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An investigation into International Post Graduate Students' Decision-Making Process

by Y J Moogan

Abstract

This paper analyses the student decision-making model for international post graduate students with a concentration of consumer service marketing principles. Using a Grounded Theory approach, exploratory techniques (focus groups) it investigates qualitatively why the United Kingdom (UK) is the destination choice, the rationale for the programme of study and the feelings of these students as they have progressed throughout the whole of the service consumption period.

The longitudinal study incorporated focus groups with a sample size of 35 MBA students with each participant contributing four times over an eighteen months period and seven sets of focus groups were held making a total of 28 focus group sessions (Table 1).

Results found that uncertainty and shock in the initial periods were followed by more positive experiences later in the consumption process. Being a post graduate (PG) student can be challenging as tutors presume there is a prior awareness of the UK Higher Education (HE) learning environment and this was certainly not the case. Consequently students had felt intimidated earlier on but as the consumption process progressed and they started to experience their modules and learn, their confidence grew, because they had found their voice.

Introduction

Universities UK (2016) recorded a total of 2.27 million students studying across 159 Higher Education Institutions (excluding Further Education Colleges) in the academic year of 2014/15. Of these 312,000 were international students (non- EU) and 125,000 were EU students (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2016). It was also noted that 47% of the international students were studying at post graduate level (UK CISA- HEA 2016). Obviously there are financial implications to the 'internationalisation' of the UK HE system and as more students across the globe already have first degrees, a post graduate degree is often seen as another differentiating factor. Frequently international students are often viewed as 'cash-cows' (Viega 2017) due to price discrimination.

With the UK exiting Europe (Brexit) in 2019/2021, there will be new challenges to the HE sector. Bothwell (2017-i) reported the reaction of the UK to leave Europe with vice chancellors concerns that the number of students from Europe would decrease significantly with many researching the idea of having branch campuses in Europe to offset any possible decline in recruitment, as well as to "fix fractured intellectual partnerships and to retain some

access to EU research funding” (pp.7) In addition with the new framework of HE funding based on the teaching excellence framework (TEF), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must be more student led and customer focused if they are to attract and maintain a healthy post graduate market. Positive word of mouth is particularly beneficial in attracting international students so if for example an excellent student experience occurs, this will reinforce the reputation of the programme as well as the institution. Hence being marketing focussed both for the student and for the HEI has to be the way forward for internationalisation to survive and in the context of this paper internationalisation refers to the diversity of the classroom, although there are other definitions. This is because internationalisation brings many benefits, so for those HEIs operating in isolation, they will not be able to compete globally (Abu-Orabi 2017).

As defined by Altbach & Knight (2007) “internationalisation includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions” (pp.290) and one of the consequences of this is the increased diversity of our UK campuses created by the growing number of foreign students. According to de Wit et al (2017), continents such as Asia, Africa and Latin America will become more dominant in internationalisation so presenting further challenges to the UK (Altbach et al 2009, Bothwell 2017-ii). Van der Wende (2017) supports this by highlighting the growth of China with its vast expenditure on research and development for today China needs to be seen as more than just a follower in global HE.

The Rationale for Investigation into International Post Graduate Student Decision-Making

This student decision-making process is defined as having five stages: problem recognition (potential students realise that studying a PG programme is a possibility), information search (gathering of programme information and university details), evaluation of alternatives (review of the various choices and options available), purchase/consumption (enrolment and then consumption of the programme from induction to the final module) and post purchase evaluation (graduation and alumni feedback). Hossler & Gallagher (1987) and Chapman (1981) were the first researchers to create student choice frameworks and decision-making models, although their work used undergraduate (UG) students only and it was based in North America.

However, since the 1990’s further work has been conducted on the student decision-making process with its various stages although with a concentration on the UG market place (Bergerson et al 2013, Brown et al 2009, Cubillo et al 2006, Dunnett et al 2012, Jian et al 2010, Moogan et al 2003,) and using local students rather than international PG students. There has also been a focus of student choice from a sociological perspective (Ball 1986, Mangan et al 2010, Kettley & Whitehead 2012), as well as from a marketing perspective (Baker 2014, Ivy 2001, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006, Moogan et al 1999, Watjatrakul 2014, Winter & Chapleo 2015) and much research on the globalisation of HE in general

(Altbach et al 2009, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015, Kearney & Lincoln 2013, Van der Wende 2007, Watjatrakul (2014) but again nothing in specific reference to international PG students and no research undertaken throughout the whole of the student decision-making process from start to finish.

