

The Study Abroad Experience, Attitude Formation and Academic Performance

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing focus on the internationalisation of higher education. This paper sets out to develop a conceptual framework to illuminate the factors which impact and influence the decision-making process of international students when seeking a period of study abroad. The methodology used in this study involved an extensive bibliography review including a detailed examination of 31 academic papers. The factors identified in a student's decision-making process involved a complex set of interrelated factors including: their perception of the academic experience, university, city, and societal context; the expectations, motivations, and characteristics of the students and their ability to transition to new environments; attitude towards the nature of the student experience and the academic performance achieved. The study concludes that students need to be prepared with the coping skills and supported by higher education and intermediaries in order that they can make the transition to new higher educational environments.

Keywords: international students, experience, attitude, academic performance, skills.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of universities can be considered as the educational response to globalization and is understood to be one that pools global and local resources together for a common objective related to the educational, social and research activity of university institutions (Kingston & Forland, 2008; He & Chen, 2010).

The government in a country is the main body responsible for creating an attractive international framework supranationally, nationally and regionally. The socio-economic benefits of internationalisation are undeniable e.g. international students represent potential talent attracted to a country, a source of prestige as well as providing income to higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, internationalization policies seek to favour the integration of foreign students and to maximise the positive images that internationalisation provides. Successful internationalisation requires HEIs to invest significantly to attract students and to understand the intercultural dimension of the international student experiences (Salisbury et al., 2009; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Jiani, 2017).

The decision to study abroad is a process with identifiable stages (Jiani, 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018). Firstly, the intention to study abroad and actually fulfilling it are two different matters, as not all students who wish to receive higher education overseas manage to do so (Petzold & Moog, 2018). Students decide which country they wish to study in, then they begin the search for an appropriate academic institution and finally make their choice (Ahmad et al., 2016; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). The decision is based as much on their perception of the attributes of the location as the academic experience (Ahmad et al., 2016). In this paper we examine the internationalisation of education from the student's perspective and the key factors that influence their decision to study abroad.

METHOD

The findings in this study were framed from an analysis of 31 academic papers published between 1998 and 2019. The following search platforms and databases were consulted: Abi/inform, Google Académico/Scholar, Emerald, Science Direct and Taylor & Francis.

A preliminary search for articles was carried out referring to the keywords: *study abroad*, *study abroad program*, *abroad experience*, *motivation to study abroad*, *international students*, *international education*, *international* and *educational experience*. The key words, and the summary of 137 articles were considered, 17 of which helped to narrow to a second

search after careful reading. Following an advanced search with new key words, first entered in the rubric “abstract-AB”, then in “full text-FT”, the results were adjusted to the specific framework. The estimated words were *Academic perception study abroad*, *University perception study abroad*, *City perception study abroad*, *Expectations study abroad*, *Motivation to study abroad*, *Attitude towards experience abroad* and *study abroad Academic Performance*. Thus, another 13 articles of particular relevance were obtained.

