Qualitative study II: What makes foreign students happy?
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Introduction

Globalization accentuates the need to make sense of the changing world. The global interdependence of today’s world has given rise to the importance of enhanced knowledge and capabilities as well as genuine empathy and commonality of acknowledging human beings and their societies (Zhou et al, 2008; Glaum and Rinker, 2002). The growing global interdependence has required students to engage and participate in local, national and global life (Zhou et al, 2008). It has been estimated that there are more than a million students and academics that are attending institutions in higher education abroad (Wiers-jenssen, 2003). Therefore, students that decide to attend universities that have a culture distance to their own have to be able to cope with different social and educational organisations, prospects and behaviours (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grogaard, 2002; Zhou et al, 2008). The importance of the receiving quality of the psychological, sociocultural and educational experiences is characterised as an important element for promoting global intercultural understanding and factors that create happiness (Zhou et al, 2008). Importance also lies in the understanding the challenges of adjustments. Also emphasised as an important factor for internationalisation is students’ exchange and flow across borders (Wiers-jenssen, 2003). Therefore, this study will explore and investigate the factors which cause exchange students’ happiness.
Theoretical problematisation

Happiness can be a very fuzzy theme to explore. Despite this, some remarks and clarification in the scientific literature help to clarify what we mean by happiness. The concept itself consists of hedonic and euadomic components. The former refers to the satisfaction the individual feels with his/her life; more specifically, it is associated with what pleasures people can get from their livelihood. The euadomic part is more deeply rooted in one’s own psychological level of satisfaction, which is an individual’s ability to feel inner peace, and harmony with one's surroundings and thus gain a sort of self-satisfaction. In this sense, people can value the things they have, and strive to achieve more in their lives. After all, a person may be well off in having for example friends, family, money and educational opportunities but if they do not value these things (gain hedonic pleasure from them), then these attributes will probably not affect their inner self-satisfaction (their inner psychological euadomic satisfaction). This in turn means that the individual cannot truly be satisfied with his/her life and therefore can never be truly happy (Fave et al., 2010; Raibley, 2011).

One theme that can relate to happiness is social relations, which includes spending time with family, friends or other partners you have become acquainted with during your university studies abroad (Wiers-jenssen, 2003; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Mogilner, 2010; Fave et al, 2010; Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell and Utsey, 2005). One major factor that enables seizing opportunities to spend time on engagement in inter social relations is leisure. Lu and Hu (2005) talk about how leisure can increase happiness amongst students studying abroad, since leisure gives them time to socialize with family, friends and other people. According to Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002), increased social interaction increases the satisfaction of students, which in
turn increases their happiness. One can thus conceptualize leisure as one factor giving foreign students a chance to engage in social relations that according to previous authors (Wiers-Jenssen, 2003; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Mogilner, 2010; Fave et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2005) give students time to appreciate life and socialise with their closest friends and family.

Another aspect that can make a difference in determining foreign students’ happiness is their impression of the quality of the educational program they are studying. One thing determining this can be what future career and job opportunities the program itself can offer for potential attendees (Glaum and Rinker, 2002). Another essential aspect is the pedagogic quality of education. This refers to a combination of the content and methods of teaching in order to give students the opportunity to develop their intellectual understanding of certain subjects. If students are satisfied with this then their happiness (life satisfaction) increases (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002). Also, students' academic experiences has to do with what type of cross-cultural experience they have during their studies. For example, if students can adapt easily to the culture of a foreign country and at the same time gain positive cross-cultural experiences when studying abroad, then they become more satisfied with their academic time abroad. This in turn increases their life satisfaction (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002; Glaum and Rinker, 2002). Satisfying the expectations students have of a study program can increase their satisfaction level and in turn heighten their happiness. Another aspect is thus the academic level of expectations, which can be labelled as ‘academic expectations’.

Third thing that can influence foreign student’s happiness is the physical school environment itself. Fave et al., (2010) ar-
guessed for the importance of the physical environment that determines how happy foreign students are. This can include things such as how the school itself looks on the inside (the hallways and what pictures are on the wall etc.). This belongs in the aesthetic factor of determining the satisfaction level of foreign students. Francisco (2017) writes that just the aesthetic environment of a physical place can arouse emotions. The physical environment (pictures, corridor design) can exacerbate a sense of joy, pleasure (satisfaction) or displeasure, depending on how the environment looks. One can thus say that the physical environment can have a direct effect upon our feeling for a particular place. This can involve the pictures and colours of the walls in the physical environment we are in. The physical environment can thus be another factor relating to how happy foreign students are.

