Aligning expectations to experiences: A qualitative study of international students

enrolled on privately provided UK university pathway programmes.

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of

Liverpool for the degree of Doctorate in Education

by Mark John Cunnington.

July 2019

Abstract

Mark Cunnington

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Against a neoliberal backdrop impelling evolving changes to university funding and income streams, the private pathway sector has established itself in the last decade as a key partner in recruiting and teaching international students for universities. Pathway providers deliver year-long courses for international students, usually at university-based Study Centres. Almost 50% of UK pathway programmes are delivered for universities in partnership with private providers (ICEF, 2016a). Typically, Foundation programmes permit students access to undergraduate university Degrees. A risk posed is that in the commercial drive to increase international student numbers, a mismatch occurs between students' perceptions of a university's pathway programme and the students' subsequent experiences. This thesis examines whether the early experiences of international students on UK-university based, privately delivered Foundation programmes, matched their expectations set during recruitment. A qualitative study using Mazzarol & Soutar's (2002) "pull" factors as the theoretical basis for the research, 35 international students enrolled on privately delivered Foundation programmes at six UK universities took part in focus groups and online interviews. The participants provided direct insights into their reasons for studying in the UK, their expectations established during the recruitment process and subsequent on-campus experiences. Data from the focus groups and interviews were initially open coded in an inductive process, with further coding deductively testing the presence or absence of themes in international student literature. Online interviews with participants further explored premises established from the focus groups. The research established five major findings to better align students' expectations to their experiences. Students' families are key influencers and should be engaged more during decision-making; personalised digital information tools should be leveraged to better set and managing student expectations; students must experience responsive 'customer service' during their pre- and post-arrival; misaligned early impressions of a university Study Centre hugely influences student experiences and satisfaction; and pathway providers must promote the pedagogical uniqueness of their offering and quality of teaching staff to prospective students. With little literature examining international pathway provision, specifically pertaining to international student expectations and experiences, the research contributes new knowledge to this fast-growing international sector.

Key words: international students; student expectations; student experience; pathway provider; Foundation programme

Acknowledgements

Without access to international students, my research would not have been possible. I would therefore likely to thank my company (Provider A), for allowing me both the access to and time with students. Thanks also go to the various Heads of Centre at my sample International Study Centres. They assisted me in access to participants as well as facilities for my focus groups.

Gratitude goes to my primary supervisor, Alla Korzh. Throughout this process she has guided me consummately, offering sage advice and invaluable feedback. I very much appreciated her responsiveness and the manner in which she supported my research journey.

Finally, for the patience and understanding of my family, I am eternally grateful. Working in solitude and focus takes commitment from everyone, and my progress through this research would not have been possible without their love and support.

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1. Introduction

Since the mid-2000's, the higher education sector has experienced the emergence and growth of privately delivered international pathway programmes (ICEF, 2016a). Pathway programmes are primarily year-long courses of study that prepare international students for either undergraduate or post-graduate university study. Although there is some differentiation in terminology, predominantly courses that prepare students for undergraduate Degree study are known as Foundation programmes, whereas those preparing students for post-graduate study are commonly referred to as Pre-Masters programmes. In just over a decade, private pathway provision has developed into an estimated $825 million global sector with over 1,400 programmes (Cambridge English, 2016) available to international students seeking access to universities ostensibly in the US, UK and Australia. While some universities develop their own pathway programmes, almost 50% of UK pathway programmes are delivered for universities in partnership with private providers (ICEF, 2016a). In part, this emergence of private pathway providers has been precipitated by the university sector's global growth in demand for international students in recent decades.

Student demand for English-language study and courses preparing those students to thrive in an increasingly global work environment, has required adaptation so that countries and HEIs[1] remain competitive. Against a global neoliberal backdrop, governments responded to increasingly competitive demand for students. In the UK, this meant positioning the higher education sector as a highly attractive study destination, modifying funding models either in support of 'traditional' modes of campus-based delivery, or evolving technology-enhanced education through blended and distance models. Further, social inequities at national and international levels have required governments to either widen participation in-country or for

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[1] Throughout this thesis the acronym HEI is used in reference to universities

governments to make their higher education sector an attractive, affordable destination. This in turn led to reviews of structural funding models, as well as growth in private provision as a means to provide additional capacity within the sector or to diversify programmes and modes of delivery (Tilak, 1991).

In the UK, while the institutional response has in part been driven by increasing international demand for a highly regarded university education, the acceleration in recruiting increasing numbers of international students has equally been a necessity due to structural funding changes. Public funding of the UK higher education sector has declined over time, precipitated in part by the introduction of domestic student tuition fees and the reduction in funding body grants (Anderson, 2016; Hubble & Bolton, 2018). As an illustration, in the last decade tuition fee dependence for UK HEIs has grown from 8% to 29% and from approximately 6% to 13% for domestic and international students respectively; concurrently, funding grants have dropped from over 25% to 7% (Hubble & Bolton, 2018). As HEIs contemplate future funding uncertainties in terms of a possible Brexit impact, the post-18 education funding review (Hubble, Bolton & Foster, 2019), teaching reforms under the auspices of the OfS (OfS, n.d.a) and further research funding reviews (REF2021, n.d.) the sector faces challenging times and dependence on international students fees will likely increase. There has thus emerged a dual burgeoning demand. That is, a 'student-customer' demand-led desire for a higher education outside of their home country and a symbiotic demand for international students to be recruited into HEIs, as a means both to diversify university income streams and to create a diverse international study environment.

Private pathway providers therefore play a key role in supporting HEIs responding to internationalisation. Typically, the private provider runs its pathway provision from a Study Centre based at the university's campus, providing international students year-long preparation and transition onto the respective partner university's degree programmes. The

rationale for universities partnering with these providers, is that they bring a breadth of international student recruitment resource, with specialist abilities for developing curriculum and teaching international students in preparation for UK degree study. Further, providers can widen access to those international students unable to enter the university directly, either due to their home-schooling systems' qualifications not being formally recognised by universities or if their academic achievement has fallen short for direct entry.