As Betts (2017-ii) notes there are future challenges of how the UK reconciles globalisation with democracy, its exit from the EU, increases in populism and the increases in numbers of refugees entering which are the long term issues. Altbach (2017) also refers to the development of global citizenship, research cooperation and international student mobility but warns about the survival of Erasmus and the Bologna Process with the impact of possible funding reductions and the rise in nationalism across the globe. The expansion of Business Schools in Asia with the challenges of Brexit are going to present further obstacles to UK HEIs so researching the international PG student decision-making process is paramount and this makes this research timely.

Internationalisation and the Challenges

There has been much research regarding international students via investigations into the students' learning environments (Barrett & Cox 2005, Barron & Arcodia 2002, De Vita 2001, Robertson et al 2000, Kelly 2009, Ryan 2013, Sahlberg 2007, Wang 2007, Wright & Lander 2003), their intercultural experiences (Oberg 1960, Schweisfurth & Gu 2009, Steir 2003, Trice 2001), the recruitment of students from overseas (Cubillo et al 2006, Cudmore 2005, Mazzarol & Soutar 2002, Papagiannidis 2013, Tan 2015, Temple 2009, Tan 2015), the international students' adaptation and subsequent performance (Chapdelaine & Alexitch 2004, Kelly & Moogan 2012, Russell et al 2010, Sam 2001, Sawir 2007) and the importance of instructional design within student centered learning environments (Biggs 1994, Bowering et al 2007, De Vita 2008, Rienties et al 2013, Turner 2006, Zhou et al 2008). However, all of these studies relate to research conducted at a 'snap-shot' in time and not throughout the whole of the decision-making process.

The diversity of learners refers to their various cultural backgrounds, such as their different levels of experience, which can all present a 'culture shock' for international students who face a unique HE learning environment (Kelly & Moogan 2012, Oberg 1960, Pitkajarvi et al 2012). Adaptation is also likely to be influenced by personal knowledge of the host country (Ward and Searle 1991) plus other factors like duration of stay and language skills (Bell 2000, Fortuijin 2002, Murray 2013, Olaniran 1996, Slee 2010, Tran 2008) with issues of communication (Argyle & Kendon 1967, Brown 2008). Benzie (2010) discusses the issue of English language skills with foreign students stating that there are barriers which prevent international students from improving their English, whilst Sherry et al (2010) debate the English language problem and recommend different initiatives to improve communication skills.

Interestingly Sawir et al (2007) specifically investigate the impact of loneliness on adaptation noting the importance of pastoral care for international students although the implications of minimal support for international students is recorded by several authors (Deakins 2009, Grayson 2008, Quintrell & Westwood 1994) and this support can vary amongst faculties of the same university (Jiang & Carpenter 2013-i). Rambruth & McCormick (2001) research learning styles between foreign students and local students, as do several other authors (Barron & Arcodia 2002, Barrett & Cox 2005, Gerstman & Rex 2001, Ryan 2008, Trice 2007). Questions about learning styles in particular in relation to group and individual work were explored in the later stages of the decision-making process (consumption and post purchase evaluation). Ryan & Carroll (2005) stress how teaching and learning practice should change to meet the needs of the socially and culturally diverse student population. However, there is frequently a lack of resources for this ‘internationalisation process’ despite additional money coming in from the students (Jiang & Carpenter 2013-ii, Maringe 2009, Russell 2005) and resources have to be directed to international students if they are to succeed (Murray 2013).

