UNVEILING OF THE EDUCATIONAL BUYING PROCESS

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the decision making process of potential students with regard to their decision whether to study abroad. Based on the assumption that the target individuals do not make such a decision autonomously, but rather in interaction with individuals in their environment, a group centred decision making model was applied.

In recent years, research, with regard to student destination choice, has focused its resources on discovering the impact of single factors or bundles of them on this decision. The most common basic principle was viewing the student as consumer, which certainly applies partially, but neglects the involvement of the student in the service. This paper depicts the view of the student, not exclusively as a consumer, and the decision making process as a non-autonomously completed choice. It therefore incorporated a more risk avoiding, non-autonomous aspect by applying the concept of the Decision Making Unit. Relevant factors, identified in previous research, have been utilized, connected with the DMU model, and both have been incorporated in a newly developed DMU-factor model, describing the decision making of students in a general and holistic way.

Results and limitations were discussed and further research was indicated by illustrating the possibility to apply and test the developed model. This paper serves mainly as a foundation for further research concerning the students' decision and sheds light on the process by depicting the process itself in a fresh and elaborated fashion.

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1.   Introduction

1.1   Introduction & Problem Statement

The world of higher education has been subject to internationalization, since its establishment centuries ago. International mobility was than enabled by shared secondary languages and that issue remains the most basic one today. The today's extant of internationalization however, is not solely based on the growing dominance of English as common language of science, but also driven by "innovations in information and communication technologies and mass air travel" (Healey, 2008, p. 334).

As of today, education and research oriented institutes worldwide are being forced into a continuously intensifying state of competition. Several intergovernmental agreements and supranational guidelines have established a solid base for students seeking opportunities abroad. Most noticeably, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which prohibits discrimination of citizens of EU member states (Art. 18 TFEU) and secures the Freedom to Move and Reside (Art. 21 TFEU), the Council Directive 93/96/EEC of 29 October 1993 on the right of residence for students, which provided students with the opportunity to establish themselves in other EU member states for educational purposes, or the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which guarantees the recognition of diplomas by institutions within the borders of countries which have ratified the convention (Treaty Office of the Council of Europe, 2013). These cases are defining the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which has become the area with the highest overall student mobility, as well as the most growing mobile student force worldwide (Kelo, Teichler, & Wächter, 2006). This is certainly an extraordinary example of promotion of internationalization in general and student mobility by policy, but it does not stand alone. Similar, though not as far-reaching, agreements do exist, most noticeably in The Americas. Additionally, most countries support

incoming students by the means of national policies, which make them eligible for grants or simplify migration (Australia, Canada e.g.). What started with student exchange programs (ISEP, Erasmus program e.g.), has become a global phenomenon.

International marketing of higher education, on the other hand, has itself a part in increasing mobility and should not be seen solely as response. Institutes worldwide have identified internationalization of the student force as an attribute and a cause of quality in higher education (Brookes, 2003) and are thus increasing their efforts to recruit international students. These efforts make students aware of opportunities abroad and increase their willingness to study abroad. Since students are transformed based on their own capabilities, a higher degree of quality and internationalisation within their student force also improves the perception of the institute in public (De Fraja & Iossa, 2002), since the service's output highly depends on the input (Rothschild & White, 1995). Recruiting a higher amount of talented international students is thus means and end.

Furthermore, first institutes are offering free or almost-free degree programs online, such as The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. This could be seen as an advancement in current services or as an emergence of a substituting service. Either way, it indicates another step towards higher competition. As of today, most so called MOOC's[1] are only certificate programs, but MOOC providing institutes are assumed to do so, in order to accumulate data about high potentials, who would otherwise be unreachable for several reasons, such as prize sensitivity, admission criteria, or simply because they disappear in the tremendous body of total potential students worldwide. The institutes also receive growing recognition and reputation. Hence, this marks also new approaches of mass selection and marketing, while decreasing the effect and significance of conventional marketing activities.

Although cooperating in several fields, the additional potential markets force institutes into a state of intense competition in order to maintain a

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[1] *Abbreviation for "Massive Open Online Course"*

continuously growing inflow of talented students. Standing still, while all others "feed on the new meadow", would leave single institutes weakened behind in the race for international talents and would consequently lead to a shrinking market share and a highly disadvantageous market position in the long run. Research has shown, that marketing efforts of institutions are far from being perfectly custom-tailored. Marketing material and campaigns are rarely containing the information, the student seeks and, according to Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999, p.223), the "absence of such information creates anxiety for the student", which should certainly not be the objective of the institution to create.

This state requires institutes to arrange their marketing & sales activities more efficiently in order to compete globally. A few institutes have chosen their global target groups based on their perspective, simplified as "We need more international student – there are barely students from the Republic of Singapore enrolled at our institution – let's focus our efforts on that part of the world". This certainly brings focus, but whether the right one, is questionable and the vast amount of countries worldwide is definitely not suitable for making use of a trial and error method.

Focus should therefore be determined the other way around. Firstly, by understanding the potential target groups including their buying motives and their decision making process. Then, secondly, by choosing the right target groups, which are to be expected to yield the best returns, and, thirdly, by implementing the right measures. This comes down to the procedure of segmenting, targeting and positioning – the basic principle of successful marketing efforts (Blythe, 2006).

1.2 Purpose & Range

The aim of this research is to seek understanding of the students' choice, the path leading to it, and factors with high impact. Some of those parts have been studied separately in the past. This research draws on these findings and aims to connect them in order to depict a holistic view of the decision making process and to point out factors, which could be converted by institutions.
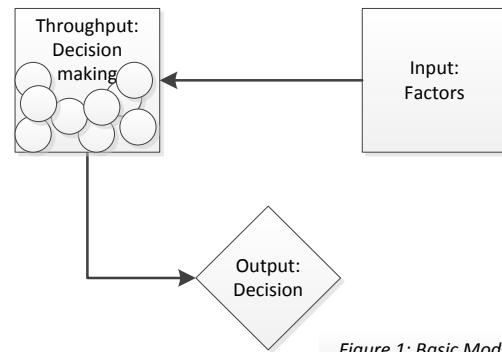

Figure 1: Basic Model

The situation of prospective students while being confronted with the decision, whether to study abroad and where, will be reconstructed and the factors involved analysed. Abridged, it attempts to depict the rationales for students to study abroad. In contrast to previous studies, the aim is rather to construct a general model of the decision making of students with regard to their destination choice, than to test single correlations. The objective is to give a broad picture of the interplay between crucial factors and individuals involved in the process (figure 1). The resulting hypothetical construct will than serve as foundation for further research.