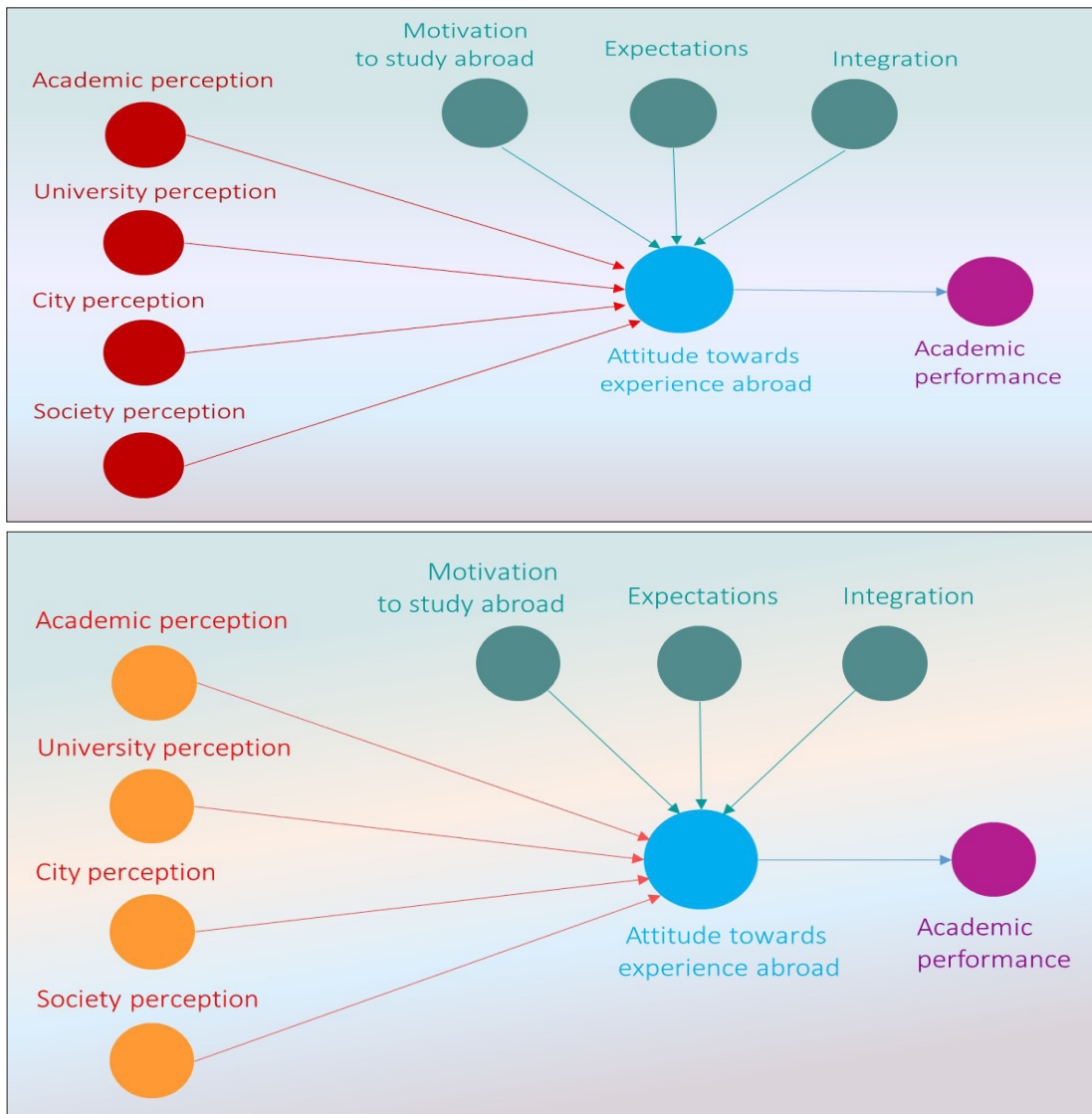
The papers examined provided an understanding of insights into academic studies abroad. With a few exceptions, university studies were the basis of the publications and information has been compiled above all from the perspective of the students themselves, but also the university teaching (academic) and administrative (non-academic) staff.

University education in many countries has been referred to in the 31 articles, but studies from the United States, China, United Kingdom and Australia are more recurrent. These papers were useful for comparing motivation and attitude in different groups of students on which to base original conclusions.

CONSTRUCTING A MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

The primary objective of this paper is to create a conceptual framework by which all the factors which impact and influence the decision-making processes of international students can be grouped together and the interplay between these factors clearly defined and understood. To that end a conceptual schema was developed as shown in Figure 1 and the remainder of this paper will discuss this schema in greater detail.

Figure 1. A Conceptual Schema of the Attitudes and Perceptions of International Students.



Academic Perception

The perceived quality of the teaching and learning experience is highly valued and is a key factor in the decision making processes undertaken by students considering studying abroad (Russell, 2005; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). All elements of the academic world come under scrutiny, including syllabus, facilities, materials used and the quality of teaching (Russell, 2005; Osman & Ashraf, 2019).

Teaching performance is considered to be the most important aspect of the perception that students have of the academic quality of an institution (Bist et al., 2019; Russell, 2005). Student centred, interactive, in-depth learning will lead to more student commitment and motivation and a positive learning experience for the student (Russell, 2005; Xerri et al., 2018; Osman & Ashraf, 2019).

The environment in which learning takes place is also a part of the academic experience (Ahmad et al., 2016). The teacher (lecturer) may be the most important figure, but quality involves a compendium of other elements ranging from the facilities, number of students per class, workload, hours of study, atmosphere created by the student body and technology made available to the student (Russell, 2005; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019).

