# Qualitative studies

## Qualitative study I: What makes foreign students happy?

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## Introduction

*"You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of."* (Albert Camus). One might view with some irony then that we intend to embark on this search. More precisely, we intend to answer the question of just what makes foreign exchange students happy. It is not without good reason, however, that we are interested in answering this question. According to Selickaite & Reklaitiene (2015), there are several factors associated with the intake of foreign exchange students in academic institutions which can produce added value for the host institutions. Examples of these are economic factors for the university, such as cash flow income and marketing value, and word of mouth, generating images of the institution to other foreign students, and for the society at large including the region and country (Selickaite & Reklaitiene, 2015). Accepting Selickaite & Reklaitiene's (2015) notion that happy foreign students produce benefits for the host institution, one can see that gaining better insights into what makes foreign exchange students happy, will allow the host institution to have greater influence on their foreign students' happiness and therefore greater influence over the positive resulting after-effects that have been linked to happy foreign students.

In our pursuit of understanding happiness among foreign exchange students, we decided to focus on social and cultural

groupings. Our decision to concentrate on these factors resulted from ideas put forward by empirical research. For example, Mogilner (2010), who found that shifting attention away from monetary gain towards the relative construct of time produced a greater increase in happiness than money versus time. His argument is that having more time to spend with loved ones or making social connections generally requires a shift of focus towards time over money, which proves to be effective in motivating social connections (Mogilner, 2010). It is the resulting social activities that, according to Mogilner (2010), produce the effect of greater happiness, and indicate that social aspects have a positive effect on happiness while social distance may affect happiness negatively. Furthermore, Wiers-Jenssen (2003) found that satisfaction was high among Norwegian students abroad when social, cultural and linguistic barriers were low and individual motivation high. Although satisfaction varied depending on the country and the individual motivations of the individual, they suggest that students believe studying abroad is a good investment both academically and personally (Wiers-Jenssen, 2003). What is more, this follows the example given by Scheier, Carver and Bridges (2001) "When people confront adversity or difficulty in their lives, they experience a variety of emotions, ranging from excitement and eagerness to anger, anxiety, and depression. The balance among these feelings appears to relate to people's degree of optimism or pessimism" (Scheier et al., 2001, p. 191). Thus, we argue that taking a new perspective by combining consideration of how optimism and pessimism may affect an individual's happiness can bring more knowledge and understanding to the field.

It is with these ideas in mind that we shaped our approach to trying to understand the triggers of happiness in foreign ex-

change students. We felt that in these examples, while some attention was given to both cultural and social aspects individually, there was an opportunity to dive deeper into the impacts of these criteria, particularly with a focus on the role that optimism or pessimism may have in narrating the degree to which happiness can be experienced.  Building on the former, we set the criteria for our study of what makes foreign students happy into two grouped areas, cultural and societal. Specifically, (cultural distance and social distance) + ( Friendship Quality and Social Actions). The criteria for our model were, at this early stage, chosen from a position of logical assumptions and empirical evidence. We deduced and argue that because the subjects were foreign exchange students, 'cultural + social distance' would be reliable indicators of happiness where distance is narrow. What is more, we argue that social activities and friendship quality are key determinants in one's happiness generally speaking, particularly for students, and therefore we believe these to be worthy of inclusion.
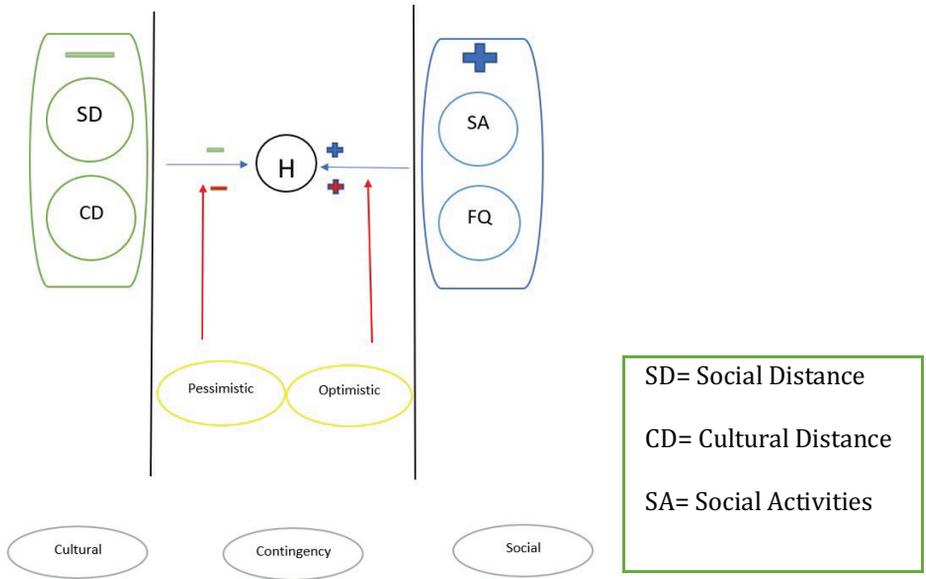
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| SD= Social Distance |
| CD= Cultural Distance |
| SA= Social Activities |