Student mobility has been monitored intensively and the variables behind that have been partly explored, however, a great part of that decision-making process, the way the decision is made or how factors exhibit influence remains comparatively unstudied and undescribed (Canterbury, 2008). The throughput, as shown in figure 1, thus remains a black-box and transfer characteristics and internal processes continue to be mostly unidentified.

1.2.1 Research Questions

Corresponding, the central research questions are:

- *How does the decision making process look like with regard to the students' study destination?*

- *How could the process-internal effects be operationalized?*

In order to answer these questions, the following sub-questions require to be answered:

a) *Which individuals or groups are involved in the decision making process?*

b) *Which factors are determining the decision making?*

c) *Which factors influence particular individuals or groups involved in the decision making process?*

1.2.2 Research Method

The research follows a qualitative approach. Existing theories are used to describe and assess a specific situation from a new angle. Which has the purposes to achieve a better understanding and to develop methods, which could be employed in further studies (Babbie, 2004). The research is thus exploratory in nature. The research method will employ desk research and content analysis.

Firstly, the dominating concepts will be illustrated, applied to the specific case and connected in order to give construct for further research. This constructed model intends to depict the above mentioned black-box within the students' decision making process.

2.   Theoretical Framework

The topic of international education marketing has become increasingly essential in the past decades (Mazzarol, 1998). Forced by the international fight for talented students, Universities and research institutes, being the creators of scientific-based knowledge, have become aware of the necessity to analyse their own activities more deeply. Consequently, research has lead its focus on identifying causes for students' motivation to study abroad or the absence of it. Recent research, however, has either focused on single correlations, such as the impact of institutions' image and reputation (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001), familial influences (Pimpa, 2003) or the amount of tuition fees (Wilkins, Shams & Huisman, 2013) on the destination choice of students, or on specific circumstances or target groups, such as Thai students (Pimpa, 2003) or international students in Turkey (Kondakci, 2011). A few authors have started to analyse a broader fragment of the decision making process, such as Raposo and Alves (2007), who analysed the impact of several factors on distinct groups of students with regard to their decision making. Mentioned authors were seeking for a direct input-output correlation, but rather ignored the throughput.

Additionally, authors have decided to analyse the buying procedure from a consumer way of view. Moogan, Baron, and Harris (1999), for instance, have utilized Kotler's (1997, in Moogan et al., 1999) "*Consumer Buying Decision Process*". This model segments the buying decision process in five stages. The first 4 stages mark the tendering stage, which ends with the 4th stage "*Purchase*", while the last stage marks the evaluation of the buying process. This model could also be applicable for the decision process at hand, but rather gives a simplified chronological order of the process, while chronological order is not crucial in this case. Besides, students should not be viewed as solely being consumers, but as part of the service in which they actively participate.

Moreover, the decision to study abroad concerns a life-forming event. Firstly, the student will alter its current state of life by choosing a new environment with a different cultural setting, while breaking with old routines and ultimately harming established emotional bonds (Westwood & Barker, 1990). Secondly, the student choses a desired outcome by choosing a destination. The student expects to achieve a certain status and way of life when potentially graduating. Thus, the decision defines the rest of the student's life. Consumer buying decisions simply face limited financial risk, while students' risk is substantially higher, due to the massive range of institutions with comparable programs (Moogan, Baron & Harris, 1999). Additionally, students do not decide autonomously, but rather seek advice and guidance from other individuals to minimise risk, which could possibly have other motives and attitudes with regard to the decision.

The decision depicts the possibility to view this decision making process as a non-autonomously completed and risk avoiding choice. Group decision making techniques do incorporate those features. Several voting techniques or the highly structured Delphi method, for instance, would serve this purpose. Unfortunately, those structured techniques do not suit the approach the student tends to apply. They could be utilized by the student by choice. The student, however, does not actively choose a decision technique, but rather exhibits it unconsciously. Structural and formal techniques are thus unlikely to be exhibited by the student and, moreover, do not fit the more unconstructed path the student seeks. Furthermore, the decision rests within the students' responsibility and students are unlikely to choose the alternative which is supported by a formal technique or an impartial vote, but rather the alternative deemed to be most appropriate from the students' point of view. Since individual decision techniques are already dismissed for its characteristics, a hybrid technique seems to be most appropriate. To put it in a nutshell, a technique which emphasizes the impact of individuals, recognizes the role of a single decider and displays the highest degree of informality.

2.1   The Decision Making Unit

A more risk avoiding, non-autonomous aspect is therefore integrated by applying the concept of the Decision Making Unit (DMU). The DMU concept derives from business-to-business commerce and describes roles in organizational buying behaviour, but, owing to its characteristics and the magnitude of the decision, it is also applicable in this case. According to Blythe (2006), the DMU contains all individuals involved in the decision making process represented by six roles within the DMU (Figure 2), which are not mutually exclusive and an actor may also inherit more than one role:

- **Deciders** make the final decision. They are highly influenced by the other members of the DMU. Although all members do affect each other, the *deciders* are influenced the most.

- **Users** are those people who are using the supplied products / services. Their opinions are vital foundations for the decision.

- **Buyers** are those individual who receive the mission to finalize the process after the decision has been made. They are mostly concerned with administrative tasks and are barely involved in the decision making.