According to QS Quacquarelli Symonds (2019), a degree curriculum and the syllabus of each subject are the most highly valued aspects when choosing a university. This information must be made available to the students in an open and accessible way (Jupiter et al., 2017; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). There is preference for subjects of an international nature, and also for them to be taught in an applied way, with the direct involvement of the industry the students are interested in, and that are related to the employment goals of students (Russell, 2005; Sawir, 2011; Jupiter et al., 2017).

Perception of the Higher Education Institution

As stated by Bist, et al. (2019), higher education is a service provider judged for the quality of its performance, which will only be able to excel if the demands of its potential clients, the students, are taken into account.

All services affecting student life are involved in establishing the perception of a university including, IT infrastructure, resources for research, online services, campus environment, student support services and financial assistance (Russell, 2005; Jiani, 2017; Bist et al., 2019; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Judgement is made on an aggregated level in two ways. Firstly, a unique image is given of the university as an institution, and secondly the added value is found in the relationships and the integration of elements outlined above (Bist et al., 2019). International students in particular are more critical of these aspects than local students (Russell, 2005; Jiani, 2017).

The level of internationalization of institutions and education is a characteristic of the quality and perceived status and image of a university e.g. the nature of international mobility programs and range of available languages. In the case of languages, offering classes in English as well as in the local language is a sign that international students are a part of an institution (Llurda et al., 2014; Jiani, 2017).

Most studies (e.g. The QS Quacquarelli Symonds (2019); Russel, 2005) indicates that following the quality of teaching and learning, the perceived reputation and international ranking is a key factor when choosing a university to study abroad. The student associates reputation with the international recognition of the university's curriculum, personal prestige and, above all, greater employment opportunities in the future. Regardless of the location, the popularity of the university is a key factor for international students (Ahmad et al., 2016; Jiani, 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). International rankings measure this prestige and compare universities in terms of quality of education and student experience which is why they are a highly valued and influential tool (Paulino & Castaño, 2019; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). The term "ranking obsession" has been used to refer to this phenomenon (Paulino & Castaño, 2019).

Within this context, competition in the market for higher education is growing. The image projected by a university must be distinctive and used as a competitive advantage over others. It is based on information available on the institution and its position, accreditations, employment opportunities and so on. The information should therefore be as complete and accessible as possible (Russell, 2005; Jupiter et al., 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018).

Finally, tuition fees also form part of the perception of a university. They go hand in hand with its teaching quality and reputation as students need to perceive that they are receiving good value for money. High fees are maintained when supported by prestige and/or justified by teaching quality (Russell, 2005). The availability of *scholarships* are also highly valued by prospective students (Jiani, 2017; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019).

Perception of the City

International students generally tend to prefer large metropolitan and cosmopolitan cities as they provide greater opportunities and attractions (Jiani, 2017; Jupiter et al., 2017). Opting for a small city is usually linked to cultural affinity e.g. religious identity, relatives live there, it is closer to the student's home town or the cost of living is more affordable (Jiani, 2017).

As proposed by Nyaupane et al. (2011), the marketing strategy carried out by a country, city or region to promote tourism, also affects its image or perception as a study destination. Therefore, countries and cities that attract a larger number of tourists, also have a larger influx of international students (Lesjak et al., 2015). Previous holiday experiences are a source of information and help the student to form a perception and provides a reference framework (Michael et al., 2004; He & Chen, 2010; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Jupiter et al., 2017).

Nyaupane et al. (2011) also refers to the importance of *social ties*, which implies that a previous bond with a specific city or area can lead to the student opting to return to study. These social ties can be in the form of a good friend, partner, close family member or even the family place of origin (Michael et al., 2004; He & Chen, 2010; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Jupiter et al., 2017; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). On more than 50% of occasions, the choice of country is influenced by relatives (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019).

In relation to infrastructure and daily needs, a socially stable and safe country is a key element for those living on their own (Lesjak et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2016; Jupiter et al., 2017). A good perception of the economic situation of the country, its financial agreements, trade and international relations, whether it is a free and developed country is also important (Jupiter et al., 2017; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). The climate and language are also elements to be evaluated (He & Chen, 2010; Lesjak et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2016; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Importance is given to accommodation and transport facilities (Jupiter et al., 2017; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). As previously mentioned regarding preference for small cities, the cost of living must be reasonable and affordable (He & Chen, 2010; Jupiter et al., 2017; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019).