While we have identified some triggers that can impact upon the life satisfaction (happiness) of foreign students, still one question remains. Do these triggers apply to all foreign students regardless of cultural background? Can one actually claim that there is a holistic perfect model that explains what happiness (life satisfaction) is for all foreign students regardless of culture? We aim to explore whether or not the model we propose (using the facts mentioned previously) applies to all foreign students or not.

**Research question**
How well does the proposed model capture what makes all foreign students happy regardless of cultural background?
**Research aim**

To explore whether or not the model proposed in this paper captures what makes all foreign students happy regardless of cultural background.

Our initial model looks as follows

![Initial model diagram](image)

Figure 1: Initial model
Method

This research paper will explore the triggers of happiness among both international and exchange students. For this, a qualitative research approach will be applied with a hermeneutical research philosophical perspective, which Bryman and Bell (2015) describe as being a research philosophy that focuses on the social and situational context that individuals are in and how this affects their behaviour. The research aim is to develop an in-depth understanding of social and situational aspects that influence foreign exchange and international students’ happiness. Therefore, data was collected on students with different cultural backgrounds and international experiences. We used a number of qualitative research methods to gather data. The methods used were observations, focus groups and interviews.

Participants

All participants were voluntary attendees and from various cultural backgrounds and had different experiences of studying abroad. The participants were both female and male. The meetings were organised by external contacts through a type of snowball effect and participants were informed about the aim of the study. All the attendees studied different international programmes and a precondition was that they were either a foreign exchange student or an international student during their academic experience.

Data collection

We started by making our own observation and using other observations to collect our data. Additionally, we used a mixed qualitative approach where we included interviews and focus groups. This was done to try to ensure quality and variation of
the results from diversified qualitative methodological perspectives (Gopaldas, 2015), because it is harder to view things from only one practical perspective. The observations took place in classroom environments and a dormitory to get a holistic view. The difference in the environments where the data was collected was important because it would give information on how different environments can affect how the students communicate with each other. Observations are, as Bryman and Bell (2015) describe them, to get more knowledge about how the participants’ everyday activities but also behaviours can be affected by the social environment they are in. Data from the interviews was also collected in order to get a more personal and interactive discussion with the participant. This allowed us to get a more in-depth and personal insight into the participants’ opinions, which according to Bryman and Bell (2015) is the main point of qualitative interviews. The focus group data collection approach will strengthen the understanding of different thoughts, while in discussion the group activity can spark new notions and encourage streams of ideas (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This helps us extract valuable opinions from the different participants.

Limitations could be addressed when discussing the collection of data in observations. As there is no verbal communication between the researcher and the participants it could be hard to interpret their emotions during certain activities. Interviews could be a complement to the observations because here the respondents are able to express their feelings verbally. However, even interviews have their own limitations. The major one is that the respondents’ feelings of self would be too limited to his/her personal experiences. Nevertheless, accompanied with focus group analysis, the data acquired would be much richer and intertwined with various people’s experience
of a particular situation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, limitations could be applied here as well, because the focus groups were not selected in a specific way, for example, the group members varied in the way they communicated and expressed themselves which could be related to personal characteristics. If someone is more introverted then he or she will take up less communication space than the others will. In addition, cultural dimensions play a role in how the dynamic of the group appears in a group discussion. Therefore, interviews are a complement to focus groups because they are focused on one person, who can thus express feelings without external group pressure (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

We also formalized a topic guide to enhance and better structure the data, which helped us develop codes that strengthened and explained what themes and their categories were in line with our research purpose. The mixed qualitative methods offset each other’s negative effects and gave us more reliable and valid empirical data material. As Bryman and Bell (2015) proclaim, this is the main goal—to ensure quality in all qualitative research conducted. Because the aim of our research question is based upon the exploratory antecedents of happiness, then the decision to collect data using different qualitative methods gave us results from different situational contexts.

**Analysis**

As mentioned by Gopaldas (2015), discussing the more procedural aspects of data analysis would develop a more creative, unusual and interesting step of viewing the collected data. We will therefore focus on presenting our findings as themes and sub-themes in order to align our study to previous studies addressing the same phenomenon. Agevall, Broberg and Umans (2018) explain that data analysis can be divided into three
stages. The first stage involves the actual transcription of the data collected. Stage 2 consisted of us viewing the data repeatedly in a structural and hermeneutically circular way. This was to help us strengthen our perceptions and understanding of the collected data. In stage three, we ensured that we got an overarching holistic understanding of the collected information to help us construct various themes and sub-themes that affect the participants’ view of what triggers their happiness. The importance of acknowledgement of our pre-understanding of the subjects needs to be addressed. We are students at the same university as the participants and one of us has actually had an international academic experience studying abroad. This could of course influence our pre-understanding of how the collected data is to be interpreted. However, we ensured that the pre-understanding did not cloud our openness, judgement and consideration of the topic.