- **Initiators** are those individual who first recognize the necessity and set the ball rolling.

- **Influencers** are individuals, the *deciders* trust. Their opinions highly influence the *decider's* decision. These people are hard to identify, since they are not required to have any formal bonds with the *decider*.

- **Gatekeepers** are the keepers of knowledge. They influence the decision making process by collecting, filtering and distributing information.

Figure 2: DMU (Blythe, 2006)
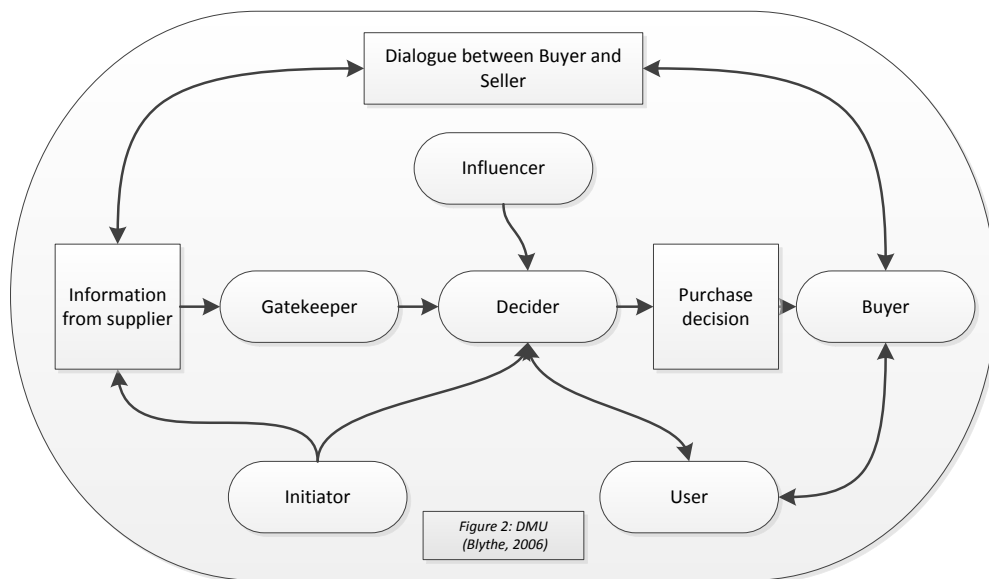
Figure 2 illustrates the links and interactions of actors within the DMU in general. Those connections define the kind and the degree of impact of the actors on the decision respectively the *decider*.

2.1.1 The student's Decision Making Unit

The six different roles are personified by several individuals within the students' direct environment or by those individuals, the student seeks guidance or information (Figure 3).

Firstly, the most crucial part of the student's DMU is the student himself and the student thus incorporates most of the critical roles. The student is the one being transformed by the program and is thus the sole user (*User*) and is, in the majority of the cases, the one, who feels the need to change. He is thus
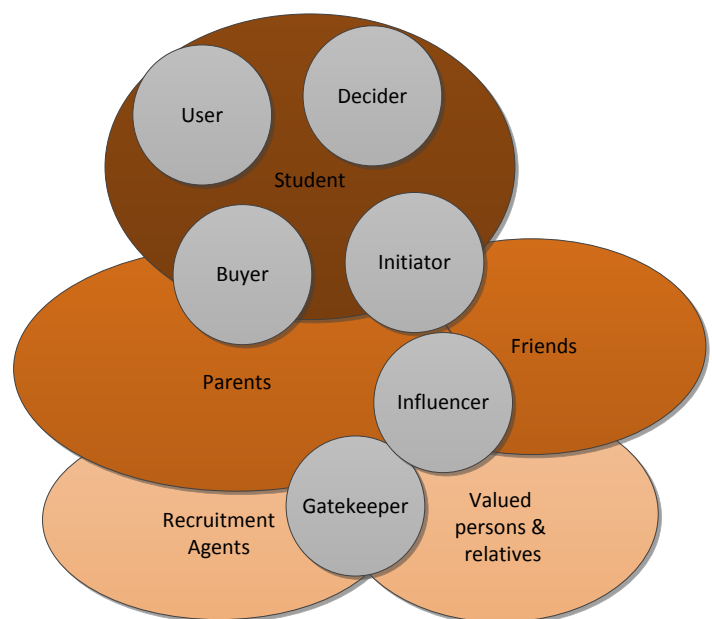
Figure 3: The students' DMU

the one starting the process (*Initiator*). Additionally, the student exhibits the most central role and therefore decides on whether to study abroad or not (*Decider*). He is hence the key actor within the DMU. The student is furthermore the actor finalizing the buying procedure and paying the tuition fees and related expenses (*Buyer*).

Secondly, the next actors are the parents of the potential student. In most cases, they support the study financially and are in few cases required to finalize the procedure (*Buyer*) and could be those actors, who motivate their child to study in the first place (*Initiator*). Parents are certainly the actors influencing the decision the most (*Influencer*), since they are the actors the student has the strongest emotionally-based bond with and their opinions and feelings are thus of enormous importance (Moogan et al., 1999; Chapman, 1981). Parents are also involved in the pre-purchase information acquisition. They, thus, gather information, but typically place different emphasis on the search. Parents possess information students do not (*Gatekeeper*), because of experinces and the fact the student has not recognized the need at the moment of delivery (Moogan et al., 1999). To put it in a nutshell, they were not listening while, for instance, financial implications were discussed, parents well.

Thirdly, friends have also a very high impact on the students' decision (*Influencer*) or even initiate the process by implying the need to change (*Initiator*). This impact is also emotionally based and could even exceed the impact of parents. For sure, both groups exhibit the most significant impact on the decision in comparison with the other groups (Moogan et al., 1999; Chapman, 1981).

Fourthly, Recruitment and sales agents, educational advisers, operators of online platforms and similar individuals[2] exhibit a certain impact through their expert knowledge. While being in the search phase, the student actively seeks information about study programs and circumstances (*Gatekeeper*). The way information is delivered also affects the students' decision consciously or unconsciously (*Influencer*).