With regards to the projected image, a city widely recognised for being welcoming, liberal and accepting is positively valued (Jupiter et al., 2017; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). Recreational facilities, student lifestyle and cultural activities are important (Lesjak et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2016; Jupiter et al., 2017). Touristic places, both historical, urban and natural (Michael et al., 2004; He & Chen, 2010; Lesjak et al., 2015) shopping areas and beaches (Michael et al., 2004; He & Chen, 2010), are also positively viewed.

Perception of the Society

One of the main attractions of educational stays abroad is the possibility to experience a different culture and to live a different student life (Lesjak et al., 2015; Paulino & Castaño, 2019) and also allows students to examine and reflect on their own culture (Jupiter et al., 2017). Moving for academic reasons is an intense experience, described as immersive because it brings complete contact with a new culture, beyond the level of exploration of other types of trips (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

The perception that each individual forms of a society is personal and is influenced by the individual's own characteristics and background. There are two dimensions to an individual's socio-cultural background - cultural capital and social capital. Cultural capital is often described as an individual's cultural knowledge, language skills, educational credentials and school-related information, derived largely from their parents' class status. Social capital is often defined as an individual's access to information, resources and support, acquired through participation, or interaction with others who participate in social networks or structures" (Salisbury et al., 2009, p. 123). Interaction with new cultures nourishes the two types of capital. These elements are essential for understanding whether there exists an interest in studying abroad, which destinations attract students most, why, and how their relationship with the host society is going to develop (Salisbury et al., 2009).

Within a society, there are specific interests and resources shared by all. When interacting in a different society, it is necessary to learn to work with the new reference framework. Only in this context does the interaction become significant and the new member, in this case, the student, obtains his own specific knowledge of that community (Coryell, 2011).

Recognising the similarities and differences between cultures, *intercultural awareness*, the individual is more capable of adapting to the host society (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Nevertheless, on

many occasions, the result of interacting with new cultures, especially in such a direct way, can generate *culture shock* and lead to stress and inability to adapt, preventing the student from performing his academic and social tasks correctly (Weissman & Furnham, 2015; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Open communication is key to successful adaptation so that differences can be gradually identified and points of conflict rationalised (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). This socio-cultural distance may seem too great when tackling differences related to language, religion, economic and technological development, amongst many other aspects (Paulino & Castaño, 2019).

Some societies are more open and welcoming than others, which can make the individual's adaptation more or less difficult and is one aspect of the student's perception of the society (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). Another feature that differs between societies concerns legal requirements for studying abroad (such as Visas, residence permits...) and are a source of stress for many students if they are unfamiliar with the procedures involved (Paulino & Castaño, 2019).

Expectations

Most of a student's expectations are formed during the decision-making process and preparation for the international experience (Salisbury et al., 2009; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). As well as acquiring academic knowledge, technical and language skills they include, improved communication skills, leadership values, the capacity to work in a team and personal growth (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015),

The most attractive aspect of the experience of living abroad is the foreseen professional success. Students hope their investment will enable them to have a career in the industry of their choice ((Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019), increase their employment opportunities in general (Jupiter et al., 2017), specifically in major multinational companies (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015), obtain a better salary (Petzold & Moog, 2018), help them to understand cross-cultural aspects that may affect them in the future (Meya & Suntheim, 2014; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015) and will make them more effective in the long term (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

In the age of communication, it is not surprising that the most commonly used sources utilised by students considering studying abroad are online sources. The most consulted are official university web sites (77%), general search engines such as Google or Bing (62%) and university rankings (47%). Within this context, social networks e.g., Facebook, You Tube, and Instagram should be highlighted for their informative power and, above all, their *engagement* with students. Approximately 70% of students use social networks to access information on university destinations being considered. Thus, social networks, are an essential element in student recruitment programs. The most recurrent information examined, concerns teaching staff, experiences of former students, and help with accommodation. Universities need to adapt rapidly to changes in communication and to be transparent, keep information updated and relevant, concentrating on aspects of greatest interest to the student (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019).

The most basic expectations regarding any student experience abroad are based on the belief that education will be better outside the home country including the academic experience, the student atmosphere, opportunities and infrastructures (Russell, 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Weissman & Furnham, 2015).