**Empirical findings**

The data analysis we collected from the mixed qualitative methods was divided into four themes that we also categorised into ten sub-themes. We called the themes: university interconnectional triggers, social culture perspicacity, personal inner development and peripheral antecedents. The sub-themes were categorised as academic systems and expectations, communication channels, teacher and student relationships (University interconnectional triggers), social life + intercommunication, cross-culture interactions, individualism vs collectivism (social culture perspicacity), personal growth (Personal inner development), financial situation, transportation challenges/opportunities, physical environment (peripheral antecedents).
**Theme: University Interconnectional Triggers**

When discussing the university interconnectional triggers, we emphasised that universities have an important impact on the overall expectations, and contribute to the well-being, the academic developments/achievements and the understanding of self. Applying to a university abroad is a big step in anyone’s lifetime as this period often consists of numerous experiences and factors that can affect a person’s ability to develop both intellectually and characteristically. This could of course also impact upon a person’s perception of the world and their surroundings. Therefore, the university experience is an influential factor and has a strong influence on the satisfaction of foreign exchange and international students. That would be one of their first encounters abroad.

**Sub-theme: Academic systems and expectations**

Some students that we collected data from emphasised that the reason for studying abroad was to obtain a greater and more reliable academic certificate. So, the country in which they studied would be picked with care, to ensure that the quality of their education could help them find greater opportunities, with a long-term perspective approach on finding attractive and satisfactory future job opportunities. Additionally, the new academic experience played a vital role in their well-being and ability to integrate themselves into the new educational system and academic atmosphere in which they were studying. For example, three students indicated that receiving a certificate from Sweden would enhance their opportunities of finding a good job in the future. This was because of the reputation of the Swedish educational system and the quality of its graduates.
Sub-theme: Communication channels

The experience of the administrative service was that they were helpful in providing assistance in all situations regarding issues students had concerning every aspect of their educational programme. It was mentioned that the services provided at the university were of high quality and nearly always supportive. This heightened the positive perceptions students had of the administrative staff.

However, not everything was seen in a positive light from the participants’ point of view. A major issue that was faced by a couple of attendees was the fact that they were not informed concerning certain social gatherings or activities that were held in the universities. This made them feel excluded, which impacted on their integration into the university and also among other fellow students, which made it harder for them to socialise and become acquainted with the others. Another issue that was faced by the participants was the unfair treatment between them as international students versus exchange students. There was no clear understanding of why they were treated differently to the others; they were all students from abroad. For example, trips were organised and the people that were allowed to participate were only exchange students and not international students, which was seen as discrimination and was not received well by some of the participants. This was very evident when a participant said:

... “I think it as the sense of belonging, like you are engaged in this kind of activities, (…), sometimes to be honest, there is discrimination in the international office, because for example they organise two trips, one to Stockholm and one to Kiruna and when I told them that I wanted to join they said: “No, this is not for you, you are an international student. I was very upset.”
Here the dissatisfaction was with the faculties arranging student trips for students attending the university. However, this only included exchange students, which was considered as unfair because they were all experiencing the same situation but the labelling of “exchange” and “international” set them apart.

Another student continued:

…”Unfair! I said it all the time, it also happened in Denmark, all the time they discriminated against the international students. I was also very upset. (....).”

In line with the above, the disconnect and interpretation of different students caused a negative impact on their experience abroad. It was unfair and should not occur.

**Sub-theme: Teacher student relationship**

It is evident that teachers have a positive impact upon students’ engagement and motivation in the academic environment. Teachers’ teaching style serves as a pedagogical enhancement leading to better results, which helps students to feel more comfortable, and this strengthens the relationship more between students and lecturer. The relationship between teacher and students can become insightful for the students that have not experienced such close interactions and relationships with previous teachers in their home countries. In some countries, the status has an impact on how communication takes place between students and teachers. Students that experienced the abovementioned appreciated the close relationship between teachers and students abroad. Nevertheless, teachers’ feedback also plays a pivotal role on how satisfied students are with their academic practice. As stated by a participant:
... “For me the relationship between the student and the teacher here is something marvellous, because it is different in our country. We do not have this relationship with the professor, like he is someone at a very high sublime level, you cannot reach him. So you have this close relation and you have this discussion where you know you will not suffer consequences because you dare to ask. That is something fascinating to me, it is somewhat related to my satisfaction with the academic system here.”