As one might expect, however, this form of public-private collaboration to support HEIs' internationalisation strategies, brings with it areas for concern. Largely operating as embedded colleges in the UK (QAA, n.d.), universities contract with pathway providers to recruit and teach international students. With some partnerships, the pathway provider either positions the Study Centre foregrounded by their own brand (INTO, n.d.) or operates as a form of 'white-label' under the university brand (StudyGroup, n.d.). With these differing models of marketing the Study Centre, universities and their partner provider must navigate appropriate and effective institutional positioning towards students. Student-facing information and promotional materials, however, bely unseen operating challenges. The nature of the partnership contract can be varied and complex, with pathway providers often contracted to achieve international student recruitment, diversity and progression targets, naturally impacting the pathway providers' behaviour. Further, the university may house the Study Centre in its own campus facilities, including access to student accommodation, or the provider themselves may have purpose-built facilities. While these operational matters may be 'seen' by international students, no doubt they impact on how students' expectations are set and their experiences affected.

Research Purpose

To varying degrees research has been undertaken into how international students make decisions of where to study, specifically the factors that influence this process

(Abubakar, Shanka & Muuka, 2010; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; María Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Simões & Soares, 2010), but there has been little research into the decisions and experiences of international students who access the UK university sector via Foundation programmes delivered by private pathway providers. In the UK, the private pathway sector is dominated by five providers - Cambridge Education Group, INTO, Kaplan, Navitas and Study Group (ICEF, 2016a), who combined account for almost 50% of the global pathway sector.

My research is designed to provide insights into how international students, enrolled on privately provided UK university-based Foundation programmes, made their decisions and the influences that came to bear on their choice of study destination. Further, once enrolled on their programme, whether the expectations set during that process, with the multiple influences that impressed upon them - not least those of the recruiting entity - matched their early experiences.

Research Questions

My research focus thus centres on two key areas within this complex international, socio-economic and sectoral context. Firstly, why students would choose to enrol at an overseas HEI - specifically one based in the UK; secondly and perhaps most critically, having made the decision to attend a university Foundation programme outside of their home country, did initial experiences match their expectations? The guiding research questions are therefore: *What influences the student choice to enrol at a UK HEI and its Foundation programme?* and *What tensions exist between the reality of Study Centre experience and an HEI's projected image through its recruitment and marketing activities?* Appreciating what

influences student decision-making and whether the higher education provider (HEP[2]) is able

to meet built-up expectations due to potentially misaligned recruitment, will assist in better

developing international student recruitment practices, while ideally matching those

expectations to a student's early campus experience.

Rationale and Significance of the Research

International student recruitment has created challenges and opportunities for HEIs,

providers, governments and countries alike. With the socio-political context demanding new

ways for HEI to generate income, international students represent an increasing proportion of

overall student numbers both globally and in the UK, with numbers growing steadily since

the 1960's by between nine and six percent annually (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; OECD,

2017). Consequently, these students represent a valuable and lucrative 'customer' segment for

HEPs. As UK universities increasingly partner with private providers to develop pathway

programmes and capture a greater proportion of the international student market, questions

emerge as to how the private providers' methods of recruitment and delivery are monitored

and managed.

As a practitioner working for a private pathway provider, I am acutely aware of and

have experienced the pressures to recruit increasing numbers of international students for

university partners. The issue this presents is whether or not the recruitment activities

undertaken, align to the environment into which students arrive. Having been involved in

contract negotiations and the operational management of Centres, I have experienced how

universities place contractual demands on providers, while providers themselves seek

assurances from universities in the part they play in the partnership (whether through the

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[2] Throughout this thesis the acronym HEP is used to describe a provider of higher education, whether university or pathway provider. This terminology aligns to the UK's Office for Students (OfS) (OfS, n.d.b) registration terminology and conditions.

provision of teaching facilities, student accommodation or student access to support and learning resources). No research in the UK private pathway sector has been undertaken to examine this issue. While private education providers are regulated to deliver excellent student experience and outcomes (QAA, n.d.), one cannot escape the fact they are commercial entities, with stakeholders who expect growth and profitability. Operating within these dichotomous pressures, one can appreciate the risk to recruitment practices potentially being misaligned to actual student experiences.

Approach to the Study

With competition rife for the profitable international student, HEPs must vigilantly concentrate on their marketing and recruitment activities; ensuring alignment to the on-campus support and experience. This becomes a dual dynamic in the context of the pathway sector, where the provider must ensure the same level of marketing activity vigilance, while concomitantly working under the oversight of their partner university.

To examine this topic, I have chosen to research a private pathway provider (Provider A) for whom I work. The provider runs Study Centres and Foundation programmes for universities across the world. I have chosen to focus on the UK sector and a selection of universities with whom the provider partners. Through a series of focus groups held with international students enrolled on Foundation programmes at six different Study Centres delivered by Provider A for UK universities, I explored how those students made decisions of where to study and the expectations set during that recruitment process. Combined with a number of one-to-one follow-up interviews, I examined how those expectations aligned to the Study Centre where the students were enrolled.

The growth in international student numbers has meant inevitable competition amongst countries and between HEPs. Recognising that these macro trends impact higher education, questions remain as to why students choose to study outside of their home country.

Considering this as a "push-pull" dynamic (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 82), my conceptual framework centres on the 'pull' factors that draw students to enrol at an overseas HEI and the ensuing experience of their studies. Once a student has decided to study outside of their home country (considered part of the initial 'push' phase where circumstances such as home-country economic conditions, access to and quality of education play a role) they move into two 'pull' stages – first, in the choice of host country; and secondly the selection of an HEI. Here the student considers the country based on their current awareness, recommendations from friends or family (and any local connections), and perceptions of the educational system. The choice of HEI is then influenced by a series of considerations, such as quality, course availability, innovation and use of technology, available resources, and sales and marketing activities (Mazzarol, 1998).

In a 'push' dynamic, flows of students from their home countries can be influenced by several factors, whether in contracted sector capacity, funding challenges, low quality of provision or historic country connections (Becker & Kolster, 2012). Conversely, pull factors centre on quality, funding, safety, living and study conditions, and international positioning (Becker & Kolster, 2012). While these pull factors have relevance, how they are applied and manifest themselves in the eyes of the student-customer requires attention.

Researcher's Positionality

This competitive backdrop of attracting increasing numbers of international students is highly applicable given my professional position. Responsible for overseeing multiple UK and European universities' International Study Centres, the area I manage operates 'embedded colleges' (QAA, n.d.) for universities. We annually recruit and teach thousands of international students in preparation for entry either to Degree studies at their selected university. As a private provider operating within a public university environment but with

distinct contractual obligations to the university partner, there is tangible pressure to deliver both growth in student numbers and acceptable student progression into the university.