Expectations can go in two broad directions - harbouring good positive hopes about what could happen or negative and discouraging (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Weissman & Furnham, 2015). From another perspective, expectations have two parts, one related to oneself (how well am I going to adapt?) and one related to others (am I going to be prejudged by others?) (Weissman & Furnham, 2015).

Problems can arise when reality does not meet expectations, giving rise to an *expectation gap* (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Weissman & Furnham, 2015). Very low prior expectations are usually synonymous with little desire to participate, which leads to unconscious self-sabotage, preventing the student from enjoying the experience and maximising the opportunity. At the opposite extreme, expectations that are too promising are difficult or impossible to realize, which leads to a feeling of deception and prolonged stress and mental wellbeing issues. It is difficult to adapt to perspectives that are not realistic, the best policy is to hold reasonable and achievable expectations (Weissman & Furnham, 2015).

Motivation

It has been demonstrated that students who decide to study outside their country of origin have different characteristics to those who opt to stay in their own country (Meya & Suntheim, 2014). The predominant reference framework for understanding student motivation is the Push and Pull theory (Jiani, 2017). The *push* factors include all those elements that encourage students to leave and, the *pull* elements are factors that encourage them to remain relatively close

to home (Ahmad et al., 2016; Jupiter et al., 2017; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Salisbury et al. (2009) describe negative motivation, which keep students in their country of origin e.g. a delicate family situation, financial strain, lack of interest in the opportunity, universities with curriculums that are not flexible and, in some cases, fear of racism.

Motivation based on personal and professional growth is a common theme in studies (Salisbury et al., 2009; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Meya & Suntheim, 2014; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Lesjak et al., 2015; Jiani, 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). With regard to personal growth, aspects such as a positive impact on personality, greater independence (Meya & Suntheim, 2014), more trust in oneself (Salisbury et al., 2009; Lesjak et al., 2015), maturing, improving problem-solving skills (Salisbury et al., 2009), widening horizons, developing new interests (Lesjak et al., 2015), knowing oneself better (Petzold & Moog, 2018), personal prestige and improvement and achieving goals (Paulino & Castaño, 2019) are mentioned.

Professional growth usually refers to having more employment opportunities (Nyaupane et al., 2011; Lesjak et al., 2015; Jiani, 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Xerri et al., 2018; Paulino & Castaño, 2019; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). Students who decide to invest in studying abroad usually have a high degree of motivation and clear sense of purpose particularly in terms of academic success and future employment and career path (Xerri et al., 2018).

According to Kitsantas (2004) and Wiers-Jenssen (2003), other motivators include, cross-cultural motivation, the desire to explore the world (Nyaupane et al., 2011), interest in and desire to experience a new culture (Lesjak et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2016; Paulino & Castaño, 2019), international awareness and global knowledge (Salisbury et al., 2009; Coryell, 2011; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Meya & Suntheim, 2014; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Jiani, 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018) and the desire for escapism and personal freedom (Lesjak et al., 2015; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Paulino & Castaño, 2019).

Other authors believe that motivation is also based on improving communication skills in a foreign language (Nyaupane et al., 2011; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Lazcano Quintana & Madariaga Ortuzar, 2016).

Very often, students opt to study abroad motivated by entertainment and opportunity to travel (Coryell, 2011; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Lesjak et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2016; Petzold & Moog, 2018).

The effect of the student's personal network e.g. relatives, friends, acquaintances and fellow students is an important motivator and influence on students decision to study abroad (Michael et al., 2004; Salisbury et al., 2009; Jiani, 2017; Jupiter et al., 2017; Petzold & Moog, 2018; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019) and can have an "eye-opening effect" (Jiani, 2017). A positive testimony from fellow students in a similar situation that have studied abroad has a positive motivational value for the student and provides reassurance and reaffirms the decision to study abroad (Jupiter et al., 2017).

Integration

Inherent in the transition for students studying abroad, is the need for adaptation and adjustment to new circumstances. International students face a new socio-cultural and academic environment, which makes it necessary for them to learn to function for themselves in the new reference framework (Russell, 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Bist et al., 2019; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). When discussing the perception of a society, *cultural shock* has been mentioned as it is the first reaction that students have, unaware of the new reference framework to which they are exposed. The integration process or adjustment enables their relationship with society to evolve based on that initial shock (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Weissman & Furnham, 2015; González Ramos, 2019; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). These problems can be of a socio-cultural origin, such as food, climate, financial situation or safety, (Bist et al., 2019), problems related to socialisation and interaction (Paulino & Castaño, 2019) or of an academic nature such as not knowing how to adapt to new teaching and learning styles or related to the organisation of study time (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Sawir, 2011). The situation can lead to stress, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, negativity, lack of motivation, social and academic isolation (Russell, 2005; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Bist et al., 2019). Communication and language problems are reported to be the most difficult of all situations to cope with (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Bist et al., 2019).

