The Desire to do an Exchange Semester: Obstacles and Motivations When Going Abroad

Assignment 7 Bachelors Project HGP

Group 7: Migration and Health in Different Contexts

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Abstract

In the light of an increased interest in student exchanges, the aim of this study is to identify the obstacles that students face when going abroad and in addition, to understand the perception of manageable and unmanageable obstacles based on a student's motivation. To answer this research question, a conceptual model based on theories of motivation during decision-making and existing literature regarding obstacles and motivations for student exchanges was created. Nine interviews were conducted among former exchange students. In total, 18 different types of obstacles were identified that relate to cultural, educational, financial, health & safety, administrational or geographical factors as well as four main motivation types. The perception of an obstacle being manageable or unmanageable seems to be highly subjective and rely heavily on a person's motivation, although differences in the extent to which motivation influences the perception of obstacles differ. The identification of obstacles might help to increase and facilitate student exchanges, which is valuable for universities, cities and their tourism sectors. Further research might use a larger, more diverse sample and quantitative techniques to confirm and expand the findings.

Introduction

Within the European Union, students have since 1987 the opportunity to go to a foreign University for a period of 2 to 12 months under the Erasmus+ (until 2014: Erasmus) Program. During the time that students study abroad, the European Union offers financial support (What is erasmus+?, no date). The stipends and funds have led to an increasing popularity of student exchanges during the last decades, which has had a considerable impact on the economies of destination cities. This is because student exchanges fall into a similar category as business tourism, with some even predicting that it might outperform business tourism within the EU in the future (Lesjak et al., 2015).

Therefore, the question of what drives students towards studying abroad and what pulls them towards exchange destinations has become increasingly relevant. From an academic perspective, the movement patterns among internationally mobile students are a relevant topic to study with the aim to understand education-related migration, especially among young adults. Exchange students, who comprise a considerable portion of the world's internationally mobile students, and the causes and reasons behind their mobility, are therefore an important topic to study. Underlying their causes and reasons are the student's motivations and limiting factors, or in other words, obstacles. With stipends across the world enabling an increasing number of students to participate in an exchange semester, the motivational factors for students to go abroad differ quite substantially.

Firstly, there are career and academically relevant reasons. Research has shown that many students like to travel to a certain destination because they can better focus on their desired study topic (Lesjak et al., 2015) and enrich their academic skills (Gutiérrez Almarza et al., 2015) or to improve their prospects, either through expanding their network or through gaining valuable experience (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2015; Trapani & Cassar, 2020). Furthermore, the student's professional development and the chance to work with better equipment or enjoy better courses than those offered at the home university seem to play a role in many exchange students' decision-making processes (Keresztes, 2014). Research by Jeanpierre & Broadbent (2015), however, indicates that the offered courses at a host university only play a minor role in the decision-making process of students.

Another important factor seems to be the personal growth and independence (Gutiérrez Amarza et al., 2015; Keresztes, 2014; Lesjak et al., 2015; Trapani & Cassar, 2020). Related to this, pleasure and leisure-related motives are increasingly important for students (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2015; Lesjak et al., 2015). Therefore, generally popular cities are also popular amongst exchange students, independent of the academic relevance that a certain university offers.

Then, there are the cultural factors that draws certain students to a place. The experience of a situation-specific lifestyle (Lesjak et al., 2015) or more generally, an unfamiliar culture (Brown et al., 2016) and the expansion of ones worldview (Gutiérrez Almarza et al., 2015) play a significant role in the decision-making process of a student. To some extent, an exchange semester can provide students with the opportunity of getting to know a culture and learn its language (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2015). To a further extent, research has shown that the development of intercultural communication is best thought through experiencing other cultures for longer

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periods of time, which can be the case when one stays in an unfamiliar culture during an exchange semester (Gutiérrez Almarza et al., 2015). Another reason for students to go abroad to a certain destination are experience and travel reports, especially by peers or friends and family that have been there under similar circumstances (Brown et al., 2016).