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[2] *From now on roughly summarized as "recruitment agents"*

At last, students seek advice from other persons within their direct environment. Those actors, for instance the friendly lusty man, who lives next door for the student's whole life, the coach at the student's local sports club or the math teacher, are mostly experienced and the student values their opinions (*Influencer*). In some cases, those individual also possess specific knowledge, for instance if a student seeks advice from his teacher, who was very satisfied with his own study program or destination.

2.2   The Push & Pull factors

Factors, inherent to the home and the host country, are either pushing or pulling the student towards an alternative. Those push & pull factors are either positive or negative attributes of a factor, comparing corresponding domestic and foreign factors. The perception of the domestic educational systems, for instance, is mostly defined by the comparison with foreign systems, deeming it relatively weak or strong. Furthermore, the factors influencing the students' choice are not only internal in nature. Although factors may have been internalized by the student, they are nevertheless created and/or affected by others. It is therefore necessary to analyse the other actors of DMU as well and how they interact and correspond with the mentioned factors. These factors indicate what is valued in the decision making process.

Regarding migration and educational migration in specific, the scientific literature (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao & Lynch, 2007, e.g.) distinguishes between push and pull factors which are determining the destination choice of students and their "[...] desire to seek overseas education [...]" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82). Those factors must execute a certain amount of pressure to overcome barriers for studying abroad, for instance a fundamentally altered family life, insecurity and fear (Larose & Boivin, 1998).

Push factors are determining the probability of prospective students to study abroad in general. These factors could be sub-grouped into external

motivated and internal motivated factors. The first is related to the conditions in the students' country of origin, and the second to the internal motivation of self-development (Chirkov et al., 2007). The latter also includes, among others, assessment of risk and opportunities for personal development with regard to financial and social status (Canterbury, 2008). Pull factors, on the other hand, are determining the probability to study at a certain institution, in a certain country, region, etc. In addition to that, "the network of friends and relatives in host countries has been identified as an important socio-psychological factor in the motivation to migrate" (Chirkov et al., 2007) (See Appendix A for full list of identified factors). However, as mentioned, these push and pull factors are opposite sides of the same coin, which means they carry meaning through comparison.

Abridged, the study choice is driven by rational factors, such as benefits, costs, etc., but it is also a very emotional choice. The latter means that students chose also based on their "feeling of well-being, or at least a lack of discomfort" (Litten, in Canterbury, 2008, p.17) they expect at their destination of choice.

2.2.1 Identified factors

Previous research has identified several specific factors influencing the decision making (Table 1 & Appendix A):

Accessibility – an important factor while assessing the options, is the question of admission. Easiness of the admission procedure will be considered, as well as legal barriers for entering the country or the study program. Strict entry criteria or high admission criteria have negative effect on the decision (Kallio, 1995; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Summarized, this factor concerns the complete preparation process.

Finance – Studying is, in most cases, a costly issue. Most international universities charge tuition fees, demand to purchase mandatory literature and

also migration could lead to expanses (for visa e.g.). These accumulated costs can reach enormous amounts at the end of the study period (Mazzarol & Soutar (2002). On the other hand, most countries and institutions offer study grant or scholarships to compensate (Kallio, 1995).

Future prospects – Studying also means CV engineering and is hence done to improve the future prospects, such as job prospects and the potential status achievable after graduation. The underlying reason for students to study is "to get a decent and well paid job" or "to obtain a qualification/degree" (Moogan et al., 1999, p. 219) in order to increase their career options.

Language – Studying abroad leads to the necessity to speak the language of instruction fluently. In some cases, this makes no difference, for instance for Mexicans intending to study in Spain or Germans intending to study in Austria, but in the majority of the cases, this means the student is required to speak another language depending on the destination. This factor is considered to be a basic condition, rather than an influencing factor.

Quality of education – Certainly one of the most important factors, it is also the most complex one. Mazzarol (1998) has recognized the perceived reputation, strength of financial resources, range of courses and market recognition as critical. Although his research measured the institutional results, rather than the reasons from a students' perspective, it indicates a trend in international

Table 1: Factors	
Accessibility	Availability of accommodations
	Legal barriers
	Admission
Finance	Costs of Living
	Costs of migration
	Study related expenses
	Financial aid
Future prospects	Job prospects
	National wealth
	General societal status
Language	Commonality of Language
Location	Proximity
	Urbanization
Quality of education	Reputation, Image & resources
	Size of the institution
	Quality of overall education
	Content &Range
	Internationalization
Safety	Overall safety
	Social stability
Social life	Student Life
	Presence of domestic group & national linkages
	Presence of relatives & friends
	Cultural conformity

recruitment strategies. Furthermore, Moogan et al. (1999) have also identified the content and structure of the program as an important criteria.

Location – The distance from home to the study destination marks an important factor, since it influences costs and possibilities to travel home. Furthermore, urbanization tends to be favourable (Moogan et al., 1999).

Safety – This factor concerns the overall stability within the destination country, the degree of corruption and the physical safety (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Social life – Students choose not only an institution, but rather a certain way of life for the period of their study. Facilities for leisure time and other non-study related organizations, such as sports clubs or student fraternities define the life of the students. The presence of a group of students from their home country or of relatives or friends tend to have positive effect on the decision. The factors, as well as the overall cultural conformity, have influence on the ability to acclimatize. Among other things, Mazzarol and Hosie (1996) have identified the fact that destination countries have traditional source countries. France, for instance, draws heavily on its former colonies, Germany on former source countries of migrant workers and the UK on developed (former) member states of the Commonwealth of Nations. Whatever the underlying reasons are, it has also developed a self-sustaining effect. Old colonial or traditional-political ties still seem to influence the decision, not only though potentially lowered legal barriers, but also by promoting the domestic community within the country. The presence of a domestic group or community marks an important factor for students.