Figure 1: Initial Model of Happiness of Foreign Students

# Methodology

In this section, a presentation of the arguments and thoughts behind the chosen way of conducting this research will be offered. First, the theoretical research approach will be introduced, followed by an explanation of the empirical investigation.

## Theoretical methodology

In this sub-section, the research approach is presented and argued for. This research will take a mixed-methods approach as Bryman & Bell (2015) explains that quantitative and qualitative methods are compatible with each other. First, we will perform a qualitative study and create a model which then will be tested quantitively.

## Research approach

The aim of our research was to discover "*what makes foreign students happy*"? We read and collated information on general theories from various empirical studies on happiness and created a hypothetical model of what we though happiness for foreign students looked like (Figure 1. Initial Model of Happiness of Foreign Students). We chose an analytical inductive approach because it allows one to accommodate existing theoretical ideas and in doing so, one can propose a hypothesis and move between an original hypothesis and data collection and theory generation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Analysis of our data involved coding, refining the emerging idea and relating them to theory, and collating the data for next stage analysis.

## Empirical methodology

In this sub-section, the collection methods of the empirical data will be presented. Three different types of data collection methods were used. The guides and question were developed through a workshop, where the students responsible for each of the data collection methods worked together to develop a framework that fit all research purposes.

### Data collection

The data collection was conducted by a research group of 23 students plus an additional two teachers. The great variety of different data collection methods gives the data a good validity (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

### Interviews

Eight interviews were conducted for a total of 405 minutes. The interviews were semi structured and based upon an interview guide developed by the responsible students, in a workshop.

The nationalities of the interviewees varied as well as the experienced foreign exchange country. The interview followed six main topics to fit the research purpose.

## Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted for a total of 165 minutes. There were ten people participating in the focus groups. All focus groups were conducted by two students, one interviewing and one making notes for transcriptional purposes. Each focus group contained different nationalities to generate a dynamic environment and to encourage dialogue from different perspectives.

## Observations

Three observations were made in three different environments, thus, providing a good variety of context from which to draw general learning. Observations can be a good tool to obtain qualitative data since the collection takes places in a natural environment (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All observations were conducted as non-participant observation and the total length of the observations was 325 minutes. Observations were conducted in a dormitory, a computer science workshop and a public health lecture. The observation in the public health lecture was later removed from the data since no foreign people were participating.

## Limitations

With respect to the data collection method used for our paper a number of different researchers conducted interviews and therefore our control was limited in this respect. With this said, it is our opinion that all researchers conducting interviews, for the most part, were competent in controlling their individually responsible interviewee or focus group. The researcher has

less control over proceedings than with individual interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, limitations regarding the focus group interviews were recognised such as pitch, tone, accent and language ability of the interviewees, was identified, which in turn affected the transcripts. There were occasions when gaps (inaudible) existed in the text. Furthermore, we acknowledge the possibility of group effect, whereby shared group opinions lead to thinking uncritically and irrational attachment to ideas (Bryman & Bell, 2015), although we stress this was a rare occurrence. Bryman & Bell (2015), explained there is no evidence of these factors negatively influencing focus group findings; however, there is a need for acknowledgement.

# Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the result and analysis of the data will be presented. Furthermore, the data will be presented through categorised themes found through the analysis of the data. Beyond the former, a new model born from the analytical process will be presented.

## Social

The data showed that social aspects can have a significant impact on what makes a foreign student happy. In this theme, the social aspects that were found will be presented.