With these different motivations in mind, one might wonder about factors that limit a student's mobility when going abroad and how the obstacles that influence a student's mobility are perceived. Some obstacles might serve as a barrier for a student while others seem manageable. This might also be subjective and individual students could perceive similar obstacles differently. Therefore, in this study, the aim is to answer the following research question: <u>What do students perceive as obstacles when going abroad for an Erasmus Exchange Semester and how do they influence their decision-making process?</u> <u>What obstacles or hurdles are they willing to overcome and thus perceive as manageable and what obstacles and hurdles are they unable to overcome as they seem insurmountable and are thus perceived as unmanageable?</u>

To answer this question, after a brief introduction into student exchanges in terms of business tourism, a definition of internationally mobile students and exchange students, the different types of obstacles to moving abroad for a short, study-related, period are defined with a distinction between manageable and unmanageable obstacles. After an analysis of motivation in a decision-making context, a conceptual model is presented, which will be used in this paper as a guideline to answer the research question. This is followed by the methodology and a presentation of the results sorted by obstacle type. In the last part, the findings of the paper are concluded and discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Student Exchanges in terms of business tourism

Student exchanges fall into the category of business tourism as it is a form of tourism for the purpose of education with as a secondary motivation the leisure part (Nicula & Elena, 2014). Research by González et al. (2010) also shows that destinations that are generally popular among tourists, such as the Mediterranean, are popular among exchange students, too. For a city and its educational structures, it is a balancing act to provide the right amount of tourism and leisure factors to be attractive for exchange students whilst at the same time providing educational opportunities and institutions of good quality and reputation as both are important in the decision-making process (Lam et al., 2011). Therefore, the motivational aspects and the obstacles that an exchange provides are points of consideration for planners, universities and tourism experts to increase the amount and the satisfaction of exchange students in the city.

Internationally Mobile Students and Exchange Students

For this research, it is important to distinguish between internationally mobile students and exchange students. Internationally mobile students is a term defined by UNESCO and describes students that have a different nationality and/or country of origin than the location where they follow educational activities (Internationally mobile students, no date). On the contrary, an exchange student is "a student who studies at a foreign institution as part of a reciprocal program

between institutions or countries." (Exchange Student, no date). Thus, an exchange student is an internationally mobile student that is part of an exchange program such as Erasmus+, making every exchange student automatically an international mobile student but not vice versa. Also, while internationally mobile students who are not exchange students most likely participate in educational activities over the course of a whole degree program, exchange students only participate in the courses of a foreign institution for one or two semesters as part of the degree program from their home institution. Therefore, an exchange student's motivation and perception of obstacles should be viewed separately from other internationally mobile students as this research solely focusses on the exchange student.

Manageable and Unmanageable Obstacles

The focus of this research lies on the obstacles that students perceive when going abroad. Here, a distinction can be drawn between manageable and unmanageable obstacles. While obstacles might seem to the student as hurdles that they have to overcome, unmanageable obstacles are those that the student perceives as impossible to overcome.

One type of obstacle is the financial aspects or in other words, the costs connected to an exchange semester. Some students lack the money or don't want to indebt themselves for educational reasons (Brown et al., 2016). In other cases, the student lacks the financial resources and cannot rely on financial help from their family, which for many other students is the case. More than a quarter of the Erasmus exchange students rely on the financial aid that the program offers (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2015). Thus, if the student lacks the financial means for a certain destination or to go abroad in general, this can be perceived as an unmanageable obstacle. Other students, however, might be willing to run into debt and can apply for scholarships or receive financial support from their families.

Other points of consideration are the education-related obstacles such as the quality of education at the host institution. The equipment and courses or the communication between students and teachers differ from country to country and might be of lower quality at the destination abroad (Boyacı, 2011; Keresztes, 2014). In most cases, this might be perceived as a manageable obstacle, as other benefits of the destination abroad might weigh in enough for the student to still go to this destination. The same logic could account for stress due to a higher workload or difference in the standard of living (Jeanpierre & Broadbent, 2015), as it might be a reason for a student to choose destination X over destination Y but in most cases won't be a sole exclusion criterion.

A further obstacle might be cultural differences (Boyacı, 2011). Language barriers might seem unmanageable for one student, but another might perceive them as a challenge (Gutiérrez Almarza et al., 2015). The separation of family and friends or even the feeling of having a certain responsibility towards one's family might be perceived as an unmanageable obstacle for one person, while it seems totally manageable for the other (Brown et al., 2016). Overall, cultural differences as an obstacle seem highly subjective as one student might search for it to expand their worldview, while for the other, it might be a reason to choose a more familiar environment.

Another obstacle one could face is health and safety risks, as health and safety standards can differ extensively from country to country (Brown et al., 2016). A perceived increase in health

and/or safety risks might be a valid reason not to go to one country for a person and thus serve as an unmanageable obstacle.