International students therefore create topical areas for discussion since considering the variables affecting adjustment of international students is crucial due to the implications for all educators (Andrade 2006). This is because there is a growing recognition of responsibility from the HEI to integrate international students (Bartram 2008, Broekmann & Pendlebury 2002, Cortazzi & Jin 1997, Richardson 2008, Tomalin 2007) and address the challenges for all parties. Ryan (2013) refers to this as the ‘reverse lens’ (pp.16) as HEIs begin to look at themselves since international students are no longer the minority so mechanisms should be put in place to provide the necessary help. Burnapp (2006) investigates various interventions in supporting international students as he acknowledges the growing diversity of the class room whilst Treloar et al (2000) find that interventions geared at removing barriers to learning will increase confidence, further engagement and improve learning conditions for international students. Consequently “institutional frameworks should be developed that are sensitive to the issues of culture and alienation” (Hayes & Introna 2005, pp.230) with a curriculum that culturally meets the needs of its international students (Turner 2006). Betts (2017-i) states the largest element of internationalisation is students mixing within different cultural environments and HE must not be “an elitist bubble but reach out into all societies” (pp. 9). In addition how HEIs support such integration is crucial and evidence suggests interaction with the host institution’s ‘local’ students can be highly beneficial (Caruana & Ploner 2010, Ward & Kennedy 1993) for it develops integration and smooths the process of adaptation so improving levels of adjustment (Searle & Ward 1990). Attracting international students is often a priority within internationalisation strategies (Sabic 2017) so delivering a strong student experience is also crucial.

Research Objectives

The key objectives of this research are to:

- 1) To investigate the international PG student decision-making process (incorporating all five stages) in terms of the student experience during an eighteen months period
- 2) To examine the influential variables prior to joining their programme of study and evaluate their rationale for undertaking a PG programme at this 'red- brick' HEI in the north of England
- 3) To provide HEIs with management implications and to inform marketing practitioners and academics with the views of international PG students so that recommendations can be made

Methodology

An extensive desk-based analysis of the last twenty years of published papers to highlight the student decision-making variables that are influential for international post graduate students were reviewed and used in the construction of the focus group questions. A pilot test (with three alumni students) was undertaken after ethical approval had been granted.

The researcher adopted a Grounded Theory approach so that the 'richness of the environment' (Parker & Roffey, 1997-pg 212) could be explored via students reflecting upon their experiences on a longitudinal basis. Hence as themes were developing from the early focus groups the literature was regularly revisited so that questions for the later focus groups were modified accordingly. Consequently the results from session one framed some of the questions for session two and so on. Consequently the research was fluid and as Glaser & Strauss (1965) refer to the generation of inductive theory through analysing the data, it was felt this qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to collect rich data from generating the discussions that could led to predictions to be tested in further focus groups over time. For example, Cohen et al (2011) states how the reality for one person can be compared to other periods in time and to other individuals so that the insights gained may predict behaviour.

Consequently the researcher delved within the focus groups to capture the answers to open-ended questions but was flexible in her approach to let the conversations flow and to see if similar responses were repeated from other focus group interviews. By using interviews for generating concepts and by returning to each focus group frequently in order to gather in-depth data on the social interactions, some structure and objectivity is found (Corbin & Strauss 2015, Glaser 2007).

A few closed questions were employed (gender, age, place of birth, first degree details) but the majority were open ended questions. To Segway into each of the focus group sessions, students were offered the notes from their last focus group meeting which acted as an introduction to their next session. The participants of the groups were arranged according to their start date and all were over twenty three years old.

Background of Recruitment

All applicants apply on line and if the entry criteria is met for the MBA programme they are interviewed using skype, a telephone call or in person. A dialogue is developed at this stage with the Recruitment Manager, Administrative Officer and the Director of the MBA so when the induction day arrives all international students are known to the MBA team. International students receive a university induction week followed by a specific Business School MBA induction, (one full day). Normally for every applicant who progresses to the interview stage, two applicants are rejected due to a failure to meet the entry requirements. Most of the interviewees are successful in that an offer is usually given to the applicant. In order to create a cohort of twelve or more students per intake, about twenty-five interviews were held.

Sampling Strategy

The MBA programme is one of twenty two level seven programmes in the Business School (academic staff < 100) and was selected, as the researcher was the Director of MBA Programmes having close contact with the students; firstly interviewing applicants prior to acceptance of their offer and delivering their induction course (session 1), secondly teaching in the first semester (session 2), thirdly teaching the final module of the programme (research methods with the dissertation) (session 3) and finally through to attending graduation (session 4). Hence 35 full time international MBA students participated (from a potential of over 100 students who were offered places but did not enrol) in four focus group sessions during the years of 2014, 2015 and 2016 (Table 1).