All these factors are not to be viewed autonomously. Although emphasis could differ, most decisions are based on a balanced view. For instance, a student, who is not eligible for study grant and unlikely to receive a work permit, will most probably valuate the cost-based factors higher, than someone who can utilize both. Additionally, some factors are closely related, although not included in one category. For instance, an institution situated in an urban area tends to have a higher quality of student life and a higher reputation.

3.   The DMU-Factors Model

Blythe (2006) stresses the impact of environmental influences on the buying behaviour and highlights influences, which could be cultural, ethical, legal, political, economic, technological or physical in nature. In this case, these influences are represented by push and pull factors. Mentioned roles of the DMU are connected with relevant factors and form a new model DMU (Appendix B). The factors are allocated per role.

Deciders (Figure 4) - Research has shown, that prospective students are in anxiety and uncertainty of their future state while studying and, even more important, after graduating (Moogan et al., 1999). Their decision is determined by the expected degree of comfort while studying (Litten, in Canterbury, 2008) and their expectations of life after leaving the institution and entering the labour market (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002,
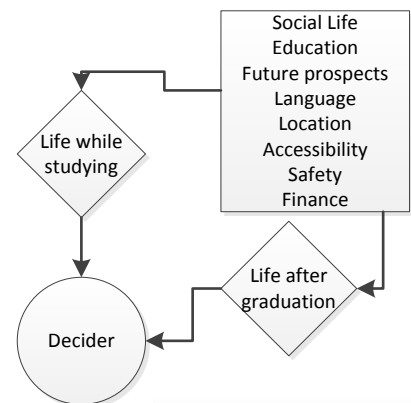
Figure 4: Factors affecting the decider

Moogan et al., 1999). Nearly all factors are considered by the decider, as he is the central actor within the DMU. They may however differ in degree and perspective. For instance, the factor of safety may be considered as basic need, whereby a certain threshold needs to be passed in order to make an alternative eligible. Absolute safety may not be required. This applies to all factors and the *decider* is seeking for an optimal solution containing a balance between the factors. The differences in direct impact of factors is relatively low compared to other roles and the indirect impact through other roles is what drives the *decider's* attitude (Blythe, 2006).

Users (Figure 5) – Crucial for *users* is the content of the decision and the effect on their life. The delivery method in particular, the social life and the overall safety can be identified as central basis for their attitude towards an alternative. They flag the need and thus define which characteristics a solution should include (Blythe, 2006). *Users* are

Figure 5: Factors affecting the users

most likely to be consulted by the decider at first. They have thus particular high influence on the *decider*. In this case, due to the fact that both decider and user are incorporated by the student, there is no consultation. However, this still indicates the dominance of these factors for the outcome of the decision.

Buyers (Figure 6) – Per definition, the buyer is concerned with choosing the best alternative within the given framework of financial matters and expected value (Blythe, 2006). To be specific, the price/value ratio is deemed to be his focus. Value could be defined as quality of throughput and expected value of the output. It is thus necessary to assess the relative costs for the transformation of the
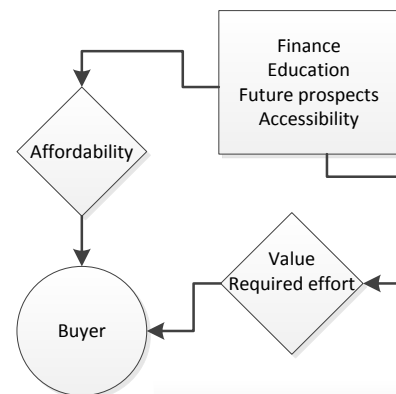
Figure 6: Factors affecting the buyer

student and the resulting increase in life quality. However, the central focus lays on the costs with to some extent binding minimal constraints with regard to value. As they are those, who finalize the buying procedure, they are also concerned with barriers, required efforts and additional offers, such as accommodations and administrative procedures.

Initiators (Figure 7) – Similar to the *deciders*, the initiators are concerned with the current situation. They sense the need to change and first recognize the problem (Blythe, 2006). *Initiators* seek the alternative promising the greatest advancement with regard to the current situation. Basically, this need or problem is related to the absence or unsatisfactory condition of a factor in the current

Figure 7: Factors affecting the initiator

state. Mostly, the current job prospects are poor or the general societal status is low due to low income or educational level. To achieve an advancement, the content of each alternative, its quality, the expected degree of knowledge gain and the reputation of institutions and programs are crucial, since it is assumed that these factors directly affect the future prospects (Chapman, 1981).

Influencers (Figure 8) – The group of *influences* is the most diversified one and hard to frame. According to the literature, parents, friends and relatives are the most common *influencers*. They share certain interests, but do possess own as well. *Influencers* share an emotional bond with the user (Moogan et al., 1999). Their interest is mostly the well-being of the user while being transformed and

Figure 8: Factors affecting the Influencers

afterwards. The method of transformation is of lesser importance. Factors such as safety of the user, social conformity, mental well-being and the achievement of the overall goals, the future prospects, are thus crucial.

Gatekeepers (Figure 9) - Other individuals have also influence on the decision, but to a lesser extent. Due to their possession of information and their reason for involvement in the decision process, they are classified as *gatekeepers*. This group includes counsellors, teachers, admission officers and other students (Chapman, 1981). Those groups influence by delivering information or, at least, by making it available.