A challenging dynamic thus exists in both recruiting, retaining and progressing students, ensuring the 'right' kind of student is attracted whilst concomitantly delivering the agreed 'volume' and growth in both new students and those who successfully progress onto the requisite university undergraduate or post-graduate programme. Studies to date have examined the flows of international students directly entering UK universities, the decision-making processes, recruitment practices, along with student adaptation and academic acculturation (De Vita & Case, 2003; Ramachandran, 2011; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). Few studies, however, have to examined this in the context of UK university embedded college private-public partnerships.

Roadmap of the Thesis

In my thesis, I first review the literature in the field of international education, focusing specifically on student recruitment and experience. I frame the neoliberal backdrop, then examine how HEIs position themselves in a competitive and dynamic environment and how students' expectations are consequently set during recruitment processes. My literature review highlights research into the influencers on student decision-making, whether from family, recruitment agents or the marketing information provided. Finally, I look at student experiences, exploring themes pertaining to campus life and the teaching and learning environment.

Next, I provide a detailed explanation of my research design and methodology. I justify my use of focus groups and online, one-to-one interviews and how the data from these sources contribute to my findings. My research methods chapter also frames my professional position and my role as the researcher. Detailed information on both my sample strategy and actual samples is then provided. Here I explain my selection of university-based Study

Centres and the participant engagement and profile. Finally, I provide an explanation of my data analysis process, outlining my approach to coding with some of the key emergent categories.

My findings are divided into two chapters. The first findings chapter examines my data in the context of a pre-arrival phase. The findings in this phase are structured around the student decision-making process and the key influences. I then draw out student views on their study destination and the factors affecting their opinions and choices. My second findings chapter moves into a post-arrival phase. Themes are drawn out relating to students' initial impressions of their study environment, specifically their experiences of arriving into a new country and study environment. Finally, students' views on the teaching and learning environment are examined.

In my penultimate chapter, I discuss the major findings from my data. My discussion examines what I consider the key themes that emerged from my data. In particular, I discuss the role of families in student decision-making, the necessity for personalised, digital information, how HEPs must be increasingly 'customer' focussed, the effect of an international students' first impressions, and the importance of academic staff to international students. Finally, I provide concluding thoughts, bringing together all aspects of my research with some recommendations to be applied to mine and others' professional practice (both for pathway providers and in the university sector), as well as considerations for future research.

2. Literature Review

Considering the continuum of my research question, that is a student's expectations set by recruitment and marketing practices (with the implicit notion of institutional positioning and image projection) relative to a student's actual experience of campus life, I have sought to examine literature that considers these dynamics. In that regard, studies examining the impetus behind higher education marketisation that drives universities to adapt marketing and recruitment strategies to influence students' study abroad decisions in an increasingly competitive environment, along with research that explores institutional image and its relationship to student perceptions, expectations and consequential student satisfaction, are central to my literature review.

The most influential studies in the field of student decision-making are by Mazzarol, Kemp and Savery (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). These works build on previous research that examined the flow of international students - either from their home country or towards a foreign destination - encapsulated in terms of a 'push-pull' model (Altbach 1991; Cummings 1984; Davis 1995). A widely referenced term, the 'push-pull' dynamic in the context of international student motivations and decisions to study outside of their home country, considers those factors that propel students to leave their home environment and those that entice students to study destinations abroad.

'Push' factors can occur on a number of different levels. Essentially, they occur when internal country issues mean a student wishing to enter higher education feels compelled to look outside of their home country. This could be driven by a prevailing local political environment not supporting the autonomy of higher education; economic conditions that mean higher education is either poorly invested in by government or conversely the relative economic wealth of a population is high (making the prospect of study abroad feasible); and a country's position and engagement in the world economy.

Although 'push' factors have their part to play in international student flows and mobility, my research largely focuses on the 'pull' dynamics. 'Pull' factors primarily occur in the receiving country. These centre on the conditions that make a country or HEI appealing to students but can also sometimes be found in the sending country and in the student motivations themselves. Drawing on insights from international students studying in Australia, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identified six key factors influencing international student choice, namely knowledge and awareness, personal recommendations, cost issues, the environment, geographic proximity and social links (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These factors are recognised and referenced across literature in this field as being key to understanding how international students make decisions and the influences that come to bear on them through that process. In many regards, it is through this process that student expectations of their study destination are set and against which their campus experiences are then effectively measured.

Although a central reference point and construct in much of the literature pertaining to student mobility and decision-making, there are limitations. As external factors impressing upon the student decision-maker, the 'push-pull' model perhaps misses the nuance of the individuals' positionality. That is to say, it may not follow that all students respond to such factors in the same way or even at all. Consequently, researchers have sought to finesse the framework by considering student's personal characteristics (their social and economic context, academic proficiency), personal influencers, through country, city and institutional image, personal reasons and programme assessment or the negative 'push-pull' forces in the host country (Chen, 2007; Cubillo et al., 2006; Li & Bray, 2007). As a theoretical framework, however, the 'push-pull' model remains pertinent to gain insights into students' motivations and decision-making that form the basis of their expectations.

The Emergence of HEI Marketisation

To understand why we find HEIs in a position of increased commercialisation, consumerism and marketisation, it is helpful to frame the current context in the shifts that have occurred over recent decades, particularly in the UK university sector given the context of my research. In post-war Britain through to the 1960's, the burden of public expenditure on higher education became increasingly problematic. Into the 1970's and 1980's as a widening participation agenda became more prevalent, funding pressures mounted within higher education (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2016). Per-student funding consequently declined and HEI's sought to recruit increasing numbers of international students (for whom they were required to charge additional fees), as a means to shore up weakening finances.

As a dimension of globalisation, concurrently neoliberalism was growing in strength, supported by the large western economies (particularly the Thatcher and Reagan administrations) and underpinned by WTO policies driving trade liberalisation, as well as under the aegis of the IMF, World Bank and OECD (Radice, 2003; Robertson, Bonal & Dale, 2002). A political discourse for western economies, neoliberalism saw the state creating an environment to achieve "the end goals of freedom, choice, consumer sovereignty, competition and individual initiative, as well as those of compliance and obedience" where the individual could be "an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 315). For the public sector, this meant the imposition of private sector modes of management, centring on performance and targets achievement. The attraction of developing a vibrant 'knowledge economy' took root and higher education became central to delivering this economic outcome.