Table 1- Time Table of Focus Group Interviews

Focus Groups (academic yr)	<u>Semester 1: Induction</u> 1 st wk Session 1	<u>Semester 1: 3 mths</u> Session 2	<u>Semester 2&3:</u> 12mths Session 3	<u>Graduation: 18mths</u> Session 4
A (2014/15)	7 students (A1)	(A2)	(A3)	(A4)
B	4 students (B1)	(B2)	(B3)	(B4)
C	4 students (C1)	(C2)	(C3)	(C4)
D	3 students (D1)	(D2)	(D3)	(D4)
E (2015/16)	6 students (E1)	(E2)	(E3)	(E4)

F	6 students (F1)	(F2)	(F3)	(F4)
G	5 students (G1)	(G2)	(G3)	(G4)

Due to the various intakes pa, (4 intakes in 2014/15 and 3 intakes in 2015/16) these created seven groups (A to G) with each group contributing on four occasions (week 1, week 12, week 48 and graduation) over this period, which created a total of 28 focus group sessions, each an hour long (Table 1). Every focus group concentrated on the student experience at particular points in time so the first focus group sessions reviewed their initial contact prior to enrolling with the relevancy of the induction days and their motivation for studying this programme and at this particular university (session 1). The second batch of focus groups targeted issues around the settling period and student learning experience of the first semester (session 2) whilst the third batch of focus groups concentrated on the learning experiences in the second and third semesters when most of the direct teaching was completed (session 3). However, the last focus groups were held towards the end of the programme in order to gain a reflection of the whole consumption process and how the institution had performed. With the exception of one student, all those who agreed to participate in the study at the induction week (session 1), continued until the end of their programme at graduation (session 4).

The sample composition contained two thirds male (23) and one third female (12) with the majority being in their late twenties (minimum age of 24 years old and a maximum age of 43 years old). All of the students apart from nine had not studied in the UK before or worked in the UK prior to entry. The students' home destinations in order of popularity were South America (Brazil), Africa (Nigeria), North America (USA and Canada), Asia (India and China), the Middle East (Libya and United Arab Emirates) and Russia.

The Questions

The data was collected using questions relevant to the decision-making process as gathered from the desk research. Documentation of the last thirty years of literature, informed the structure of the focus groups and as the focus groups progressed the literature was revisited several times to see if themes were developing which the researcher wished to probe further in later focus groups. As the researcher wanted to encourage honesty with candid comments to flow, a tape recorder was not used but all notes taken throughout were copied up immediately afterwards by the researcher (within half an hour). Interestingly the researcher did suggest recording all conversations but some of the participants were not comfortable so the decision was made to listen and write notes simultaneously. All the participants were shown their focus group's narrative at the end of each session and at the beginning of their next session in order to create a recap. The data was then manually categorised and placed next to meaningful sections of data and sub-themes which were developed from the five stages of the decision-making process.

Limitations of the Research

Qualitative research inevitably contains bias due to its subjectivity (Antwi & Hamza 2015, Golafshani 2003, Malterud 2001) although the researcher tried to minimise it by performing the following:-

- 1) The question-ordering, wording and phrasing was carefully planned in accordance with good practice (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016) and a pilot test was also performed.
- 2) Although the background and culture of each participant were known to the researcher so any sensitivities were easily recognised, the researcher remained objective. In addition confidentiality of the participants was strictly adhered to throughout the whole of the research process (Hussey & Hussey 2014) for as Walsh & Wiggins (2003) state the importance of maintaining participant privacy.
- 3) The focus group participants volunteered their time freely so there was no pressure and with no recordings taking place the students could relax and let open conversations take place, or as (Miller 2012) notes the importance of not wilfully exploiting nor coercing participants. Consequently the students were able to leave any question unanswered if they felt embarrassed or awkward and in order to maximise transparency all notes from the previous focus groups were made available to the students before commencing the next session.
- 4) Internal reliability can be controlled by applying a clearly defined coding process (Mangioni & McKerchar 2013) and the researcher transcribed all responses immediately after every focus group, placing them in themes as taken from the extensive literature search. Hence findings could be generalised to other populations and contexts (Cook and Campbell 1979).
- 5) The sample was small and constrained to one programme in one Business School but small sample sizes can produce accurate data for each student had the opportunity to discuss in depth their opinions and a small group led to an intimate setting.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings using sub-headings as uncovered from the themes and sub-themes developed from the 28 focus group interview sessions. Hence the most common occurring comments were grouped into themes according to the literature and some of the popular quotations from the students are extracted as shown in italics for each of the sessions.