Motivation

In the decision-making process, motivation is a key factor in the perception of obstacles. It refers to the underlying attribute and reasoning that moves, in this case a student, to either do something or not. Furthermore, it involves an interrelated assemblage of perception, values and personal interests and thus is highly subjective, depending heavily on experience, attitude and personality (Lai, 2011). The motivational factors mentioned in the introduction and the obstacles therefore are subjectively perceived and based on a student's personality. Also, motivation directs an individual towards the outcome that is most valuable to them in the decision-making process (Niv et al., 2006). Regarding the perception of factors that are indicative for an exchange and the perception of obstacles, motivation serves as a subjective, personality-based mean to evaluate these factors and select the outcome or in this case, the destination that is most favorable for the student. Thus, the perception of an obstacle depends to a significant extent on the student's motivation. How this might look in practice is discussed in the conceptual model below.

Conceptual Model
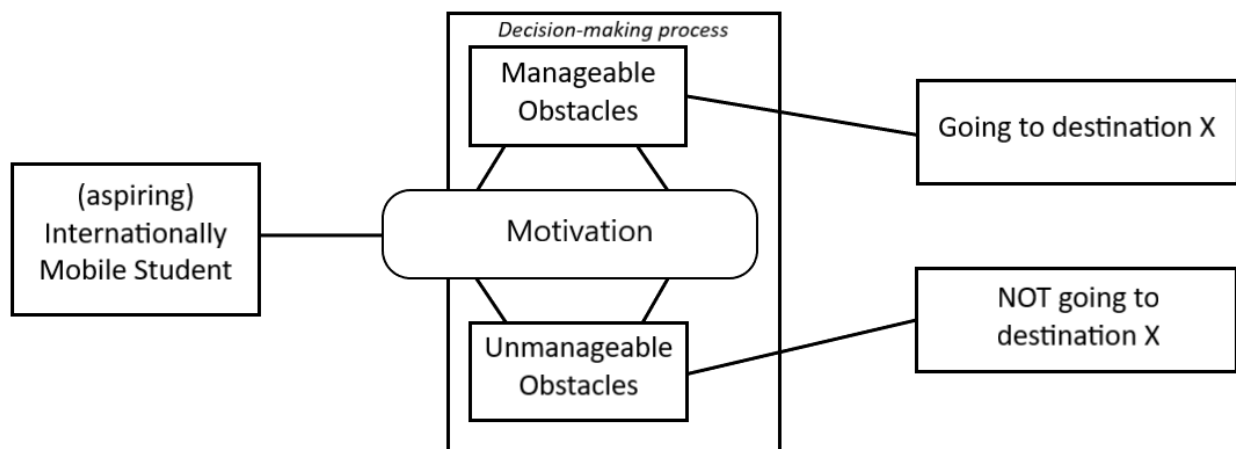
The conceptual model works as follows: The aspiring exchange student decides that they want to participate in an exchange program. This leads them to the decision-making process of where they want to go on their exchange. The decision-making process for destination X depends on the perception of the obstacles the student faces following their decision. If the obstacles for destination X are manageable, the student will decide to go to destination X. If one or more obstacles seem unmanageable for the student, they will not go to destination X.

A key role in the perception of an obstacle lies in motivation. First, the student needs the motivation to go to a certain place, which they may base on factors that were discussed in the introduction. This motivation can be so strong that obstacles for a certain destination do not matter and thus appear all manageable and vice versa. On the contrary, during the decision-making process, specific obstacles might be perceived as manageable or unmanageable, depending on the student's motivation. An obstacle might seem unmanageable at first glance. For example, destination X might be too expensive for the student. However, if they have excessive motivation for going to destination X (eg. because they always wanted to experience that destination's culture), they might be willing to take out a loan and thus overcome this obstacle, making it a manageable obstacle. It can work the other way around as well. For example, a person considers going to destination X but the educational institution that they would visit abroad offers an excessive workload. They could, in practice, overcome this obstacle by studying more during their time abroad like the other students assigned to this program. However, they prefer to invest as much time as possible into exploring the local culture and performing leisure activities. Therefore, an increased workload might be perceived as an unmanageable obstacle because of the students' lack of motivation.

There are two limitations to the use of this model in the study that should be kept in mind. The first limitation is that in some cases, obstacles are of a magnitude that they can not be overcome by motivation alone. Restrictions concerning one's personal freedom, the missing access to necessary monetary funds or other political barriers to international migration are not addressed in this research and are excluded from the conceptual model. They arguably could be considered as "hard obstacles", unaffected by motivation, that require a different approach in research. The second limitation is the nature of the research sample, as only people who finished their exchange program and went on an exchange were interviewed. They did not encounter any of the "hard obstacles" mentioned above and managed to select a destination without any unmanageable obstacles in their perception. Therefore, the model is only applicable to aspiring exchange students that eventually end up going abroad.