While the development and evolution of the global economy could be deemed positive in terms of growth and cross-border economic integration (Wade, 2004), events such as the 2008 international financial crisis put tremendous pressure on government finances, to

which the university sector was not immune. Although there can be deemed net benefits to

globalisation (Intriligator, 2003), it is widely agreed that the socio-economic benefits

remained skewed towards wealthier nations. The global economy expanded nonetheless, with

higher education dutifully following suit. Under a neoliberal economic discourse, higher

education could no-longer be seen solely as a force for 'public good' (Yang, 2003), instead

being expected to conform to modes of marketisation, becoming increasingly 'customer-

focussed'.

Social tensions come to the fore when access to knowledge and its perceived benefits

give rise to widening participation agenda. A contradiction exists however between the notion

of public good in terms of university provision and expanded access (Calhoun, 2006), relative

to average declines in the UK, for example, in public funding for universities against an

increase in private provision (OECD, 2011). Increased marketisation of higher education

often influenced by these socio-economic, cultural and demographic shifts (Lebeau, Stumpf,

Brown, Lucchesi & Kwiek, 2012) to which governments respond with appropriate short and

long-term policy measures, arguably led to not only expansive choice for the student-

customer, but equally one that potentially crossed borders, resulting in greater student

mobility and growth in international students. There exists, however, a troubling dichotomy

in terms of access. Statistically, international student mobility and access to higher education

is on a growth trajectory, yet the wealthier westernised countries are largely recipients of

those international students, who on the whole are likely to have the financial and educational

means (OECD, 2018).

Increasingly dependent on student fees as a proportion of their income, UK HEIs

arguably had more control over their development, turning to consumerist marketing

techniques to position themselves and attract increasing numbers of students, particularly

those higher fee generating international students as domestic student fees were capped

(Palfreyman & Tapper, 2016). The notion of the student-customer is of course problematic. The literature recognises how HEIs had to adapt to the neoliberal environment, whilst attempting to protect academic autonomy. Notions of prospective students being cognisant of what they want from a higher education, counterpoint to academic freedom, an ideology of knowing what is best for students and an emphasis on knowledge development rather than the receipt of a service and tangible outcome (in the form of a degree and post-study employment) (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

Universities therefore had to sharpen their marketing skills, whilst diversifying income streams, distinctly focussing on international students. Brown and Mazzarol (2009) examined the resultant higher education marketisation where government reforms had widened the number of universities but overall reduced public university funding, meaning universities had to seek additional avenues of income generation. An inevitable marketisation and emergent student-customer dynamic was affected by the higher education sector being the country's fastest growing export industry (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). The government policy changes to increase access and participation in the higher education sector resulted in more fierce competition between HEIs. A shrinking government funding pot meant universities found themselves not only with increased numbers of competitors, but equally battling for a finite number of domestic students. Performance-based funding models, reduced government oversight and widening participation trends are key factors impacting institutional profile positioning and subsequent university recruitment and marketing strategies (Frølich and Stensaker, 2010). In this competitive context there exists a risk of misaligning marketing messages and recruitment practices to gain an acceptable share of the international student market.

Of course, aside from the political and ideological challenges posed by enhanced marketisation (Foskett, 2010), there comes an implicit assumption of customer-centricity.

Neoliberal practices of measurement and accountability have led to increased regulatory oversight such as student satisfaction measures and teaching quality. An uncomfortable dichotomy thus permeates todays higher education provision, between student choice and consumption versus academia in the form of teaching and research. UK universities have been increasingly exposed to market and sectoral dynamics where their mix of fee income has changed over time, making for heightened competition in attracting growing proportions of fee-paying students (Frølich, Brandt, Hovdhaugen & Aamodt, 2009; Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001; Strehl, Reisinger & Kalatschan, 2007). In the UK, university tuition fees for domestic students are currently capped at £9,250 (GOV.UK, n.d.). International students attending UK universities, on average are charged between 30% to over 100% higher fees than their domestic counterparts (Complete University Guide, 2018a), making international students proportionally higher contributors to tuition income for universities. Consequently, universities have been required to make strides to improve their student recruitment practices (Becker & Kolster, 2012), not least to those directed towards international students. Where HEIs find constraints either in a combination of expertise or the resource to both attract and teach international students, private sector expertise has been sought, in my research context in the form of private pathway provider partnerships.

‘Customer’ Expectations and International Student Recruitment

Accepting the global ‘knowledge economy’ drive and neoliberalism in the higher education public sector has meant a shift to managerialism, measurement and performativity (Radice, 2013), where the HEI service is commoditised and the consumer central, it is important to consider the role of marketisation and marketing practice in how students are enticed to HEI and their expectations set. In this regard, one turns to the notion of the ‘customer’ and the relationship between expectations, experiences and resultant satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is a central tenet in much marketing theory and practice (Churchill Jr. & Surprenant, 1982) and is seen as a corollary to brand affinity, purchase, repeat purchase and brand loyalty. In much of the theory, satisfaction is deemed to derive from the disconfirmation experience, that is to say where an individual's expectations are either confirmed, negatively disconfirmed or positively disconfirmed (Churchill Jr. & Surprenant, 1982). In the disconfirmation paradigm, expectations relate to the anticipation of a product or service's performance, where four expectation types are established, namely the ideal, expected, minimum tolerable, and desirable (Miller, 1977). Expectations develop over time and are formed from an organisations' communications (such as through advertising), their brand image (built over-time), word of mouth, reviews and reports in the media and a customer's prior experience (Fripp, n.d.). Seeking to understand any potential mismatch between international student expectations and consequential experience (and the relationship to satisfaction), the disconfirmation paradigm is a useful construct through which to consider student responses. For HEPs to ensure satisfied customers, we must understand the effectiveness of the expectation setting and whether or not those expectations were disconfirmed when the 'service' is eventually experienced.

While the notion of service can be deemed intangible, in a higher education context the service centres on areas such as academic delivery (learning environment), administration, campus infrastructure and facilities, and support structures (welfare and employability) (Illias, Hassan, Rahman & Yasoa, 2008; Tahar, 2008). Hanaysha, Abdullah and Warokka's (2011) research supports Siming, Niamatullah, Gao, Xu and Shaf's (2015) findings. Using Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's (1988) SERVQUAL framework to measure student satisfaction, it concluded that should HEIs exceed student expectations in the realm of service delivery, they would become more competitive and resilient. Attending therefore to variables such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy

(Hanaysha et al., 2011, p. 4) will help HEP in their quest to both attract, progress and retain students.