Sessions 1: Problem Recognition, Information Search and Evaluation of Alternatives

Career Rewards and Progression

The majority of students chose the MBA for career progression and enhancement with the exception of one student who wanted to gain a masters qualification for the experience of studying at a higher level. **Career development** was seen to be their solution in the problem recognition period since they saw the qualification as a stimulant in aiding their professional progression. The MBA programme is not a specific academic qualification but a generic degree that links business to practice being aimed at employees in the work place and very different to the STEM courses. For example, evidence specific to the MBA demonstrates the importance of its learning outcomes and its career progression (Gordon 2010, Kelly & Moogan 2012). Hence from the very first focus group several students said; “I am doing it to get more chances of promotion and better money at work since I am going no-where at the moment” (A1).

The emphasis on an MBA supporting a career is common as all students gave this as their key reason for undertaking the programme rather than an MSc or MA which is more subject specific, - “I hope it will help *my career*” (B1). This was probably emphasised in all focus groups due to a greater proportion of students in the sample, with non-Business first degrees (engineers, pharmacists and a doctor), who wanted to enter the world of business and management with a degree that would provide more opportunities. Several commented, - “I need to move up the career ladder and progress” (C1) or “I am frustrated at work and a *break to study full time at a UK university is an opportunity*” (E1).

Trade-off benefit

The majority of students were paying for their studies themselves whilst only a few were being sponsored by companies but most of them said- “I believe the MBA will open more doors for me” (D1) or “I want to get promoted after completing” (B1). Tavares (2016) has conducted research into the impact of employability in undertaking a degree programme and as fees increase, students are increasingly looking for rewards or beneficial returns after graduation. Hence they perform a cost benefit exercise to justify their decisions; as one student remarked, “An MBA at a British university will help me a lot I hope, *so it's worth the price*” (F1). Hence they were price sensitive weighing up all their options.

Awareness and Influential Sources

Sources of information most commonly referred to were the internet, advertisements, agents in home country, social media and friends or family. Several students had been recruited by agents back at home and the majority of students had been influenced by the information content on the web site followed by personal email correspondence with the university (Admissions faculty, Marketing department and or Programme Director). The speed of email reply and the interactive dialogue with the HEI was noted by several students as being an influential source. Some of the students (6) had done their first degrees in the Business School and due to the lucrative (25%) discount for undertaking a post graduate programme there, decided to return since they knew about this form of bursary from their UG days. As many students recalled from the website; “An MBA is an MBA but I want an accredited one (AMBA), and as cheap as possible” (G1).

Social Media

Students also said that the most credible information sources were word of mouth from family or friends but everyone mentioned using social media with several referring to Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook to gather their knowledge. For example, “we are all on Facebook so we connect and learn things about other people” (E1) or “I found Snapchat was really useful” (B1). This highlights the impact of social media within the marketing and recruitment process and interestingly millennials make up 59% of Instagram users (Smart Insights 2017).

Personal Recommendations

In addition, more than two thirds of the students also referred to parents or partners when thinking and then deciding to enter a UK university to undertake a PG degree which is surprising, as all the students are mature. They also said they did more research for this programme than for their UG programme; “Using Facebook for word of mouth experiences *was useful for me*” (A1) and “I spent longer researching before I decided to come in *comparison to my first university*” (F1). As Gordon 2010 mentions, selecting a Business School demands a great deal of searching for information about the HEI as well as the MBA curriculum and the recruitment opportunities upon completion.

Reputation and Image

The choice of university was influenced by a variety of variables such as university ranking, teaching quality (AMBA accredited), geographical location (wanted an English speaking institution), ethnic diversity (the Business school is located in a multicultural region), internship opportunities (connections with industry), political stability, local student population and personal recommendations via social media.

Rankings

Several students remarked on the HEI's industry networking scheme and its reputation for enterprise via its industry collaboration zones that were published on the website (*"It looks like there is a lot going on with companies outside"*) (B1) whilst some students referred to choosing a traditional university that was well established (*"I know it is not an ex-poly as its been around for ages and has a good name"*) (E1). Image and reputation are frequently used by students to differentiate (Dunnett et al 2012, Ivy 2001) since rankings of Business Schools and universities are globally accessible.