Methodology

Data Collection

The research follows an inductive approach, as from a broad research question with subquestions the qualitative data has been collected through individual interviews. This was done to answer its research with a link to motivation as described in the conceptual framework. With this, the aim is to achieve in-depth explanations of the students' decision-making process for going abroad to their selected destination. The expectation is that during the interview, the assessment of the obstacles that the student made during the decision-making process will provide useful insights into what students under certain circumstances and personal preferences perceive as manageable and unmanageable obstacles and what role motivation plays in the decision-making process.

To make sure that all participants were asked the same questions, an interview guide was created (Appendix 1). The interview starts with some basic questions to categorize the interviewees such as their country of origin, their exchange destination and period and their field of study. This is followed by four key questions with subquestions that function as prompts to go more into depth on the main question. Finally, there are three closing questions with the main intention of getting the participants' perspective on their exchange and its challenges in hindsight and validating their perception of the exchange.

The main questions aim to go from rather superficial and generic questions about their exchange at the start to more detailed questions on the research topic towards the end. The first question, "Why did you go abroad?", is asked to find out the participants' initial position and motivation for the exchange. The second question, "Why did you choose the place you chose to go abroad?", is asked to discover the motivation of the student during the decision-making process and why they were motivated to go to their specific destination. The third question "What obstacles did you encounter/perceive during the decision-making process?", serves to answer the main question of the research and is used to find out what manageable and unmanageable obstacles the participants perceived. This question, as opposed to question four, is designed exceptionally open to get as much information as possible and possibly some obstacles that weren't discussed in the literature. Question four, "Were there other types of obstacles (that the interviewee didn't think of initially) and do they seem manageable or unmanageable?" tries to link the interviewees' experiences directly to the conceptual framework to get their opinions and feelings towards the obstacles that were mentioned in the conceptual framework. Here it is of special interest to see if they experienced these obstacles and how they judge them.

Participant Recruitment

The participants for the research were selected through a convenience sample from two groups of former exchange students. The first group consists of students from the Faculty of Spatial Sciences of the University of Groningen that went abroad in the last couple of years. Their destinations vary to a great extent, however, their (academic) backgrounds are similar as they all studied Human Geography & Planning or Spatial Planning & Design in Groningen. In the second group, the backgrounds are rather different as they are selected by their destination. These are students who went on an exchange to or studied in Vienna for a certain period. With this diversity in students the aim is to get a variety of backgrounds and a multitude of perceived obstacles.

Study Setting

Since the participants are from different countries in Europe, it is not feasible with the basic funding of a bachelor's thesis to do all the interviews in person. Therefore, a share of the interviews was conducted via Google Meet. When possible, however, the interviews were conducted in person. With the oral agreement of the participants, the sessions were recorded, and the interviews were later transcribed with the interviewees' names being anonymized. The interviews were mainly conducted in English. However, one of the participants didn't feel comfortable talking about this topic in a foreign language. Therefore, the interview was conducted in their mother tongue, which was German. All the interviews take place in April or May 2023.

Ethics

In both cases, in order to secure the anonymity of the participants, the recordings were deleted after transcription and were stored in a Google Drive of the University of Groningen during the transcription. Also, the interviewees were informed about the research and their rights trough an informed consent and information sheet (Appendix 2) to ensure that the research is conducted ethically and before the interviews gave oral consent to the researcher for recording the interview and transcribing and anonymizing it afterwards.

Data Analysis

The data analysis follows a descriptive, thematic approach. As the research aims to understand and describe the perceptions of obstacles by students when going abroad for an exchange semester and their influence on the students' decision-making, the obstacles that are mentioned in the interview are categorized without explicitly seeking to prescribe or evaluate specific courses of action. The categorization of these findings happens through inductive coding according to the mentioned obstacles in the theoretical framework with newly created categories for mentioned obstacles by the interviewees that weren't mentioned in the reviewed literature. Additionally, with the aim to differentiate more within the obstacle types, subcategories were created according to the responses of the interviewees. All obstacles were, dependent on the perception of the interviewee, divided into manageable and unmanageable. Furthermore, the initial motivations were categorized to help explain the perception of certain obstacles. The data analysis has been done with Google Spreadsheets.