Figure 9: Factors affecting the gatekeepers
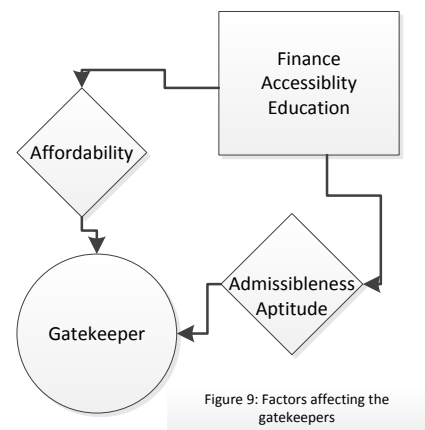
4.   Operationalization

This model could best be tested by a self-evaluation procedure. Individuals, who have already been confronted with the decision at hand, are the central subject to this research. Therefore the sample consists of students who are studying in a foreign country or graduates who have been. The latter will be ignored because of potential loss of memory through time and to establish clear boundaries. Therefore, 5 distinct units of observation exist, which are the actors of the students' DMU: The student, the students'
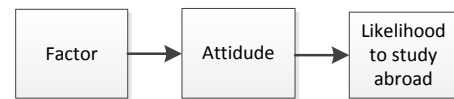
Figure 10: Path diagram

parents, the students' friends, the students' relatives and valued persons, and recruitment agents and information distributing individuals or organisations. All of them must be addressed by separate questionnaires. The aim of these questionnaires is to measure the impact of certain factors on the actors' attitudes towards the students' study destination choice. Deeming the attitude to be a moderating variable with regard to the likelihood of the student to study abroad (Figure 10).

The central question for each questionnaire would be:

"To which extend do certain factors influence the attitude of the actor and therefore the likelihood of the student to study abroad?".

In order to answer that question, respondents are asked to evaluate several items regarding their attitude towards studying aboard and to assess the importance of those items. This method is "specifically to elicit information that will be useful for analysis" (Babbie, 2004, p.244).

For the purpose of this research, a five-point Likert scale will be applied and respondents asked to rate certain statement on significance (containing the

values: very unimportant – unimportant - neutral – important – very important agree). This evaluation method has been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the Likert scale method is easy to understand and to complete, since it does not force respondents to choose a specific answer, but rather gives opportunity to state a certain degree of importance. Secondly, the respondents are easily quantifiable and statistical analysis is therefore simplified. Thirdly, due to advantages with regard to comprehensibility, the questionnaires can and will be distributed with less effort online. Those reasons have thus impact on abortion rate and the easiness and costs to accomplish the research.

4.1 Proposed Research Method

An explorative research method has been chosen in order to retrieve information about the composition of the DMU and the impact of certain factors. For this purpose, a survey study has been selected. Single questionnaires have been designed for each actor of the DMU. Each DMU will receive an individual sequential number, which will be used to connect single questionnaires of actors. Respondents will be asked to state their gender, country of origin and, except for the recruitment agents, and which channels they have used to receive information regarding the alternatives. These questions have been integrated to be able to assess differences with regard to gender and culture, and for the latter, to refine the actor groups. The main purpose of the questionnaires, however, is to receive a self-evaluation from the actors regarding certain factors affecting their attitude towards a study abroad. Those factors and their items are given in Table 2. The proposed conceptual model is based on several assumptions and propositions. It emphasizes the importance of different factors with regard to the decision making of students, to be more specific, their impact on parts of the DMU. This unit, although based on previous results, is far from being well-grounded. Therefore, the applicability of the DMU model requires being tested. In order to do so, the impact of the roles on the output respectively the *Decider* should be tested.

	Factor		Construct		Item
Accessibility	Availability of accommodations	Life while studying	Admissibleness / Required effort		Effortlessness to find an accommodation
	Legal barriers				Effortlessness to migrate
	Admission				Effortlessness to enrol
Finance	Costs of Living		Affordability		Expected living costs
	Costs of migration				Expected costs of migration
	Study related expenses				Expected study related costs
	Financial aid				Potential financial aid
Language	Commonality of Language		Aptitude		Commonality of Language
Location	Proximity				Nearness to home
	Urbanization				# of inhabitants in the area
Quality of education	Reputation		Value / Aptitude		Reputation of the institution
	Size of the institution				# of students enrolled at the institution
	Quality of overall education				Ranking of the institution
	Internationalization				# of international students enrolled at the institution
Safety	Overall safety				Expected overall safety
	Social stability				Overall social stability
Social life	Student Life				# of students in the area
	Presence of domestic group				# of inhabitants from home country in the area
	Presence of relatives & friends				Presence of friends in the area
	Cultural conformity				Cultural equality
Future prospects	Job prospects	Life after graduation			Job prospects after graduation
	National wealth				Overall wealth of the destination society
	General societal status				Expected societal status after graduation

Table 2: Factors & Items

The first and most important actor within the DMU is certainly the student. The student incorporates the four roles *user*, *decider*, *initiator* and *buyer* (Figure 3) and will therefore be addressed with corresponding items from all factors. Furthermore, as the student incorporates the central role *decider*, questions were added for the purpose of assessing the composition of the DMU. Additional questions have been integrated concerning the destination country, the kind of study programme, and the students' intentions with the purpose to provide additional information regarding their choices and to be able to assess the degree of homogeneity (Appendix C).

Previous research has identified parents as the most important *influencers,* but in most cases, they also appear as *gatekeeper* and *buyer*. According to the DMU-factor-model (Appendix A), the following factors are concerning those roles: *safety*, *future prospects*, *social life*, *finance*, *language*, *quality of education* and *accessibility*. The items were thus chosen accordingly. Furthermore, as *buyer*, the parents interact with the student, as the *user*, by discussing the alternatives. An additional question has been included to verify this (Appendix D).

The *friends* exhibit a strong role as *influencer* (Figure 3) and will therefore be addressed with items corresponding to factors from the fields *safety, future prospects* and *social life* (Appendix E).

The *recruitment agents* incorporate solely the role *gatekeeper* (Figure 3) and will therefore be addressed with items corresponding to the factors *finance*, *accessibility*, *language* and *quality of education* (Appendix F).

The *valued persons & relatives* incorporates the four roles *influencer* and gatekeeper (Figure 3) and will therefore be addressed with items corresponding to the factors *finance*, *accessibility*, *language, safety, future prospects, social life* and *quality of education* (Appendix G).