## Social Life

The data showed that having a social life has a positive impact on happiness among foreign students. Having a social life included factors such as socialising with friends, being around friends and having a lot of friends.

### Socialising through informal activities

Foreign students who participated in social informal activities had a happy attitude and believed that these activities increased their happiness. Activities included having parties with friends in dormitories, being a member of social clubs, travelling with friends and spending time with classmates. In this category it was interesting was that none of the participants had a negative experience from an informal activity. We believe this is because the participant does not expect anything from informal activities and therefore is positively affected when these informal activities occur.

### Connecting with people

Another sub-theme apparent in the data was the need to connect with other people. This included connecting with new people as well as being part of social networks. Mostly, there was a positive categorisation to connecting with people. However, two of the participants felt unhappy when they did not have the chance to connect with new people. One of the participants felt that it was hard to connect with Swedish people. This can be explained by the environment that the foreign students were in. They were mostly interacting with other international students since they lived together in an international campus environment.

### Social Distance

Social distance, according to the data, can both affect happiness in a positive manner and a negative manner. Considering the data, no consensus can be seen. One participant talks about having a low status as a student and refers to social hierarchy. On the other hand, another participant argues that teachers are very friendly, and there is a more relaxed environment. However, another participant mentions how German teachers are

very hierarchical. Thus, we draw the conclusion that social distance considering social hierarchy affects happiness. Going from a less hierarchical society will affect the happiness negatively while the opposite will affect the foreign student's happiness positively.

### Belonging

The last sub-theme found in the data is belonging. Participants who felt they did not belong in the social context expressed unhappiness when these events of not belonging took place. The international office, hosting activities for exchange students does not let international programme students participate in these activities. This clearly affected the foreign students' happiness negatively. Other visible arguments included being able to socialise with homogeneous people and people in the same situation.

## Environment

The data showed that environmental aspects can have, to a varying degree, both positive and negative impacts on the happiness of foreign students. In this theme, a presentation of the environmental aspects found in the data will be presented.

### Language Barriers

The data largely indicated that language barriers led to a feeling that it was hard to integrate.

### New Environment

The data indicated that being in a new environment led to largely negative experiences of the environment, for example being confused, being unable to navigate the environment or communicate efficiently led to confusion, difficult integration and feeling of wasted energy and a sense of non-integration.

However, there were some examples given by the foreign students interviewed that these environmental experiences can be positive in that they help you learn about yourself.

### Learning Environment

The data indicated that the learning environment was entirely interpreted as positive. Largely, this was related to the openness of the teaching staff and the interactive nature of the teaching methods used. Furthermore, the availability of the teachers was noted as positive for the experience and was described as being supportive.

### Positive Intangible Environment

The data showed that foreign students like to be surrounded by positive people and this positive energy in class can make them feel happy. What is more, a sense of community among the wider university environment was described as giving a sense of pride.

### Physical Environment on Campus

The data showed there were mixed feelings regarding the physical campus environment. Largely there was a positive feeling towards the physical environment; however, there were also some negative reflections. The negative reflections focused mainly on the Library, both the available working space and the closing times were criticised, and this created negative feelings. Regarding the positive reflections, the bulk of the positivity was centred on the communal spaces and the cosiness of these environments. The dormitories were mentioned as the second most positive environments due to a sense of feeling safe and secure and proximity to the campus. Lastly, the out of hours access was mentioned as being positive.

### Physical Environment Off-Campus

The data indicated a marginal difference between positive and negative experience, in favour of positive. The data collected did not offer a clear consensus either way. For example, the size of the city was seen both as positive and negative, in that it was small and therefore there was not that much to do, but also it was easy to navigate. What is more, public transport was interpreted both positively and negatively, with some indicating it to be convenient and reliable and some indicating it did not go to all places they wanted to go to, and it was unreliable.

### Negative Intangible Environment

There was a perception that the class lacked ambition because it was a quiet class, which induced feelings of disappointment and feeling of depression.

## Culture

In the theme of culture, an interesting aspect was found. A huge variety of different perspectives on how culture might affect happiness was found.

### Adaptation

The participants talking about adaptation mostly focused on negative aspects affecting their happiness; factors such as people having trouble adapting to the foreign culture, thus not being able to be themselves. Furthermore, difficulties adapting to the academic system affected the participants' happiness. One participant focused more on a positive outcome of adaptation. Not having any culturally similar persons made the participant go outside the comfort zone, thus developing the ability to adapt to other cultures.