The Interviews lasted between 17 and 30 minutes. All nine interviewees were able to answer the questions to some extent and to a satisfactory level. Therefore, the quality of the data is relatively high, and a large quantity of obstacles were identified by the researcher after conducting the interviews. However, there were some limitations to the study as well. In order to keep the output of the interviewees comparable, the study focused on the perspectives of students who had already participated in an exchange semester, potentially introducing a bias towards positive experiences. Also, details that worried or influenced them could have been forgotten over time. Furthermore, the sample is relatively small, with only nine participants. However, due to the qualitative and inductive nature of this research, this is not too big of a concern. Nevertheless, further research with a larger and more diverse sample is recommended to validate the findings and expand upon them. That being said, the data offers the expected basis for an analysis to answer the research question, whose results will be discussed in the following section.

Results

Overall, the participants experienced the obstacles presented in the literature review. However, the way they experienced these obstacles differed significantly. Furthermore, the obstacles presented themselves as expected as either manageable or unmanageable depending on motivational factors. The participants presented further categories, namely administrational and geographical obstacles. The obstacles are summarized in Table 1 below. In this section, the types of obstacles that were mentioned by the participants will be discussed.

Interviewee Number	Cultural			Educational				Financial		Health & Safety			Administrational			Geographical			
	Language	Anxiety	Differences	Different System	Course/Uni Selection	Losing Momentum	Quality	Living Costs	Stipend/Funding	Covid-19 and Health	General Safety	LGBTQ Acceptance	Bureaucracy	Housing	Visa Requirements	Climate	Location	Distance to Home	Other
1	X(M)	X(M)	X(M)	X(M)	X(U)	X(M)			X(M)										
2	X(U)								X(M)				X(B)	X(M)	X(U)	X(U)		X(U)	
3	X(U)				X(U)		X(M)			X(U)					X(M)	X(M)	X(M)		
4	X(U)	X(M)						X(U)	X(U)	X(U)			X(U)		X(M)			X(U)	
5	X(U)				X(U)		X(U)	X(B)		X(M)	X(B)	X(U)	X(U)			X(M)	X(M)	X(U)	X(M)
6	X(U)	X(M)		X(U)	X(U)			X(B)	X(U)	X(U)	X(U)				X(M)				
7	X(U)	X(M)	X(B)	X(M)	X(U)				X(U)	X(U)	X(U)		X(M)	X(M)				X(U)	
8	X(B)	X(M)		X(M)	X(U)			X(M)	X(U)	X(U)			X(M)	X(M)				X(U)	
9		X(M)		X(M)	X(U)				X(U)		X(U)					X(M)	X(M)		

X = Manageable

X = Unmanageable

X = Both

Table 1: Overview of the Obstacles Mentioned by the Interviewees

Financial Obstacles

The financial obstacles can be divided into two categories, namely the cost of living and the stipend-related obstacles. For the cost of living, especially an exchange semester to the US would have been an unmanageable obstacle as according to multiple interviewees, the costs are excessively high:

"I decided against it because everything about studying in the US is expensive and even though

I wasn't paying a tuition fee or whatever I was going to have to pay ridiculous level for housing or whatever and it just it wasn't as attractive" (Interviewee 5).

When it comes to the cost of living being a manageable obstacle, this was either due to savings or financial help from the parents of the participant. It does, however, appear that the stipends, such as Erasmus+, are a significant enabling factor. Upon the question if not receiving a stipend would have resulted in not going on an exchange or a different destination, multiple interviewees claimed that this would have been the case. For one Interviewee, the financial burden she would have caused her parents without the grant would have been incompatible with her conscience:

"But then psychologically I think if I had not been able to get a grant to help fund the study abroad, I would have felt compelled to choose a cheaper country to not burn my parents." (Interviewee 6)

For another Interviewee, the exchange wouldn't have been possible without the Erasmus+ grant:

"Um, but I think knowing that I would not have the grant, I probably would not even have applied." (Interviewee 4)

Thus, based on the findings of this research, financial obstacles do play a role and can be either an unmanageable or a manageable obstacle, depending on the financial situation of the student and their motivation.

Education-related Obstacles

In this category, the perception of an obstacle being manageable or unmanageable depends significantly on the type of education-related obstacle. The difference in the system was generally an obstacle as it puts the students into an unfamiliar setting or as Interviewee 2 describes it,

"…there wasn't any course with exercises. This was new for me that there was just lectures and no other exercises where I can work for myself."

However, students who are willing to go abroad seem to be willing to accept these challenges. This seems to be the case for an increased workload or a lower quality of education as well, which can be perceived as an inconvenience:

"But I think I would have liked a bit more of a challenge. Because some of the courses were extremely simple and basic." (Interviewee 3)

Thus, as they are motivated by non-education-related reasons, they can overcome these obstacles. This wasn't the case for everyone though. One of the interviewees decided not to go to Athens during the decision-making process based on the quality of education:

"I heard negative things about school in Athens and I just was like I actually want to do something where the studies are good." (Interviewee 5)

An obstacle that came up as unmanageable repeatedly was the availability of universities and courses. In most cases, a list of universities is presented to the students to choose from, already

limiting the possible destinations:

"And then in Africa, there just isn't any exchange options for our faculty" (Interviewee 6).