For an HEP, the practice of student recruitment is a core activity in the setting of expectations. In student recruitment research, a number of studies sought to provide greater understanding into university recruitment practices and their effect on students. Increasingly, universities have pursued strategies to build their brand presence and institutional position, aligning it to their core service and quality attributes. Related to this is the notion of the student-customer, where it is argued that HEIs can improve their success in recruitment by focussing on their 'customer' needs, namely the quality of courses, and the facilities and services accessible to students (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos & Bourlakis, 2016). This advice was previously affirmed by Ross, Grace and Shao (2013) who found the importance of a customer-oriented marketing approach to international student recruitment, but equally argued for a systems-based approach, ensuring alignment across the HEI to ensure student satisfaction was met. No doubt, this sense of institutional alignment is key if expectations set during recruitment are to be met when students arrive at their chosen university.

This competitive space for attracting international students means universities must be organisationally agile, delivering adaptive, high quality education programmes, while concomitantly ensuring strong student support (Becker & Kolster, 2012). The consequential dynamic of student recruitment practices, institutional image, student perception and student satisfaction are evident in the literature. Palacio, Meneses and Pérez (2002) examined the cognitive and affective responses of students to a university's image, establishing that while cognitive responses are antecedents to affective responses, and that both influence a student's response to university image, overall image is more prominently influenced by affective responses. In this manner, it is possible to conclude that HEPs in as much as they must

provide adequate information, must also attend to prospective students' emotional engagement with marketing messages.

The notion of institutional image is a complex field of corporate and marketing studies but can be broadly categorised as the facets developed by the entity and the customer's response to those facets (Palacio et al., 2002). In the context of the university sector, these would be considered as the university's orientation towards students, its reputation (largely defined by its perceived and actual prestige, often illustrated through rankings importance), university age, entrance thresholds and tangible attributes such as size of student body and fee structures. Concluding that the university's image impacts student satisfaction (Palacio et al., 2002, p. 500), the premise that management must attend to institutional image, developing policies and ensuring alignment to any enhancements deemed to improve student satisfaction is reinforced. If one assumes international students are largely selecting publicly funded universities, the parallels to perceptions of private provision are notable (Levy, 2006; Rastoder, Nurović, Smajić & Mekić, 2015) and of relevance to my professional context and research of a private provider operating embedded colleges for UK universities.

Few studies into student expectations appear solely to focus on international students and certainly not students having to enter UK university undergraduate study via a privately delivered, embedded pathway programme. The literature, however, has relevance in relation to how HEIs market themselves to students, highlighting the necessity for aligned messaging between recruitment teams and institutional contexts.

Influences on International Student Decision-making

Of the six primary 'pull' factors (Mazzarol et al., 1997), 'recommendations' of where to study consistently factored highly, most frequently second only to 'knowledge and awareness'. The researchers identified that "the recommendations of parents, relatives,

friends and private recruitment agents" (Mazzarol et al.,1997, pp. 40-41) had considerable influence on students' decisions of where to study. There follows an examination of literature exploring these key influencing actors – family and friends, agents and sponsors.

Family and Friends

Perhaps one of the largest scale mixed-methods research studies in the field of international student flows was that of Altbach (1991). Interested in the complexities of the international student market, the research examined many factors in the relationship between the 'push-pull' dynamic and students' decisions to study outside of their home country. Although researching only students from Indonesia and Taiwan studying in Australian universities, the sample of 780 prospective students involved in completing the survey and attending focus groups, allowed for extensive findings to be drawn out. Not least of these was the influence of family members on a student's decision to study abroad. As Altbach (1991) states,

> [i]t is very important to keep in mind that the most important decisions concerning study abroad are made by individuals and families and only indirectly by governments, academic institutions and aid agencies because most foreign students are privately funded (Altbach, 1991, p. 309).

Thus the research highlighted that almost regardless of governmental or institutional policy changes, the influence of those closest to prospective students remained paramount.

Both Altbach (1991) and Mazzarol et al. (1997) further highlighted the effect of the family members' influence had they visited, studied or lived in the prospective host country, concomitantly implying positive disconfirmation despite indirect experience of the 'service'. As Mazzarol et al. (1997) stated, "[t]he more students who study in a host country or have family who visit that country for other reasons the more important this factor is likely to become" (p. 35). Pimpa (2005) concurs that family remained a key influence on students'

decision to study abroad, particularly if they had experience of the country or international education. The limitation with such studies (Altbach, 1991; Mazzarol et al., 1997, Pimpa, 2005) is of course their focus not only on Australian universities as the receiving HEIs, but equally with the narrow scope of south-east Asian sending countries.

Revealing that "direct connections triumphed over technological information and other forms of college driven communication" (Yakaboski, Rizzolo, & Ouyang, 2017, p. 31) is important for HEIs on two levels. Firstly, that despite best efforts of recruitment and marketing teams significant persuasion exists outside of their own field of influence; and secondly they must be cognisant of who to target in their messaging. Highlighting the influence of family members on students' decisions to study abroad no doubt creates challenges for universities and their recruitment and marketing activities. Arguably, this is further compounded if one concurs that "prospective students tend to choose first the country then the institution" (María Cubillo et al., 2006, p. 109).

Despite the preponderance of literature exploring student decision-making being East to West, that is to say focussing on China and south-east Asian sending countries to Western countries (Abubakar et al., 2010; Chen, 2007; Mathew & Beatriz, 2000; Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2005), it is interesting to note that the influence of family and friends still remains for international students studying at Chinese universities. Aside from the general influence of parents, it was further uncovered that "family financial support, information provided by family, and family expectations were important factors influencing the participants' choice of the host city, the host universities, and the academic programmes they registered in" (Lu & Tian, 2018, p. 38). This serves to highlight the complexity of advice a student might receive from family members. In this regard, the influence is actually far greater than simply a strong suggestion of where to study, but is often further underpinned by available financial resources, the potential subjectivity of information supplied (either from direct parental

experience or research), and parental aspirations for what an international education might mean for the family's societal stature.