Costs

However, the most prevalent answer throughout all of the focus groups was the cost of studying, both the tuition fees and the cost of living in the area as being the most significant factor. One student said; *"the costs of the course and the living accommodation are less than other places and I knew this from being on social media"* (G1). Woodall et al (2012) reported cost factors as having a significant impact when students make their choices. For example, all students mentioned the costs from their first degrees for they wanted to have as little debt as possible so price elasticity seems to be a key decision-making variable for these students. As one focus group reported, *"the costs of living in the north of England are less than London"* (D1). Linked to geographical area, location can therefore be another influential factor (Simoes & Soares 2010) as all of the focus groups noted *"We wanted an English speaking country and one close to Europe rather than America or Australia"*(A1) and *"We have extended family in the area"* (C1).

Internship opportunities

The next most popular comment in justifying their choices, was the option to perform an internship (three months) and undertake a business live project at the end of the taught programme instead of a dissertation. As one student said; *"To gain some experience in a British company will look good when I return home and the live project in a real company will add to my CV"* (F1). All students must complete a live business case project and not a formal dissertation to gain their level 7 qualification so they are on placement for three

months in a local company performing relevant research. “*The placement opportunity is what sold it to me*” (E1).

Sessions 2 and Sessions 3: The service consumption experience

The consumption (or purchase) stage of the decision-making process was recorded in two phases. Session 2 of the focus groups took place towards the end of the first semester after the student/staff committee meeting and after only twelve weeks of teaching, whilst Session 3 of the focus groups were held at the end of end of the taught programme (approximately a year later). Consequently this section will be divided into the early teaching period (Session 2) and the later teaching period (Session 3) within the programme.

Phase I- Early consumption period – students had undertaken induction, one full module and submitted at least one assessment having received summative feedback (Focus Groups A2 to Focus Groups G2)

Information overload

Feedback from the induction day was that despite there being some useful information it was too much to take in, especially if you had just arrived in the UK; “I was preoccupied with other things at induction as had to find accommodation fast” (B2) and “It was good to meet all the other students but the week long university induction was drawn-out and we could *have started the course earlier*” (D2). Research by Papagiannidis (2013) talks about exposure to a Business School via on-line taster courses as the virtual learning environment which mirrors the classroom and provides input prior to induction week which may reduce some of the ‘shock’ during this first week. Having a longitudinal induction programme could be an option whereby there is a half day induction event every week but during the first month only.

Adaptation

Students at this phase had also attended at least two of the monthly Personal Development Plans study skills classes (3 hours each) with the Programme Director which cover some of the topics in more detail from the induction week but these were staggered over the first semester only. Those students confident in English and with a greater understanding of Business English noted that adjusting to the academic expectations had been a steep learning curve but they had coped whereas those less confident speaking students said;- “*It’s been a nightmare and we have struggled from taking notes in the class to how to write the*

assignment” (E2). Other students stated; “The tutors expect you to know the *do’s and don’ts* as they assume from having a first degree that we know everything” (A2) and “It has been a real shock as I could not understand at the beginning what was happening but the PDP (Professional Development Plans) monthly classes were helpful” (G2). This supports the findings of Olivas & Li (2006) about the stresses in adapting to new educational settings. Hence the culture of the environment with staff motivation and attitude are vital factors in helping international students settle (Jiang & Carpenter 2013 ii, Ryan 7 Hellmundt 2008, Trice 2001) and to facilitate diversity (Van der Wende 2017).

Social Media

Several students referred to using social media as a main communications system during their consumption period since the MBA Facebook page allowed all students, no matter what intake they were in, to message each other. As one student said; “Using social media has been great to share ideas and to ask questions with more experienced students, as *I’ve never heard of this Turnitin thing* but we had a dialogue on Facebook which helped me to *understand*” (F2). Constantinides et al (2013) note the importance of using social networking sites as a support for students. As all students were actively engaged in social media they found this method of communication to be the most effective means and preferable to that of email correspondence. For example, the MBA Facebook page was popular as one student remarked, “we did find the MBA Facebook page really useful” (C2).