The relevance of courses for the interests of the students turned out to be important as well. Students would choose or exclude a certain university based on the courses:

"The ones in Sweden were mainly like sociology classes. I was really like wanting to do something with planning focus, or just teaching me skills related to planning and yeah, the schools in Sweden just didn't have that didn't have those classes." (Interviewee 6)

Some other manageable obstacles were the fear to lose momentum (Interviewee 1) or the long workdays (Interviewee 3). So overall, the availability of education and the type of education can be a hard obstacle that not many students are willing to overcome. A difference in system or workload, on the other hand, are obstacles that are commonly not that big of an issue for the students if they are motivated to go to the destination for other reasons.

Cultural-related Obstacles

The cultural challenges that were discovered during the interview can be sorted into three subcategories, namely language-related obstacles, the fear of the unfamiliar setting or in other words, cultural anxiety-related obstacles and obstacles related to cultural differences. Language, especially if the university doesn't offer any courses in English, turns out to be an obstacle that is hard to overcome. Multiple interviewees explained that France wasn't an option for them as a lot of things there are in French in which they are not fluent. Another stated a similar position on the Spanish-American countries:

"But that's the language barrier because I don't speak Spanish and a lot of them had only a few courses in English and they required a certain Spanish level that I don't have." (Interviewee 6)

However, if the university offers English courses, this isn't necessarily the case. Another interviewee studied in Poland where they did have difficulties with the language in everyday life but as the courses were in English, he was able to overcome this obstacle (Interviewee 1). Overall, it seems that learning a new language for the sole purpose of an exchange is an obstacle that requires large effort and motivation to overcome.

When regard to anxiety, six out of the nine participants report some form of obstacle they had to overcome and eventually, were happy to do so when going on their exchange. Multiple mentioned that they had to mentally prepare themselves for the exchange to overcome this obstacle. One of them also mentions the separation from her family, which was worried about her well-being when going abroad:

"[My family was] against it because they thought they would miss me a lot. And they were not sure about my security or like, just general things. Like how will you manage alone, being so somewhere abroad, so they were quite anxious about it." (Interviewee 9)

However, they were able to overcome the obstacle in the end. Generally, it seems as if any

exchange is accompanied by anxiety to some extent and everyone that goes abroad must overcome this obstacle at some point. Therefore, exchange students are generally motivated to a sufficient extent as otherwise, no exchange would be possible in most cases.

The cultural differences were mentioned as an obstacle by two of the interviewees. For one of them, the difference in people was something they did need time to get used to. However, they wouldn't have changed their destination because of that in hindsight. For the other interviewee, there were two cultural factors that played a role. Firstly, it was the case that for the exchange, they had to move from a small city to a city with more than a million inhabitants. They were happy to overcome this, however, they didn't have the desire to experience the culture of a different continent which is why they stayed in Europe. Thus, it appears that this is an obstacle that depends heavily on one's motivation to experience a new culture and/or a different setting.

Health and Safety Risks

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, students were influenced by the spread of the virus in the choice of their destination country. While not everyone was worried about it, others excluded certain destinations from their candidate list due to strict Covid laws. Another student delayed their exchange by a year because of the pandemic. Unrelated to Covid, one student excluded countries with a poor public health system deliberately and one of the interviewees had second thoughts because of their mental health at the time. They also excluded countries that they didn't consider LGBTQ-friendly because of their sexuality:

"I don't I don't want to go to Hungary or Poland or a place where I felt like I couldn't really experience the ability to talk to people without having some weird like governmental agency breathing down my neck." (Interviewee 5)

Multiple interviewees did take general safety into consideration and excluded countries that were not up to their preferred standards during their decision-making process. One of the interviewees went to Finland, which is a neighbouring country of Russia. Due to the war in Ukraine, they did have safety concerns. However, these were not big enough in the end to influence their decision. Overall, health and safety concerns seem to be influential obstacles in the decision-making process of an exchange student according to the conducted interviews and students need to be especially motivated to not be limited by them.

Administrational Obstacles

During the interviews, the participants mentioned different obstacles related to administrational topics. The application process was perceived as bureaucratic by some of the participants. For multiple interviewees, it limited their possible destinations to Europe as an exchange outside of Europe would be too much of an effort. Other interviewees also reported about the bureaucracy as an obstacle:

"It was not so easy with all the bureaucracy, I had to fill a lot of papers, send a lot of emails."

