English-speaking country for the elements “recommended by a teacher” and “living abroad part of upbringing” while the percentage of students in an English-speaking country was significantly higher than that of students in a non-English-speaking country for the elements “recommended by a friend”; “learn another language”; “adventure”; “existence of an agreement” (Fig.1). Recommendations from teachers and friends seem to be crucial for the students. Furthermore, the experience of having lived abroad as part of one’s upbringing stands out. It seems that there is a selection of students who study abroad, and that previous experience of living abroad is important when explaining student mobility.

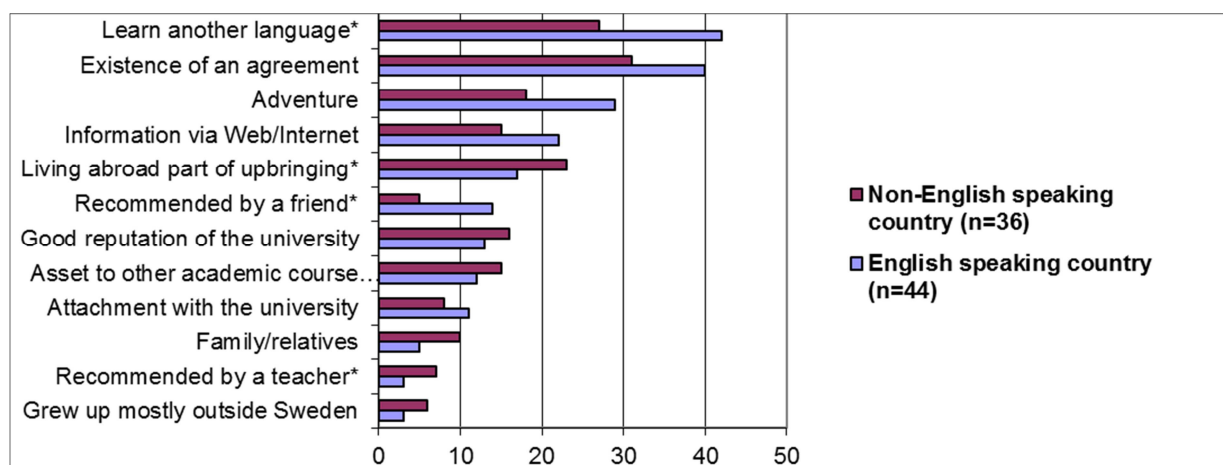


Fig. 1. Differences between motivations among students who studied in an English-speaking country and those who studied in a non-English-speaking country; the level of statistical significance was set to $p < 0.05$ (*).

2.3.3 Comparisons of expectations before and after the study-abroad experience

Outbound students had expectations prior to departure, upon return had gained experience, from temporarily studying abroad (Table 1). Before departing as exchange students the vast majority had an expectation of excitement and adventure and a majority did in fact experience adventure. For the respondents, adventure stands out as the aspect that characterizes the experience abroad and was thus shown to be a significant element. Before leaving Sweden the students responded that a period abroad would be an adventure, and this expectation was shown to have been fulfilled. The two surveys asked questions about what it was like to be an exchange student. Many students expected to help them find a job more easily in the future, learn about another culture and learn another language. It seems that the respondents were looking for the experience of having lived abroad for a period of their lives. After returning home, the respondents reported that they had enjoyed the change of study environment and that it had been interesting to learn more about another culture. Elements such as change of study environment and learning about another culture became more important after a study

period abroad; i.e. these aspects surpassed the students' expectations. The respondents had positive expectations before leaving as an exchange student, and they returned with even more positive attitudes. This study indicates that their expectations were met and that they were very satisfied with their overall experience of temporarily studying abroad. It seems that the experiences they had in a foreign country were well received in all respects. In addition, the respondents considered the study period worthwhile. Finally, this study also shows that living in a warmer climate does not stand out as important for students when they make their destination choice, which one might expect considering that Umeå University is located in northern Europe.