Assessment Anxiety

The comments from this phase tended to relate to academic issues like library access, performing group work and other aspects of the curriculum. For example, the majority of students did not like group activities and more than two thirds felt performing presentations in class was hard as they had not been taught how to deliver orally or in a group. Interestingly some authors (Kelly 2009 and Volet & Ang 1998), note the challenges of multi-cultural group work in the class room. More than half of the students remarked; “studying back at home is so different to here as there is more input there whereas here we are left alone quite a bit, even in class to work in groups” (G2). Again in reference to HE adaptation, Rientes et al (2012) also refer to academic adjustment as being affected by student integration whilst Winter & Chapleo (2015) note the role of emotional factors in this process of adaptation.

Phase II- Later consumption period – Students had now completed all the taught modules and were ready to start their project/dissertation module. For example, they had attended at least seven monthly PDP skills classes by this phase and all had attended the compulsory international residential week. **(Focus Groups A3 to Focus Groups G3)**

Confidence

At this phase more than half reflected upon the issues of ‘early’ adjustment; “It was an upward struggle in those early weeks and months and until I got my assignment results back I *did not really know if I was ‘getting it’ so I was anxious*” (D3). Consequently HEIs must provide relevantly and timely feedback that is detailed and supportive to the student. Robotham & Julian (2006) discuss the causes of stress in HE (financial stress, examination stress and study assessment stress) but one of the biggest HE stress factors having the most impact is transition to university, since students are often outside their usual support frameworks and this will be especially true for international students.

Interestingly all of the students noted the usefulness of the monthly PDP classes for they realised the importance of understanding the ‘rules’ of learning in a UK university with the skills of writing and researching. However, many said it was also an informal forum to network with other students and to learn together sharing ideas; for example, “we managed to have *catch-ups and meet our seniors in the PDP classes*” (C3). There were also several specific references to the monthly skills classes, as one student stated; “*I didn’t understand the importance of adding references in my report, but the PDP classes helped me*” (G3) and “*at the PDP skills sessions I met other students who also explained how they had done their assignments and the mistakes they had made*” (A3).

Regular feedback is collected from the formal module questionnaires at the end of each module as well as from student/staff committee meetings, in addition to other informal mechanisms. The comments from this phase were more positive which is to be expected, since the students have developed their skills during the taught modules and grown in confidence. In fact students at this time started to complain about the minor issues like the temperature of the room and facilities of the canteen with limited break out space for studying. Several commented; “a more regular social programme rather than once a semester would be good (A3) and “the guest leadership speaker events should have food afterwards” (F3). Hence the feedback was less academic and more personal in terms of how improvements for them personally, would have added value.

Perhaps at this late phase in the programme students are expecting to be treated more like consumers and have that ‘customer focus’ on their learning experience (Watjatrakul 2014) as well as wanting to be satisfied with everything. Several academics refer to students as consumers and state that HEIs need to be more consumer focused as the service experience is

of a long duration and positive word of mouth is important for future potential students (Baker 2014, Ivy 2001, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006).

Post Consumption Phase: Reflective Feedback- (Focus Groups A4 to Focus Groups G4)

Students at this final stage have completed their dissertations (live projects) and either gone through the examination board or are about to have their marks ratified. The independent piece of research marks the end of their journey and at this stage listening to the students reflect was enlightening as most were about to leave the Business School and graduate.

From these final focus group sessions, the majority of students reflected on their struggle in the first few months of starting with there being little sympathy from module tutors unless they personally asked for support; *“At the beginning, tutors think you know much more due to having already studied on a degree course”* (A4). Many students reported back that without the monthly PDP skills classes they could not have survived and several stressed the necessity of having social events in order to share experiences and ideas; *“the bowling trip was a great exercise to meet the seniors”* (C4) and *“the residential trip really made us bond as a group”* (B4).

All students commented on the importance of social networking for a variety of reasons saying the regular and instant communication had been a key to their success in completing the programme. When asked if the students would like to repeat the experience, the majority were highly complementary although a few noted the dynamics of the six intakes in terms of cohort stability which they had found difficult to meet and make long term friends. With reference to probing their feelings about the ‘service delivery’ and if it had met their expectations, a small minority stated; *“we were lost in the early days as it was hard to know what the tutors expected of us”* (B4) and *“if we had been better informed at the start, the programme would have been less stressful and more enjoyable”* (D4).