This statement emphasises how important student and teacher interactions are, and that they need to be established for the comfort and satisfaction of the student’s experience abroad. A close relationship triggers students’ happiness. Also expressed was the difference with relationships previously experienced with teachers, and that the setting was opposite from the environment in which they previously lived but the new experience was an aligned feeling of great satisfaction.

**Theme: Social Culture Perspicacity**

Social life when studying abroad is an underlying element in most people’s personal life because when going abroad you leave your secure social environment and fit into an unknown and unexplored context in which the uncertainty level is high. Being able to replicate one’s previous social setting is of great importance. Social interactions abroad also involve socialisation with people from diverse cultures. This could either be a deliberate or undeliberate choice but it is a fact. Socialisation with diverse groups of individuals can thus be seen as a natural process that occurs when students decide to study abroad. It is in this sense like every day occasions in which people automatically start to communicate with others. Whether these verbal but also non-verbal exchanges are socially stimulating or not
can affect and become ingrained in how we perceive our surroundings. As such the possibility to socially interact with others, for example when studying abroad, can become a trigger that affects a person's satisfaction and contentment with themselves but also with their surroundings.

Sub-theme: Social life + intercommunication
Most of the participants stressed the importance and benefits of being able to engage in different social activities during their studies because it increases the social satisfaction and the ability to interact with numerous people. It could be lonely being alone and away from home, specifically family and friends; therefore, some participants valued the time spent communicating with their close ones.

The local community were often seen as open and polite and as contributing to the well-being and to the experience abroad. This underlying factor enhanced the perception of the country and community in which the students were living overseas. In some countries where the participants had gained their academic experience, there were restrictions concerning what social activities there were available. This was seen as a limitation and had an impact upon how satisfied some students were with their social life. The ability to spend alone time watching TV, relaxing on the sofa and focusing on one's inner self was a contributing factor to heighten the appreciation of one's time.

Sub-theme: Cross-culture interactions
We interpreted the cross-culture experience to be nothing but positive and there was a high willingness to integrate with the culture in which they were living. This because it strengthen their social networking, expanded their view and understanding of other culturally diverse people. It was enticing to be able
to step out of one's comfort zone and meet people from different ends of the world. However, it was seen that some locals were kind in light conversations, but when trying to establish a closer relationship there was disconnect and a distant attitude. It was easier to establish relationships with other international or exchange students than with the actual locals. This could be due to the fact that the locals often did not live in the student accommodations, so the only interaction that could take place was in the classrooms and other facilities connected to the university.

**Sub-theme: Individualistic vs Collectivism**

It was evident during the data analysis that cultural norms affect personal perceptions of how things should be done, attitudes towards people, the way interactions take place, academic social expectations and how students behave towards each other. We saw that there was an individualistic approach where students preferred studying in countries similar to their own, for example, the western Anglo-Saxons chose to socialise in smaller groups and with people that had similar cultures. It was not that they would not integrate with other diverse cultures but that they felt more comfortable with people that they were less socially distant to. This was also the case with the participants that had a more collectivistic cultural mind-set. Although they also preferred to be with people with the same cultural background they usually socialised in larger groups.

**Theme: Personal Inner Development**

The decision to move abroad for studies and pursue academic accomplishment is one of the major decisions in one’s life. Once outside of one’s comfort zone, one’s own personal attributes speak louder because personal characteristics that have been established up until the decision to study abroad has formed
and shaped the person into the human being they are. This would be shown in the way you assess and judge the world. Personal development is a tool for peace of mind, a future investment and can be interpreted as progress that provides guidance and information that cannot be found elsewhere than within self. What are the forces that push you and establish you as a human being? Have you reached your optimal depth? Are decisions you make now rooted in past experiences or will this new endeavour push you even further into balancing personal habits and qualities? Truly, an academic experience abroad will form, mature and develop a human being. However, how close the ability to reach your maximum true and deepest identity is of greatest interest.