### Learning

When it comes to learning from different cultures, this affected foreign students' happiness positively. The participants felt that cultural differences challenged their own perspective and saw this as a learning experience. Moreover, one of the participants thought that diversity in cultures ensured reflections on their own culture, and therefore learned more about their own previous perceptions and ideas. Overall, all participants mentioning learning experiences from a diversity of cultures stated that they made them happier.

### Openness

Openness was generally perceived as improving the participants' overall sense of happiness. All participants' mentioning openness referred to how people in different cultures were perceived as open and friendly, thus affecting happiness positively. The underlying message was that the participants did not expect that foreign people would be as open as they were. Thus, expectations were exceeded, resulting in greater happiness.

### Differences

The way people focused on differences between cultures was interesting to analyse, since all participants made the connection that differences affected the happiness negatively. The participants mentioned situations where the differences in cultures restricted them to being themselves and not being able to be understood. Also, a feeling that you are different makes you unhappy according to one of the participants. Overall, a consensus can be drawn from the data that focusing on differences will make a foreign student unhappy.

### Similarities

An interesting point to draw from the data is that when foreign students focused on similarities between their home culture and the foreign culture it stimulated their happiness. We argue that if people find similarities this creates a feeling of belongingness. Participants mentioned that situations such as finding a restaurant serving food from their home country increased their happiness. Some people chose the country to study abroad based upon a preconception that there were cultural similarities between their home country and the foreign country.

### Homogenisation

The last sub-theme was positively related to happiness. This sub-theme was a recurring topic in the data. Combining all the previous aspects of culture affecting happiness, we can now draw the conclusion that being homogenous in some respects nurtures happiness. Two of the participants argued that when the teachers mixed the seating in the classroom, people obviously were mixed with those from other cultures. It was interesting that people could now find other similarities beyond the cultural differences; thus, focusing on finding homogenous people in a diverse context.

### Time

The data shows an overwhelming clear and unanimous indication that having an imbalance between study time and non-studying results in negative feelings. Feelings of stress are communicated and associated with not being able to achieve this balance. Naturally, the opposite, finding balance, is unanimously associated with a positive feeling and being happy. Furthermore, the data shows that when foreign students have a sense they have gained time through being close to campus,

completing work before deadlines or completing their thesis early, they have a sense of happiness and positivity.

### Friends & Family

The data indicated unanimously that a sense of closeness to friends and family is associated with a feeling of happiness. In many cases, a foreign student's choice of exchange country is based on the closeness and ease of travel to and from their home country. While foreign students expressed a desire to experience new cultures and experiences they also expressed clearly the importance of having relatively uncomplicated and quick travel access to family and friends. What is more, when making friends, in many cases they ended up finding friends from similar cultures or even from their own country, thus highlighting the idea of unwitting cultural homogenisation. The only negative reflections on finding new friends related directly to Swedish people; the consensus was you make acquaintances but not friends with Swedish people, which was felt as a negative experience.

### Health

The data shows that being physically healthy has clear links to happiness. One respondent said to be happy is to sleep without problems or pain.

### Freedom

The data indicates that there is a unanimous feeling of positivity resulting from a notion or sense of freedom among foreign students. This freedom is mentioned in reference to certain aspects of their lives such as having their own car, so they are free to travel anywhere at any time they want and they are self-reliant in this way. Being financially free of loans was another

example, and being free to shape your future was also mentioned. While only a small number of respondents mentioned freedom, it was clear that it was positively related to making people feel happy.

## Happiness

The interviewees on occasion explicitly mentioned happiness and what this could mean for them. The data revealed several categories of described happiness, which were then grouped into sub-themes. In all sub-themes but one there was a positive connection to the given example of what can influence happiness in the foreign students. For example, the categories of meeting expectations, opportunities, personal well-being, socialising and meeting one's needs were unanimously linked to positive experience and happiness. Meanwhile one sub-theme, which we labelled 'greed', due to students mentioning being happy but still not having enough and wanting more, one can interpret as negative and contrary to happiness.