4.2   Limitations

The actors *student* and *parents* are differentiated and identified and could thus easily be addressed. The other actors, however, are differentiated, but not identified (friends) or neither differentiated nor identified (valued persons & relatives and recruitment agents). These three groups are thus hard to address. Prior, this obstacle has to be removed by identifying the individuals within the group by requesting the information from the *decider* or by indirect addressing by asking the *Decider* to forward the questionnaire. The first would increase the items of the questionnaire, which could lead to frustration and abortion (Dooley, 2001). The latter option deems the questionnaire to be hardly traceable and would heavily rely on the personal motivation of the *decider*.

Furthermore, the students' parents are viewed as one unit, however, in all likelihood, mothers and fathers exhibit influence to a different degree and are sensible to different factors. Additionally, there are actors which may not be present in every case and may have distinct influence. An example for the former could be the case of orphans or students' committing to a serious relationship, erasing the parents from the equation or adding the companion. In order to achieve a general model, these possibilities and several more, had to be neglected.

Certainly, it seems almost impossible to define the two groups at the outer rim of students' DMU – *Recruitment agents* and *valued persons & relatives*. Prior to the proposed research, these two groups require being defined or removed from the survey.

The method is also responsible for limitations. The benefit of simplification achieved by the usage of a five-point-Likert-scale also leads to the drawback of simplification. It simplifies results with regard to human attitudes, which is merely made possible by the means of deficits in accuracy. The results are thus not a precise reflection of reality, but rather an imperfect abstract. Results should therefore be interpreted with caution.

5. Relevance & Further Study

5.1 Scientific & Management Relevance

Student recruitment could be seen as the sales process of a service and the decision to buy marks therefore the end of the tendering stage. Understanding the students' buying motive and the way of decision making, enables the institution to react accordingly (Blythe, 2006). To be specific, for higher education marketing it is necessary to identify what students value, why and how they decide where to study. This is the first part of the value proposition (Elliot & Healy, 2008). In the light of this paper, the mentioned first part and the trust in delivery are crucial. As stated these values and expectations are not solely a product of the student, but of a greater entity – the Decision Making Unit. In order to be effective, all actors within the DMU should be involved in the effort (Blythe, 2006). As mentioned, several factors determine the decision making and are describing the students' perspective and the foundation for his decision making. The research has created practical benefits for institutions, since it could be used as a footing for decision making with regard to international marketing activities. Selecting the right targets and expanding the marketing focus beyond the student will lead to increased efficiency and effectiveness of student recruitment and thus to reduced expenses and/or increased output.

Additionally, this paper applied already existing concepts in a different or more specific manner, than they have been applied in the past. It gives therefore insight on the transferability of these concepts and illustrates the value of previous results. Research in applied fields also seeks better understanding of actions and interactions, and to take actions based on that understanding (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This research presents dominant concepts which could be vital for marketing or entry strategies and aims to depict the process which leads to certain actions of the target group of potential students. It thus attempts to close

gaps in existing theory and seeks expansion of the applicable field of existing theories.

5.2   Further Study

Foremost, this paper seeks to illustrate the DMU and the decision making process on a global extreme general level. It therefore neglects differences with regard to domestic circumstances and the possibility of a further segmented target group. This limitation could be tackled by adjusting the model to cultural differences depending on the target group. In order to be able to do this effectively, further research into cultural differences and domestic compositions of the DMU are required or to integrate a cultural variable in order to measure the effect of culture on attitude
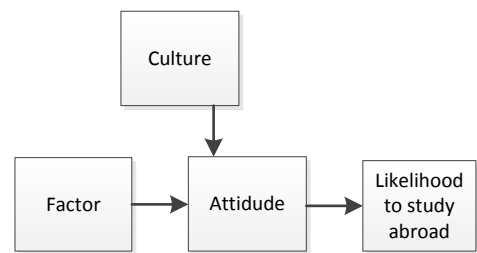
Figure 11: Path diagram

(Figure 11). Moreover, Mazzarol (1998) stated: "basically the range of services is too broad to allow meaningful, in-depth analysis of the entire field" (p. 163). That, however, has been the objective of this research, with deficits in accuracy. Further research is thus required to increase the degree of accuracy of the model, in order to prove Mazzarol wrong.

Additionally, from the beginning, the described links were meant to be a footing for further research. The next logical step would be to test the significance of each factor and the causal relations between factors and the individuals' attitude.

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Appendix

Appendix A: List of identified push and pull factors

	Factor	Measurability by…	Reference
Accessibility	Availability of accommodations	Students / Accommodations	Raposo & Alves (2007)
	Legal barriers	Index	Kallio (1995)
	Admission	Yes / No	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999)
Finance	Costs of Living	€ per annum	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), McMahon (1992)
	Costs of migration	€ per annum	McMahon (1992)
	Study related expenses	€ per annum	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), McMahon (1992)
	Financial aid	€ per annum	Kallio (1995)
Future prospects	Job prospects	unemployment rate of academic workforce	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
	National wealth	GNP growth rate	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
	General societal status	Human Development Index	
Language	Commonality of Language	Toefle result	
Location	Proximity	KM	Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999)
	Urbanization	inhabitants / km	Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999)
Quality of education	Reputation, Image & Resources	Rankings	Kallio (1995), Mazzarol (1998), Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999)
	Size of the institution	# of students	Kallio (1995)
	Content	-	He & Chen (2010), Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999)
	Quality of overall education	Education Index	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
	Internationalization	% of international students	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
Safety	Overall safety	Crime rate	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
	Social stability	Failed States Index	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
Social life	Student Life	Student / overall pop.	Moogan, Baron, & Harris (1999)
	Presence of domestic group	Yes / No	Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)
	Presence of relatives & friends	Yes / No	Raposo & Alves (2007)
	Cultural conformity	Yes / No	

Appendix B: DMU-factors Model

Appendix C: Proposed questionnaire "Student"

Personal

Sequential Number: [＿＿＿]

1) Gender:
   ○ Female
   ○ Male

2) Country of origin:

   [＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿]

Study programme

3) In which of the following fields would you place your chosen study programme?