**Sub-theme: Personal growth**

Almost all the participants expressed the anxiety at studying in a foreign country and a few did not know at all what to expect. They were nervous about leaving their comfort zone and venturing into the unknown. As time progressed, personal development also enhanced their capabilities to tackle these issues. Personal evolution was shown in the ability to develop more self-confidence, self-esteem, self-satisfaction and inner peace and was the cause of personal inner growth. The more exposure they had strengthened their ability to adapt to new cultural and social norms. The view was expressed that due to one’s own perceived ways of treating people and one’s own personality, the way some experiences abroad were observed contributed to either positive or negative personal impressions. More mature students could not cope with some other younger students because they did not have the same priorities and younger students were often more immature.
Theme: Peripheral Antecedents
As the internal environment of every student’s life can play a role on enhancing academic experiences overseas, so can also external environmental and situational aspects. Aspects of the physical environment can influence the experience students have abroad. As mentioned before, many students are stepping out of their comfort zone and the ability to feel safe and enjoy the overseas experience can be determined by financial, transportation and environmental factors.

Sub-theme: Financial situation and transportation challenges/opportunities
We found that living conditions matter and were affected by the economic situation of the student. The cost of the rent, food, travel affected the ability to partake in social activities with other students. Hence, financial support, for example student grants and funding from home, contributed to a more affordable social lifestyle. Being able to transport oneself and the distance from home to the university had a big impact on the experience. Many had issues with the length and the timeframe of travel. Options of travel influenced how student’s overall impressions of transport availability and convenience from point A to point B.

Sub-theme: Physical environment
Due to the fact that many students interacted and lived in close proximity to the university the value of safety was at the top of the list. Feeling safe and being able to walk around the premises without fear and with comfort were ranked very high. The abroad experiences were of different calibre, some came from countries with weather conditions that were totally different from the country in which they lived previously. Therefore,
weather conditions affected the moods of the students. For example, the students that were used to warm weather conditions did not appreciate the cold weather in Sweden but also expressed as previously mentioned the close proximity to local centres:

... "For me I enjoy this little town. I call it a town not a city, because I imagine a city where there are a lot of people, with very tall buildings and a lot of cars. This is what I think a city is in China. But I think this is a very good town and personally I like this kind of environment. The university is not very far from the centre, for example in China most of the universities are very far from the city, it takes two hours to go to the city centre. I think this is very good for me, and where I live is very important for me so I can get up late and come to lectures too. (Expressed in a very relaxed and happy manner)."

Hence, satisfaction lies in the ability to transport yourself to and from the accommodation in which you stay and increase the ability to sightsee more at one’s own convenience. In addition, satisfaction with the distance between the housing to the university would enable the student to get more rest, which is a factor affecting happiness.

**Conclusion**

The overall aim of this study was to explore if our initial model presented in the background section could be applied to all foreign students, and more specifically, if the triggers identified in this framework can be applied to all participants regardless of cultural background. This is to some extent possible but it needs to be developed further.

Some students emphasised the importance of studying an educational programme that would strengthen their job and career
opportunities in the future (the academic systems and education expectations sub-theme). Another crucial thing in satisfying foreign students was what type of service the administrative facilities offered them, in regard to helping them with questions they might have regarding their studies and also giving them the opportunity to participate in student activities arranged at the university (communication channels sub-theme). For the pedagogic learning experience, most students valued the social and close interactions they had with their teachers, which gave them a sense of comfort and motivation to continue with their studies. Also what played a crucial role was the feedback teachers would give students in regard to the grades they would receive during some written exams (Teacher student relationship sub-theme).

Of course, some of these academic sub-themes can have an impact upon other aspects. For example, the more student activities the university offers foreign students (communication channels sub-theme) the better the social life and heightened possibilities for cross-cultural interactions foreign students would receive (social life + intercommunication and cross-culture interactions sub-themes). As stated earlier, most of the participants valued social activities and cross-cultural experiences as something positive that affected their overall satisfaction. Having of course more possibilities to have social and cultural interactions with other students can heighten, as most participants expressed, their self-satisfaction and inner peace (personal growth sub-theme).

The two latest paragraphs strengthen some authors’ claims that social networking and cross-cultural academic experience can have an impact upon foreign students’ happiness (Wiers-
Jenssen et al. 2002; Glaum and Rinker, 2002). In turn, these aspects can affect the personal growth aspect of people, which can be related to the euadomic inner psychological level of happiness, as proposed by Fave et al. (2010).

Other aspects identified have to do with the fact that participants stated that their satisfaction could also be dependent upon external factors. This would include how affordable the students living conditions are, the safety of the campus and also how convenient the transportation is in and out of campus. Also, weather conditions play a role (Peripheral antecedents theme).

In regard to all these mentioned facts the initial model can be developed below:
Figure 2: Final model
References


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