Table 1. How can your expectations and experiences after returning from temporary studies abroad best be described? Data have been matched between the same respondents before departure from and after return to Sweden; the level of statistical significance was set to $p < 0.05$ (*).

	<i>Before going</i>		<i>After returning</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Exciting/ adventure	35	61	28	50
Learning about another culture	5	9	7	12
Learning another language	4	7	5	9
Studies in a more interesting academic environment(*)	2	4	4	7
Change of environment (*)	3	5	8	14
Living in a warmer climate	1	2	0	0
Easier to get a job (*)	6	10	3	5
Other matters	1	2	2	3
TOTAL	57	100	57	100

3 DISCUSSION

Since the 1970s, the number of students studying abroad has increased considerably worldwide. Approximately four million university students are enrolled in studies outside their country of citizenship, in comparison with approximately 0.8 million in 1975 [23]. As student mobility has become an ambiguous area of research, this tentative study has broadened the perspective and added the research question "How expectations are being met?" The respondents had positive expectations before departing as exchange students, and returned with even more positive attitudes. In this study, experiences other than strictly 'academic' ones were an attraction influencing the outbound exchange students' choice of destination.

The findings in this study indicate that a period of studying abroad enriches students' lives, also confirm that it is only a selection of students that study abroad. The most adventurous and internationally experienced students are attracted to enrolling in student mobility programmes. It is clear that these students see exchange programmes as an opportunity for exploration but also as a way to use the experience as a merit later in life.

In this study, it was found that the choices students make about mobility are individualistic, and it seems as if the students place very high value on their choice of country in which to study. For most students, the study destination is more important than the university itself, and a vast majority of the respondents felt that the country was more important than the study destination. This is an interesting result, considering that students have many more options than they are willing or able to use when it comes to temporarily studying abroad. However, some studies have shown that international mobility for study purposes may be tied to future intentions concerning places of work and residence [24].

It would seem that students see studying abroad as an opportunity for a unique adventure. When the students in this study responded to the survey, they seemed to label themselves as more adventurous than they were in more objective and strict terms. A survey is a self-evaluation, and terms like 'adventure' and 'exotic' mean very different things to different people. However, students who went to non-English-speaking countries seemed to be able to consider a wider range of options when it came to studying abroad. It is noteworthy that half of the students who studied in a non-English-speaking country actually studied in English. English has become a global language [25], a lingua franca. The

students expressed a desire to become more fluent in a language they already had good knowledge of (i.e. English), rather than to learn a language of which they had limited or no knowledge. However, improvement of language skills still seems to be important to students when choosing to enrol in a student mobility programme. Moreover, the respondents studying in an English-speaking country were less internationally experienced and expected studying abroad to be an adventure. Students going to English-speaking countries valued adventure more because they had limited experiences of studying, travelling and/or working in a foreign country.

In conclusion, a global lifestyle among young people [26] and the fact that being mobile has become normal among European university students raise questions. Are the students who are not presently attracted to exchange programmes already experienced travellers with extensive international experience? This study has highlighted not only the incentives students have to become exchange students but also, most importantly, how they value this experience. The findings from this study indicate that the students first prioritize which country they would like to study in and secondly the more precise study destination and university. Only thereafter come aspects, which have relevance to an 'academic' exchange programme such as courses, the research reputation of selected universities or departments, teaching and learning issues, etc.

Mobility as a phenomenon is also strongly supported by mobility programmes, for instance the newly launched Erasmus+ Programme. However, to make progress, more knowledge is necessary in this field, especially when it comes to inspiring students not only with 'political' arguments but with personal rationales as well. Stretwieser et al. [27] call "to engage in deeper research to more fully understand the totality of the study-abroad experience." Furthermore, in coming years it is important to move beyond student mobility and to enhance the possibilities of joint degrees, double degrees and an increasing growth of networks and partnership between universities. Finally, this process needs to be managed by the leadership of the university to become successful. Internationalization of education is a strategic tool for universities worldwide when it comes to branding and ranking, but not the least for the students and their training working in international organisations, businesses and transnational projects.

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