Beyond the major sending countries of China and south-east Asia, fewer studies cover the impact family members have on where a student may seek to study. It is clear, however, that families do remain a consideration. In Middle Eastern territories, for example, the financial support provided by families to their children, undoubtedly exists as a factor in the decision of where to study (Roy & Luo, February, 2017). Additionally, for students from the Middle East the presence of family in the host country emerges as a highly important part of their choice of where to study. Understandably, this can have a significant bearing on the student decision not least for the general support provided by family members in-country, but in particular in relation to general financial support and in the provision of accommodation (Leggett, 2013; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2017). No doubt, relieving these financial burdens can lift a considerable weight of anxiety from an international student already faced with significant tuition costs.

Those closest to students play a critical role in the decision of where and indeed whether to study outside of a student's home country. As with any such influence, it remains complex. While the local context in terms of a 'push' factor (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) appears to diminish relative to the family push, the role a family plays is multi-layered in its effect on where and whether a student should and can study away from home.

International Recruitment Agents

International student recruitment agencies are multi-service companies contracted by universities to assist with marketing and recruitment. Despite their noted presence in the international student recruitment ecosystem, agents' effect on students appears not to be a widely researched field. Often based on high-streets or in shopping malls, the agencies are quite literally one-stop-shops (Pimpa, 2003) used by international students in their home-

country. The agents give prospective students information about study destinations, offering

advice on potential host countries and HEIs. Many agents provide additional services too,

assisting with visa applications, the completion of university admission processes, sourcing

of accommodation and travel.

    With a high proportion of universities making use of the services of agents, only a few

studies explore in detail the effect agents can have in influencing student decisions and the

setting of expectations. Exploring the effect of agents on international students, Pimpa (2003)

found agents to be highly persuasive, exerting a powerful influence over students and their

decision of where to study. Such findings are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the

agents are in effect an extension of the universities' recruitment and marketing teams. How

they are handled and represent the university is therefore critical in aligning student

expectations. Typically, the agents operate on a commission from universities, paid as a

percentage of between 10% and 15% of first-year tuition fees for a student enrolled to the

selected HEI (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). Thus, university recruitment teams must

manage the relationship and service offered with their contracted agents closely, ensuring an

agents' performance-based remuneration does not result in distorted advice to students.

Secondly, students and their parents need to be attuned to how agents operate. Interestingly,

given the discussion of family influence above, Bodycott's (2009) study implied that it is

often the parent that engages most closely with an agent. The research found that although

agents were a highly rated source of information, there was an element of wariness in

excessive use, where additional service costs could be burdensome on families.

    Notwithstanding these issues of how universities effectively navigate the use of

agents and their engagement with parents and prospective students, no doubt in China, Asia

and the Asian sub-continent, international recruitment agencies are an inescapable factor in

the process of student recruitment (Findlay, McCollum & Packwood, 2017) and thus an

influence on student decision-making. As a key mediator between the university and a prospective student, the agents as drivers of student mobility, influencers in choice of study destination and conduits of institutional image, their multiplicity of effect on UK universities cannot be underestimated.

Sponsors

Although the effect of family can be seen on students from Middle Eastern countries, in this region in particular an additional influencing force in the form of sponsors plays a significant role. Many national governments 'sponsor' students in the forms of grants and scholarships as a means to aid transition to studying abroad (Altbach, 1991), recognising the effect an international education can have on a student and the contingent benefit to national commerce when the students return. However, these programmes tend to be ones to which a student must apply and while success in receiving a government grant to fund study will have a major impact and benefit, in and of itself it may not be the primary influencing factor. Conversely, a high proportion of Middle Eastern students studying abroad have been overtly advised and supported by sponsoring entities (Roy & Luo, 2017), whether in the form of governmental programmes or those enabled by companies (especially oil and gas industries).

It is noted that influences on sponsored students compared to those who fund themselves differ (Lawley, 1993; Pimpa, 2005). Universities, too, appear to recognise the influence sponsors can have on students, directing marketing activities to sponsoring entities and embassies as a means to raise their profile (Findlay et al., 2017). However, potentially sponsors span both push and pull factors. No doubt they are an influencer in the setting of expectations and decision-making but could be deemed also to be a 'push' factor, acting in their governments' interests. Notwithstanding this, the extent of literature exploring the effect of sponsors on student decision-making remains limited and is a key area for further exploration.

Information Importance and Availability

Availability of information concerning both the destination country and its HEIs figures as one of the most influential factors in student decision-making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). How HEIs make information available to prospective students as part of overall institutional positioning, supported by recruitment and marketing practices, no doubt has an impact on student decision-making and perception of a host country and study destination. Aligned to literature in this field, Moogan (2011) concurs that course content is a critical decision-making factor for students. Despite this, few studies delve deeply into the nature of information, specifically course content presentation. It is recognised that aside from an institutional necessity to be present in a student's pre-search activity, as the student moves into active searching, information must be readily available (Felix, 2006). Within that information, "[p]rogramme factors, field of study and details of course, information appear[ed] to exert the greatest influence on university choice" (Felix, 2006, p. 474). Thus, we see the criticality of information to student decision-making and specifically information pertaining to course and programme of study.

In the many ways a prospective student can access information, such as via websites, university prospectuses and email marketing, the notion of HEIs' quality and reputation consistently figures. The relative quality of a university's qualifications factor highly in how students choose where to study (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In much of the student decision-making literature, qualification themes recur (Cleopatra, John & Robert, 2004; María Cubillo et al., 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Souto-Otero & Enders, 2017). Students consider qualifications from a number of perspectives - whether it is recognised in the students' home country; if the qualification has currency with prospective employers - important in both academic and non-academic fields of employment; and the relative quality or reputation of the qualification as measured by ranking (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). On this last point, it is

important to acknowledge that university rankings' influence as a whole is a complex area

and becomes even more nuanced at subject level. Indeed, subject ranking weighting can

differ in importance based on student socio-demographic differences, as well as by subject.

For example, students seeking to study business qualifications often place more weight on the

ranking of a course, compared to students who might be interested in studying anthropology

(Souto-Otero & Enders, 2017, p. 785).

For an HEI to deliver great qualifications, aside from course materials one also has to

turn to the quality and recognition of academic staff, integral to the delivery on any course.

Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda (2017) found that 'teachers' and 'professors' factored

highly in the notion of what makes a good university. They also found that for international

students to consider a university of quality, the HEI needed to provide "sound teaching…

good professors teaching with adequate methods [and] fair student assessments" (Perez-

Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2017, p. 14). Few studies point to teachers or academics

featuring in student decision-making when it comes to considering qualification quality.

Arguably, it could be a blind spot in university marketing. As will be discussed later,

university teaching staff figure highly in students' actual experiences of campus-life and the

pastoral and academic support received. Perhaps this is because students do not consider

teacher reputation a significant factor in measuring university quality (Pimpa, 2005, p. 141).

While perhaps an outlier in the literature, it does appear that teachers are more of an

influencing factor in the decision of where to study (Felix, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007;

Moogan, 2011; Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010; Wilkins, Balakrishnan & Huisman,

2012), rather than solely being influential as a proxy for quality in the eye of international

students.

Active Research Prior to Arrival

If one accepts that 'knowledge and awareness' (Mazzarol et al., 1997) of where to study is a leading factor in how students select their host country and HEI, it is important to recognise that such 'knowledge and awareness' pertains to "the overall availability of information… and the ease with which students could obtain the information" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 83). As highlighted earlier, that information in many cases can come ostensibly from family, additionally from recruitment agents and to an extent sponsors.

HEI need to support student decision-making with information in the form of "course descriptions…, post qualifying employment rates, opportunities for progression, availability of accommodation, labour market information… and the international composition of student body" (Maringe and Carter, 2007, p. 471). These findings are helpful to HEIs not just in terms of the types of information that need to be made available to international students, but equally ensuring it is the correct type of information in terms of its usefulness and relevance.. What is less clear, however, are the channels through which that information would be most effectively supplied.

Determining the relative value of information sources, Simões and Soares (2010) noted that students relied "primarily on information sources developed by the university (e.g. brochures, leaflets, university websites)" (Simões & Soares, 2010, p. 376). Further, they highlighted that not only was the internet a key source of information gathering prior to study, but specifically the university website factored as the highest ranked source. This finding was affirmed by Cleopatra et al. (2004). Use of the Internet made in advance of choosing where to study and the university website along with university prospectuses and open days, similarly factored highly in students' information gathering.

Though many such studies examine only the behaviours of students seeking to study in their home country, parallels do exist in international student behaviours (Eder et al., 2010).

Interestingly, although one might assume that the internet figures highly in researching information about study destinations for international students given the geographic distance, university exhibitions and fairs actually trend higher, especially for mainland Chinese students (Bodycott, 2009). Thus, one can appreciate that while family, agents and digital sources of information are paramount to informing student decisions, events where interaction with other advisors occurs, equally play a role in the network of information sources accessed by international students.

Forming Assumptions

With all of the recommendations and information available to them, it comes as no surprise that international students develop fairly strong views of the selected host country, HEI and course in advance of arrival; views and conceptions that form the foundation of their expectations. Perceptions of an HEI, its position in the market and what was deemed to be important, often centre on how the HEIs' qualifications are recognised globally; the ease of admissions and immigration processes; post-study employment opportunities; and costs - relating to accommodation and living expenses (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

Of course, the relative quality of an HEI and its global standing can be measured by domestic and global rankings (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). Most HEIs have come to accept ranking systems, and while detractors exist in relation to some of the methodological rigour and subjectivity deemed present in the multitude of available rankings (Hazelkorn, 2008), students themselves inevitably turn to them in their decision-making (Ball, Davies, David & Reay, 2002). While not entirely a measure of quality per se, the various available rankings hold much sway in international student decision-making (Laird, 2017). Yet it is only upon arrival and in experiencing the university facility and teaching environment, that a student can form an opinion of whether or not it is deemed of acceptable quality. Similarly, until a student actually experiences admissions and immigration processes, they will only

ever have a conception concerning the ease of entry perhaps, given some of the recommending influencers noted, from actual family or friends' experiences.

An HEI's reputation is often closely associated with "perceived quality" (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos & Bourlakis, 2016, p. 3054) but how that perception is derived and how one measures quality raises a number of questions and challenges. Although Mazzarol et al. (1997) note the close association of reputation to competitive position, one has to be cautious in associating the reputation of a university relative to its ranking (Souto-Otero & Enders, 2017), often used as a proxy for competitiveness. Despite this, rankings have considerable sway in student perceptions of a university, resulting in universities themselves making sizeable efforts to manage and improve their institutional and subject rankings (Frølich et al., 2009; Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015; Souto-Otero & Enders, 2017; Teichler, 2017).

University marketing teams can take strides to ensure messages directed at prospective students create a perception of value in the students' mind (Kerin & Peterson, 2001; Shanka et al., 2005). Marrying the factors that students deem important and imbuing marketing materials with targeted messaging, no doubt have an effect on enticing students. An important consideration in my research, the challenge occurs when those messages set perceptions with the students that the HEI is not able to match.

Factors in Choosing a Destination

Where an international student finally chooses to study is affected by a complex relationship with recommenders and available information. Mazzarol et al. (1997) found that the reputation of the host country and HEI factored highly in the student decision-making process. A host country's reputation and thus its ability to 'pull' international students inwards, was considered to be impacted by the country's relative economic size (compared to the students' home country); any existing economic connections; whether or not political and

cultural linkages were in effect; and if the receiving country provided scholarships or financial aid to the sending country.

All of these factors (Mazzarol et al., 1997) play their part in creating a positive or negative image of a host country and its relative attractiveness. Noting the complex relationship between destination image and reputation, how the host city is perceived along with the HEI image, María Cubillo et al. (2006) further concurred that the choice of country is the primary consideration for prospective students. For those prospective students, however, thoughts also turn to the city itself, the environment (such as social life and security) and available facilities (transport, food etc.). Further evidence of this was uncovered in Cleopatra et al.'s (2004) UK study, where the information available in relation to local infrastructure and social life ranked highly for prospective students. Thus, we see that while the quality of an HEI and its image are key factors in international student decision-making, other issues students must consider have considerable weighting in their final decision.