## Academic Achievements

From the analysis of the data, three sub-themes emerged. These themes were *challenges, grades and completion*. The data indicated that where foreign students reflected on challenging themselves or being challenged or completing academic course's or programme's there was a unanimous sense of happiness. However, where grades were concerned there was an almost unanimous sense of negative feeling when expectations were not met in the actual outcome. Almost all the foreign students who had clear expectations be it of themselves or the course, experienced negative feelings, while those who remained open-minded and did not express expectations experienced positive or neutral feelings about their grades.

## Experience

The data revealed that foreign students reflected on the experience of being abroad to study unanimously as a positive experience overall. They data revealed three sub-themes from the categories: learning experience, new experiences and development experiences. In all cases these themes were reflected upon as having positive effects directly on themselves.

## Financials

In the theme "Financials" we acknowledged several sub-themes. The data showed that having financial support from the family, the government, a scholarship, or student loan relieved financial stress. However, if participants focused on stuff that was either expensive or cheap compared to their home country, this negatively affected their happiness. One exception was when things were cheaper, resulting in the ability to engage in more social activities with friends. Moreover, free education was regarded as causing happiness and created a stress-free environment. The difference between having either bad or good liquidity did not significantly affect happiness among the foreign students.

## Expectations

The theme "Expectations" was interestingly showing that communication, or rather, no communication affected the foreign students' happiness negatively. Most of the participants felt that unclear instructions for exams or assignments created irritation and unhappiness. Furthermore, there was also lack of communication about what social activities the foreign students could attend, as well as introductory information of the start of the programme. One of the foreign students felt unhappiness when the student got a complementary assignment

whose length was equal to the total amount of words as the previous course in the programme. The foreign student had expected something of the same size as the initial assignment, which led to unhappiness. Moreover, we found that the foreign students without expectations felt happier about what they experienced than the foreign students who expected things.

## Personal Value/Worth

The data highlighted that there was a unanimous positive effect associated with foreign students' sense of value/worth resulting from the master's programme. Growing as a person, achieving goals building networks that could be valuable in the future, increasing knowledge and a sense of legitimation were linked to an increased sense of happiness and created positive feelings among the respondents.

## Summary

From the analysis of the data a new model revealed itself. In taking an inductive approach to the data analysis we uncovered new discoveries which challenged our original perceptions and developed our understanding of what makes foreign students happy. Therefore, we were forced into altering our original model to the one we see now in Figure 2. Factors Affecting Foreign Students Happiness, which reflects accurately the empirical findings from the data. We have clustered the different themes into colour codes, which indicate the relationship between them. Furthermore, the size of the circles is in correlation to the importance on a foreign students' happiness. Another difference from our original model is that we no longer use optimism or pessimism as a contingency. This is because the research group did not test for this variable. Thus, the interview guide, focus group guide and observation did not consider whether the participants were either optimistic or pessimistic.

Figure 2. Factors affecting Foreign Students' Happiness

## Conclusions

With this research we can now conclude that happiness among foreign students is mostly influenced by social, cultural and environmental factors. While foreign students cite new cultures as a reason for going abroad to study, we found on the contrary that during the experience, these students tend to attach themselves to similar people, this including, cultural similarities, or other identifiable homogenous characteristics. We found that

this could be explained by the need for a sense of belonging among other individuals. Furthermore, foreign students focusing on similarities tend to be happier than those focusing on differences. Thus, focusing on differences negates their ability to adapt or feel comfortable in themselves.

Interestingly, we found that the environmental aspects had a significant impact on the foreign students' happiness. The happiest people were the ones that were in the dorms with other foreign students. We argue this is because there is a sense of shared community born from the fact that all are in an international environment. No consensus was found regarding the physical environment either on- or off-campus. However, consensus was found on the positive effect on the communal areas on the on-campus physical environment.

We found that informal activities had a great impact on the foreign students' happiness. We explain this by the fact that the foreign students do not expect any informal activities at all, resulting in a positive impact on their happiness. On the contrary, we found that the foreign students were unhappy with the formal activities conducted by the school. Thus, the international programme students felt excluded since they were not allowed participating in the formal activities conducted by the university.

Yet another interesting revelation revolves around having family and friends close during the foreign exchange experience. We found a clear link between those students who based themselves relatively closely to their home country in terms of travel times and ease of accessibility to those who did not. Furthermore, it was revealed that the balance between study time

and non-study time affected happiness. The sense of own-time also resulted in a sense of happiness.

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