Tackling integration problems is a challenge for both students and those who wish to help them (Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Family and friends and social networking, are the best allies for international students (Bist et al., 2019) and provide an emotional support pillar that students can lean on (Xerri et al., 2018). Emotional support helps the student to develop a sense of belonging and to adjust to their new environment and circumstances (Russell, 2005; Xerri et al., 2018).

Counselling and information from parents, teachers and others are essential in enabling the student to identify, understand and handle problems that they may encounter. Students who have the necessary supports are better placed to adapt and improve both their academic and social performance (Xerri et al., 2018).

University institutions can take different measures to help international students to integrate better and more easily (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Xerri et al., 2018; Bist et al., 2019; Paulino & Castaño, 2019). Generally, spaces must be created to encourage the integration of new students and allocate resources to keeping track of their progress in their transition - *social support* (Bist et al., 2019). Teaching staff must make an effort to understand the background of their students, guide them in the adjustment process and create a relationship that will encourage learning (Bist et al., 2019). They must find an appropriate teaching model that will benefit both international and national students (Kingston & Forland, 2008). It has been proven that relationships among students lead to satisfactory integration and therefore the creation of a learning community in which students integrate at group level, influencing and supporting each other, is one of the best options offered by universities (Xerri et al., 2018; Bist et al., 2019).

With regard to the learning community and integration of teaching methods, Xerri et al. (2018) point out that the international experience does not aim to oblige students to forget their own culture and replace it with a new one. The idea is to gain cross-cultural experience and understanding and to reinterpret aspects of society itself. Thus, international students are not alone in the transition process. It is a process with a double meaning. As both cultures are equally valid, the interaction is reciprocal and aims to benefit both. This concept is known as cultural synergy. As previously mentioned, some societies are more welcoming than others (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). There is a responsibility on the host to help the adjustment process for newcomers (Xerri et al., 2018).

Attitude Towards the Experience

Attitude is defined as the general evaluation of the perceived quality of a product or service (Russell, 2005). From the moment the first desire to study abroad is expressed, this evaluation will be linked to the attitude that the student has of the socio-cultural diversity of the world (He & Chen, 2010). Attitude is the way to process knowledge, expectations, beliefs and behaviours within a reference framework (Nyaupane et al., 2011).

Attitude depends on the personal development of the students, which shapes their capacity to act and make decisions (Streitwieser & Light, 2018). These decisions, which are made throughout the international experience, form part of all the activities that give it value and meaning (Salisbury et al., 2009).

Students' commitment to the university experience as a whole determines the time and effort invested in performing activities related to their education. This commitment will relate to a number of factors including, their perception of the quality of teaching, their sense of workload, interrelations created with teachers and fellow students, and their future destination (Nyaupane et al., 2011; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Xerri et al., 2018). Also, for Streitwieser & Light (2018), attitude is influenced by the cultural identity of the students, their native culture and that of the host country, as well as personality.

All university experiences can be defined in relation to the effects they cause: behavioural effects (what the student does), affective effects (what the student feels) and social effects (concerning their relationships with others), (Xerri et al., 2018). The attitude developed by the student with regard to the experience as a whole is one of reflexive interaction, as most of the interaction consists of comparing their customs with those of the new country (Coryell, 2011). There are four ways of embracing the experience (Streitwieser & Light, 2018):

- OBSERVING: you expose yourself to the culture and its differences. You compare and contrast it with your own.
- INTERACTING: you interact with the new socio-cultural situation, but following the rules.
- PARTICIPATING: you take a conscious part in the practical aspects and respect the rules of the new culture.
- EMBRACING: easily accepting new practises and rules; feeling them as their own.

Thus, attitude is not immediate but formed throughout time and changes with new relationships and contacts, competencies and beliefs (Nyaupane et al., 2011).