Expectations

Understanding student expectations and managing these is important (Coates & Dickinson 2012, Lui 2012, Robertson et al 2000) as is the importance of preparing them for their studies (Lacina Jan Guidry 2002). Several academics refer to students as consumers (Brown 2008, Taylor 2002, Woodall et al 2012), noting the role of expectations (Coates & Dickinson 2012, Lobo & Gurney 2014) as they view the importance of performance and delivery with the consumption of the service process which leads to the question about how interactive academics are during the whole of the student decision-making process and especially in the final journey of the project/dissertation module; as one student commented; *“knowing what*

was needed for the dissertation and how to approach my supervisor was new to me but the Director of MBA introduced me and discussed both of our roles during our first *meeting*”(C4).

Personal Recommendations

With regards to students recommending the programme to others, all of them agreed that they would spread positive word of mouth, except for two students who had found the journey too challenging and had not enjoyed the experience. One of these students would have preferred to have studied without the local or UK/EU students present whilst the second student said mixing part time with full time students was not what they expected since the part time students could be disruptive. For example, “It would have been much better to have learnt without the part time students since they tended to moan about everything and they often missed classes so doing group work with them was a disaster” (E4). The researcher was uncertain how to interpret this latter comment as the full and part time students have been mixed together for the last five years and research indicates the benefits of integrating different types of students (Caruana & Ploner 2010, Kelly & Moogan 2012) but she does recognise the unpopularity of utilising group work with international students in particular and again managing expectations is probably the key.

Finally all of the focus groups reflected strongly on the positive impact of the residential international trip which had taken place in between focus groups three and four. (In 2014 the international trip was in Brazil, in 2015 it was in Abu Dhabi/Dubai whilst in 2016 it was in Hong Kong). “We did not expect it to be so educational and enjoyable at the same time for it went beyond my wildest dreams” (G4) and “the trip was perfect for networking and meeting companies *which is one of the reasons I chose an MBA*” (F4).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the attitudes and feelings of international students on a longitudinal basis so that mechanisms can be introduced to improve the programme further, but more importantly, it has tried to understand the rationale for studying a taught post graduate programme in an English university and with a focus on the student experience and expectations during this consumption process. This is because PG students are a valuable sector within HE and are often neglected in terms of both the research being performed and the differentiation of their expectations in comparison to UG students. In particular international PG students bring diversity and other benefits to the classroom so they should be listened to.

The motivating factor for undertaking an MBA was that of career development with a trade-off benefit in terms of the cost of the programme fees and the possibility of promotion at

work. Cost considerations were also noted later in the decision-making process such as when the potential student rationalises their decision of which HEI to choose. Awareness was gained from either being an alumni, contact with an agent back at home or via social media sources. Consulting with family was commonly quoted and more information gathered in comparison to choosing an UG programme of study. Influential factors concerned those of reputation, particularly in relation to industry connections and enterprise for the ability to take an internship at the end of the taught modules was noted by most. Experience during the consumption periods varied from being quite negative during the early days where students appeared to have information overload both personally and academically so feeling overwhelmed, to a more positive experience towards the end of the programme. Hence students do require additional support to aid the possible culture shock.

For example, many students commented as follows;- “the first semester was hard and difficult as I nearly gave up but the second semester was much more enjoyable” (A4) and “semester one was the biggest learning curve I have ever been on but if you ask for help, it is *there although it is hard to admit you don’t know but in semester two I would always ask for help even if I was relatively confident*” (D4).

Hence their confidence grew as their studies progressed with all students noting the importance of the PDP workshops after each guest speaker event, both for educational support as well as for the opportunity to network and meet other students. This networking circle also continued because of the popularity of social media. Finally the impact of the international residential trip and the ability to undertake a three months industry placement was significant in creating a positive student experience. Hence when constructing modules, academics can create programmes that incorporate unique yet popular elements, so that the learning process is effective and enjoyable. This all contributes to positive student surveys which impact on the TEF scores.

As MBA programmes tend to be more costly than other masters programmes, students do tend to want value for money in terms of career progression rewards, networking events and additional study skills support. Adapting can be tricky especially if the student is new to the UK but with personal tutors, mentors and university support mechanisms, this transition can be smoother although it demands resources from the HEI and to a certain degree, academics who are more sympathetic towards international students.

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