(Interviewee 2)

However, it didn't stop them from going to their preferred destination. Housing was mentioned as an obstacle, too. However, it was only mentioned as a manageable obstacle. Visa and residence permit requirements were a further bureaucratic obstacle. One of the interviewees reported the following:

"For most of the Asian countries, there's a lot of forms you have to fill out to get a student visa and then you have to register in the country". (Interviewee 6)

Only one of the interviewees, however, excluded a destination, in their case the UK, based on the extra effort related to a residence permit. Thus, based on the conducted interviews, it seems that administrational obstacles can be perceived as manageable or unmanageable, depending on the attitude and motivation of the exchange student.

Geographical Obstacles

Another unveiled category during the interviews is geographical obstacles. The climate was perceived as an obstacle by four of the nine interviewees. While two of them had issues with the cold weather of their destination, it didn't negatively influence their experience in hindsight as they were motivated enough by other aspects of the exchange. It thus can be considered a manageable obstacle on their account. The other two deliberately chose a more southern destination because of the weather conditions:

"[I] also excluded countries such as Norway, Finland, because it's quite cold there." (Interviewee 9).

The location also played a role in the decision-making process. While two interviewees saw the remoteness of their destination as a manageable obstacle, another regretted the urbanity of their destination and wished that they would have selected a different, more rural, destination. Yet another excluded places with a landscape that they would perceive as boring:

"And I really wanted to go somewhere that like nature is very important to me. So, I wanted to go somewhere where the nature was inspiring." (Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, the distance to home limited especially the students that were unwilling or unable to go extremely far on their exchange. This seems to depend on personal preference as financial, cultural or administrational obstacles are covered in the other categories. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned that they...

"…mainly ruled out going to Asia, because it was far." (Interviewee 5)

Overall, geographical factors do seem to play a significant role in the decision-making process, also depending heavily on motivation, preferences and the goals of the exchange student.

Other Obstacles

One of the interviewees mentioned that during the time between the application and the exchange semester, they met their current boyfriend:

"I met him [his partner] just before I left and we stayed in touch and he came to visit and Helsinki but if I had stayed it definitely would have felt a lot better to stay and to build a relationship right after being in, right after meeting in Groningen instead of being separated and having to call every night and, and all of that." (Interviewee 5)

As eventually, they did go on their exchange, one should consider this an overcomeable obstacle but due to the uniqueness of the situation, it is unfitting to categorize it as many factors seem to play a role here.

Motivations

To further understand the perception of the obstacles, it is necessary to investigate the motivations of the participants for the exchange semester. The initial motivation was questioned at the start of the interviews and has been categorized in Culture & Travel, Leaving Home, Different University and (different) Language in Table 2.

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER	CULTURE & TRAVEL	LEAVING HOME	DIFFERENT UNIVERSITY	LANGUAGE
1	X	X		
2	X	X		
3	X	X		
4	X			
5		X	X	
6	X			
7			X	X
8		X		
9	X			X

Table 2: Main Motivations of the Participants

It seems to be the case that for all the students the experience of something new, either culturally, geographically or educationally, motivates them to go on an exchange. This can be linked back to the perception of the cultural differences and anxiety-related obstacles or a difference in system or workload, which were generally seen as overcomeable obstacles. They are interlinked with the mentioned motivations as the change in one's life, which motivates the students to go abroad naturally comes with a difference in system or workload provided by a foreign university or cultural differences. In accordance with Niv et al. (2006), the students are directed to the for them most desirable outcome because of their motivation.

Other obstacles seem to simply be harder to overcome and require extra motivation. Financial obstacles, language-related obstacles and the availability of universities and courses require students to go an extra step, for example, by getting an extra loan as discussed in the Theoretical Framework, learning a new language or by being proactive in finding a university that is not enrolled in the exchange program of their university yet. Health and safety risks ask students to put themselves at a higher risk. These extra efforts make it more likely, depending on the attitude and personality of the student (Lai, 2011), that they prefer an "easier" destination unless the outcome of an exchange in a certain place is of exceptionally high value for the individual (Niv et al., 2006). For the other obstacles, a student's personal background seems to play an important role in motivation and the perception of obstacles. Especially the geographical and administrational obstacles rely heavily on the perception of the student and confirm the subjectivity mentioned by Lai (2011).