Academic Performance

There are many influences on academic performance and achievements including the nature of the learning experience – deep learning strategies are more successful than surface strategies (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012), the perception of

the academic process (Bist et al., 2019; Meya & Suntheim, 2014), class attendance (Xerri et al., 2018), work-load (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Xerri et al., 2018), different teaching systems (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Bist et al., 2019), university life and atmosphere (Meya & Suntheim, 2014; Xerri et al., 2018; Bist et al., 2019), student motivation (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Xerri et al., 2018), commitment (Coryell, 2011; Xerri et al., 2018), the ability to cope with culture change (Kingston & Forland, 2008) and handling the language of the country (Thomas & McMahon, 1998; Coryell, 2011; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Meya & Suntheim, 2014; Petzold & Moog, 2018; Bist et al., 2019).

Students also need to develop a range of skills to cope with the challenges that they may face to achieve successful academic performance (Coryell, 2011; Petzold & Moog, 2018), including, self-confidence, empathy, better understanding (Coryell, 2011), negotiating, intellectual and communicative skills (Coryell, 2011; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Petzold & Moog, 2018), cross-cultural understanding (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Petzold & Moog, 2018) and personal growth (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Petzold & Moog, 2018).

Several authors affirm that previous academic performance, both at secondary school and in the first years of university, prior to travelling abroad, is an indication of future academic performance while studying abroad (Thomas & McMahon, 1998; Meya & Suntheim, 2014). Students with better grades tend to be those who pursue a career abroad (Thomas & McMahon, 1998). Also, they show more willingness and make a bigger effort, which accounts for their results, amongst other things (Meya & Suntheim, 2014).

Cisneros-Donahue et al. (2012) found that students who study abroad enhance their knowledge in comparison to fellow students who did not participate in the international experience. Specifically, they refer to how they develop better functional knowledge i.e., how to deal with everyday problems and greater cultural sensitivity in comparison with their fellow students, they also score higher in knowledge of world geography, global interdependence (they have a better understanding of the global impact of actions) and interpersonal comfort (patience and flexibility).

Meya & Suntheim (2014) measure academic success by the final grade and obtaining a degree within the foreseen period. The authors suggest that international students should not be hired more easily simply because they have studied abroad, but because the experience has truly made them more capable. They conclude that the skills developed are the reason why the average grades of students that have studied abroad are higher than those who remained in their own country. However, they point out that another possible reason is that host universities are more generous with their grades. According to their theory, the way in which students transfer their grades, excluding those below the average in the country of origin, contributes in the first place to improve the average grade, and secondly, to delaying graduation as it is more difficult to obtain the number of credits necessary since some of the subjects taken are excluded. Under these criteria, it can be concluded that international students obtain better average grades in return for extending their time at university.

CONCLUSIONS

We are living in an increasingly globalized world which is also impacting on higher education institutions. To improve their reputation and rankings, universities need to include internationalization as part of their strategic plans. At the core of a university's internationalization plan is the need to attract international students. This bibliographical review sheds light on the reality of students that choose to study abroad. Through the vision of different authors, the factors which impact and influence the decision-making processes of students have been discussed. The factors examined are diverse, complicated and interrelated and include, academic perception, perception of the higher education institution, the perception of the city and wider society, expectations, motivation, integration, attitude and academic performance.

The value of this study lies in understanding the experience as a whole, which starts to take shape the moment the idea to study abroad is forged and before the student travels to the country of destination. (Ahmad et al., 2016; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019).

The challenge of studying abroad requires students to develop skills that will enable them to adapt to their new environment. It is generally accepted that those students that succeed and cope with their international experience, will be rewarded with improved academic performance, growth in personal development and enhanced career and professional development opportunities.

International students face many challenges when transitioning to new environments. It is recommended that universities constantly monitor the experiences and thoughts of international students and ensure that the supports are available to help them cope with the new environment and journey particularly for young students with little intercultural awareness

and leaving home for the first time. Intermediaries, policy makers and government bodies must continue to support universities in their quest to grow their international student base in an increasingly competitive environment.

Research on the internationalization of student education is limited and provides opportunities for future research, particularly research of an in depth nature. There is a need to further examine the experiences and challenges of students that study abroad and the barriers that they face in finding and availing of opportunities to study in another country. The perceptions and challenges of internationalization faced by academic and non-academic staff has also had little attention to date.

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