○	Humanities (Arts, History, Linguistics, Philosophy, etc.)
○	Natural sciences (Chemistry, Physics, Space sciences, etc.)
○	Formal sciences (Mathematics, Computer sciences, Statistics, etc.)
○	Social sciences (Economics, Cultural studies, Political science, Psychology, etc.)

4) Which programme did you chose to follow abroad?

○	Undergraduate programme
○	Undergraduate programme (partly)
○	Consecutive graduate programme
○	Consecutive graduate programme (partly)
○	Postgraduate programme
○	other, to be specific: ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

5) In which country did/do you follow the programme?

   [＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿]

6) Did you move or plan to move back to your home country after your graduation?

○	Yes, immediately.
○	Yes, but not immediately.
○	No, I stayed in the country where I had studied.
○	No, I moved to another country.

Decision-making

7) Please rate how important the following opinions have been with regard to your decision to study abroad.

Opinion	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
The opinion of my mother.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The opinion of my father.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The opinion of my siblings.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The opinion of my friends.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The opinion of my teachers.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The opinion of consulted advisers.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The opinion of other students.	○	○	○	○	○	○

8) Has anyone else's opinion been of great importance to you? If so, who?

9) Which channels have you utilized to retrieve information relevant for your decision and how would you rate their importance for your decision?

Channel	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Alumni.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Official Social Media of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Other Social Media (Blogs, fora, etc.).	○	○	○	○	○	○
Website(s) of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent websites.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advisers / recruitment agents of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent advisers.	○	○	○	○	○	○

10) Please rate how important the following factors were with regard to your personal decision whether and where to study abroad.

Factor	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Overall wealth of the destination society	○	○	○	○	○	○
Reputation of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ranking of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Job prospects after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected societal status	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected living costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected costs of migration	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected study related costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Potential financial aid	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to find an accommodation	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of inhabitants from home country in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of international students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected overall safety	○	○	○	○	○	○
Nearness to home	○	○	○	○	○	○
Commonality of Language	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of inhabitants in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to migrate	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to enrol	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cultural equality	○	○	○	○	○	○
Overall social stability	○	○	○	○	○	○
Presence of friends in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix D: Proposed questionnaire "Parents"

Personal   Sequential Number: [   ]

1) Gender:
   ○ Female
   ○ Male

2) Country of origin:

   [   ]

3) Which channels have you utilized to retrieve information concerning the potential study programmes of your child?

Channel	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Alumni.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Official Social Media of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Other Social Media (Blogs, fora, etc.).	○	○	○	○	○	○
Website(s) of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent websites.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advisers / recruitment agents of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent advisers.	○	○	○	○	○	○

4) Please rate how important the following factors were with regard to your attitude towards the potential study programmes of your child.

Factor	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Overall wealth of the destination society	○	○	○	○	○	○
Reputation of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ranking of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Job prospects after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected societal status after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected living costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected costs of migration	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected study related costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Potential financial aid	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to find an accommodation	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of inhabitants from home country in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of international students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected overall safety	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to migrate	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to enrol	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cultural equality	○	○	○	○	○	○
Overall social stability	○	○	○	○	○	○
Presence of friends in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○

5) Have you tried to enfeeble certain alternatives? If yes, why?

Appendix E: Proposed questionnaire "Friends"

Personal   Sequential Number: [   ]

6) Gender:
   ○ Female
   ○ Male

7) Country of origin:

   [   ]

8) Which channels have you utilized to retrieve information concerning the potential study programmes of your friend?

Channel	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Alumni.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Official Social Media of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Other Social Media (Blogs, fora, etc.).	○	○	○	○	○	○
Website(s) of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent websites.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advisers / recruitment agents of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent advisers.	○	○	○	○	○	○

9) Please rate how important the following factors were with regard to your attitude towards the potential study programmes of your child.

Factor	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Overall wealth of the destination society	○	○	○	○	○	○
Job prospects after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected societal status after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of inhabitants from home country in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected overall safety	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cultural equality	○	○	○	○	○	○
Overall social stability	○	○	○	○	○	○
Presence of friends in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
Reputation of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ranking of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of international students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix F: Proposed questionnaire "Recruitment agents"

Personal   Sequential Number: ☐

1) Gender:
    ○   Female
    ○   Male

2) Country of origin:

3) Please rate how important the following factors were with regard to your attitude towards
    the potential study programmes of the student.

Factor	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Reputation of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ranking of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected living costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected costs of migration	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected study related costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Potential financial aid	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to find an accommodation	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of international students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to migrate	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to enrol	○	○	○	○	○	○
Commonality of Language	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix G: Proposed questionnaire "Valued persons & relatives"

Personal   Sequential Number: [   ]

1) Gender:
   ○   Female
   ○   Male

2) Country of origin:

   [   ]

3) Which channels have you utilized to retrieve information concerning the potential study programmes of your child?

Channel	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Alumni.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Official Social Media of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Other Social Media (Blogs, fora, etc.).	○	○	○	○	○	○
Website(s) of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent websites.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Advisers / recruitment agents of the institution.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Independent advisers.	○	○	○	○	○	○

4) Please rate how important the following factors were with regard to your attitude towards the potential study programmes of your child.

Factor	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important	Not applicable
Overall wealth of the destination society	○	○	○	○	○	○
Reputation of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ranking of the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Job prospects after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected societal status after graduation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected living costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected costs of migration	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected study related costs	○	○	○	○	○	○
Potential financial aid	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to find an accommodation	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of inhabitants from home country in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of international students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expected overall safety	○	○	○	○	○	○
# of students enrolled at the institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to migrate	○	○	○	○	○	○
Effortlessness to enrol	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cultural equality	○	○	○	○	○	○
Overall social stability	○	○	○	○	○	○
Presence of friends in the area	○	○	○	○	○	○
Commonality of Language	○	○	○	○	○	○