Conclusion

In this research, obstacles related to cultural, educational, financial and health & safety were confirmed and expanded upon. Further obstacles related to administrational and geographical factors were identified to be perceived by exchange students. Many factors are involved in the perception of obstacles in the decision-making process for selecting an exchange semester destination. The perception of the obstacles is heavily influenced by the motivation of the future exchange student and subjective (Lai, 2011). This causes a motivation-dependent perception of the mentioned obstacles during the decision-making process, leading to the student selecting the destination that leads to the best outcome for them individually (Niv et al., 2006). Also, the research was able to identify and categorise initial motivation in Culture & Travel, Leaving Home, Different University and (different) Language. The interviews showed a variety in perception of different obstacles during the decision-making process based on motivation and vice versa, which is in accordance with the conceptual model.

Discussion

This research is not without its limitations. Firstly, it is a small-scale qualitative study with the aim to identify as many types of obstacles as possible. Although multiple obstacles were identified, there likely is a variety of obstacles that weren't mentioned. Secondly, the participants were former exchange students, meaning that none of them faced any unmanageable obstacles that kept them from going. Also, all participants originated from Europe or the USA, which excludes many cultures and nationalities from the sample who might face different obstacles.

Therefore, there still is research to be done, especially among students who are either in the decision-making process or just finished it and either applied for an exchange or decided against it. Furthermore, with the use of quantitative methods and a larger, more diverse sample, an attempt could be made to assess correlations between motivation and obstacles and find even more obstacles and motivational factors.

The gained knowledge from this paper and from further research could help policy makers and educational institutions make their cities more attractive for exchange students. Combatting

obstacles or the creation of policies that help exchange students in dealing with obstacles either on university or city-level might lead to an increasing popularity of exchange programs and lead to an influx of exchange students. An increase in exchange students is beneficial for a city's tourism industry and could cause growth in the tourism sector of the city. Next to combatting obstacles, this research has shown that the quality of education and general attractiveness of a place are important factors for students, too, and should therefore also be considered to increase or facilitate student exchanges.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Interview Guide Bachelor's Project HGP   Wouter Heinen

Research Question: What do students perceive as obstacles when going abroad for an Erasmus Exchange Semester and how do they influence their decision-making process?
What obstacles are they willing to overcome (manageable) and what obstacles are they unable to overcome (unmanageable)?

Basic/General Questions:

- When did you participate in a student exchange? For how long?

- What do you study/what did you study during your exchange?

- Where are you from? Where is/was your home university during your exchange?

- Where did you go abroad? What city/university?

Key Questions:

1. Why did you go abroad?

    - Initial motivation?

    - Was not going abroad an option as well?

    - What did your social environment think of it?

2. Why did you choose the place you chose to go abroad?

    - Motivations?

    - Why this place and not another?

    - Other candidates? (or either this place or staying at home?)

3. What obstacles did you encounter/perceive during the decision-making process?

    - Were there obstacles that prevented you from going to certain places?

    - Were there any obstacles you were happy to overcome?

    - If not obvious: Why did you perceive them as obstacles?

4. Were there other types of obstacles (that the interviewee didn't think of initially) and do they seem manageable or unmanageable?

    - Cultural differences

    - Health and safety risks

    - Quality of Education

    - Costs and Finances

Closing Questions

5. In hindsight, was your perception of the obstacles justified?

6. Are you satisfied with the choices you made? Would you have done anything differently?

7. Are there any other remarks?

Appendix 2: Informed consent and information sheet (confirmation of reading and understanding the sheet and consent was given orally before the start of the interview)

Informed Consent and Information Sheet Interview

About the research:

This research is about exchange students and their experiences with a focus on their decision-making process before their exchange started. The research serves as the basis for the bachelor thesis of Wouter Heinen. His supervisors are Max Frentz-Göllnitz and Hinke Haisma.

About the data and participation:

Participation is entirely voluntary and is free to ask questions at any time. The interview is recorded. The recordings are stored in a Google Drive by the University of Groningen until they are fully transcribed and anonymized. After that, the recordings are deleted by the researcher. The researcher is the only one who has access to and views the data at any time. The data will only be used for this research project.

- The participant can at any moment decide to withdraw during the conduct of the interview or study. If you wish that the interview is not used after it was conducted, the recordings and transcripts will be destroyed immediately without any consequences for the participant.
- Your name will not be mentioned in the paper.
- Personal information relating to your studies might be used unless the participant explicitly wishes otherwise.
- Direct quotations from the interview might be used in the research paper, unless the participant explicitly wishes otherwise.

Consent statement: I, the participant, agree with the statements above and am aware that I can an withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

_____
Date and signature of the participant

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