The criticality in choice of study destination cannot exist in isolation from other considerations. Bodycott (2009) aligns to other research in the field concerning the study environment (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), finding that particular emphasis existed in relation to "employment and immigration prospects, and proximity to home" (Bodycott, 2009, p. 361). The nearness of a host destination to the students' home country in this latter aspect is an additional factor for consideration. However, a number of studies highlighting the question of proximity (notably Mazzarol et al., 1997), tend to focus on Chinese or South-East Asian students who were studying in Australia. While the evidence in relation to host destination proximity to home country appears clear, the findings are also somewhat counter to international student mobility dynamics. In a 14-year period from 1999, the UK and US as receiving countries saw international student numbers grow by 80% and 74% respectively (Choudaha, 2017). Of the sending countries, China accounted for a significant proportion of

the growth, with international student numbers growing 480%. These statistics would tend to suggest that while proximity appears to be a factor for certain segments of the international student population, these are outweighed by the relative attractiveness of the receiving country, its respective cities and HEIs.

Third highest in the factors affecting student decisions of where to study is costs (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Students' concerns centred on "cost of fees, living expenses, travel costs and social costs, such as crime, safety and racial discrimination" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002 p. 83). It comes as no surprise that the amount of money invested in an international education is a significant factor in whether and where a student decides to study away from home and is reflected thus in a considerable proportion of literature relating to student decision making (Bodycott, 2009; María Cubillo et al., 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Pimpa, 2005; Shanka et al., 2005; Wilkins et al., 2012). Tuition fees and living expenses make up the bulk of cost considerations for international students, thus benchmarking potential destination countries against each other plays in to the decision-making process. While student mobility data may somewhat counter concerns of geographic proximity between sending and host country, costs issues remain. Similarly, cost of living and tuition was the third highest influencing factor for students after geographic proximity of the destination and an HEI's quality and reputation in Shanka et al.'s (2005) research. Interestingly, while the study found variances between the relative importance of proximity to home country, educational quality and safety between the respective source countries, living and tuition costs were most closely correlated between the multiplicity of South-East Asian nationalities. Implied here, is that cost concerns are arguably a relatively uniformly weighted factor in international student decision-making.

Despite Shanka et al.'s (2005) findings, it is noted that international students still find the cost of living in the UK to be high (Ramachandran, 2011). For example, students may not

have fully appreciated the different UK seasons compared to their home country and therefore the clothing required. Students may find adaptation to local cuisine difficult and thus shopping and cooking for themselves (especially if sourcing specific foods unique to their home country) becomes expensive. Finally, other costs may not have been fully considered in a students' pre-study research, such as whether the travel from their accommodation to the university campus requires the use of public transport, and if access to the internet or to health services are considered. Costs pertaining to tuition, accommodation and living expenses are normally available on university websites and in prospectuses - noted for their importance as information sources (Cleopatra et al., 2004). In that regard, students in advance of arrival should at least have an appreciation of the study costs. Yet it is clear that not all costs are either available or can be entirely considered in advance of study and thus weigh heavily as a concern for international students.

The literature highlights considerable alignment in the field of international student decision-making with the six 'pull' factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) identifying how students choose where to study resonating broadly. In concluding their study, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) simply state that "[i]nstiutions need to ensure their marketing and promotion is undertaken in a sophisticated manner and that quality claims can be substantiated" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 90). Naturally, there are some areas of minor divergence when considering specific destination countries and equally from students' home countries. Yet it is clear that for receiving countries, their cities and HEIs to position themselves effectively, transparently and honestly in-front of prospective international students, there are key considerations to address in successfully attracting and recruiting students and in living up to the expectations set during those processes.

Experiences of Campus Life

With expectations set from an array of close sources, digital information and events, it is perhaps no surprise that how student's arrive into their chosen destination is a key factor to maintain confidence in their decision. Considered against a student lifecycle model (Morgan, 2013), the arrival, induction and orientation are key stages in managing and meeting student expectations and as a means to assuring their acculturation and academic success.

Arrival and Induction

Costs and administrative support have been identified as significant factors, along with the course and country characteristics (Lawley & Perry, 1997). Yet, even in advance of arrival, international students have to make preparations. Aside from logistical decisions such as securing accommodation and organising travel, students also work through various administrative processes. Unlike domestic students, perhaps one of the more complex and potentially stressful of these processes is applying for their study visa. Access appears a common trend and referencing Muche and Wächeter (2005), Eder et al. (2010) acknowledge that visa procedures and immigration policies can negatively impact positive motivational factors such as a university's reputation, quality of provision and standing (Eder et al., 2010, p. 235). In this regard, teams overseeing universities' admissions processes must be mindful of delivering a positive student experience during these sometimes-difficult pre-arrival transitionary processes.

Identified in the literature is support required by students upon arrival (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014), that if poorly executed or experienced can make for a traumatic experience for new students. Basic recommendations are made to support students, such as meeting them at the airport with international staff from the HEI. Many arriving international students may be travelling long distances for the first time. Aside from the practicalities of navigating a new transportation system in a second language, the

anxiety of how to behave is also recognised (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Attending to both a students' psychological and socio-cultural needs must happen in tandem (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Arriving into a new country where language and practices are unfamiliar is both daunting and nerve-wracking for such young adults. Often the "stressful start" for students is "exacerbated by an evident lack of preparedness and by coming in with an inappropriate expectation" (Gill, 2007, pp. 171-172). To counter these challenges, a process of 'intercultural learning' is advocated, where students undertake reflective learning based on their experiences, adapting in an iterative cycle to attune themselves to a new paradigm.

For many students, this process starts during their formal induction to the HEI. Appreciating the nervousness of students early in their arrival, that anxiety is likely to continue to be evident in the induction process itself (Brown & Holloway, 2008), most notably as they begin to converse in English. Consequently, a balance has to be found in how HEIs induct and acculturate newly arrived international students. Many induction programmes are developed and designed specifically to address some of the aforementioned issues, while some HEIs choose to fully integrate both home and international students (Stokes, 2017), countering the notion of difference and separateness, instead seeking benefits of bringing students together as one group. However, HEIs need to address the design of their induction programmes to meet the varied and complex needs of students (Gbadomosi, 2018). Universities are advised to hold acculturation workshops, surfacing issues that can be integrated into reinvigorated induction programmes designed specifically to address "students' personal challenges and social integration" (Gbadomosi, 2018, p. 136).

By addressing the early phase of an international students' arrival into a country and university, HEIs can at the very least counter any potential short-comings in the student expectation and awareness upon arrival. At their best, HEIs can assist in students'

acclimatisation and intercultural development (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009), aiding transition into university life and setting up students for success.

Support for Students

Administration teams are central to a university's non-academic operations. The administrative function often has responsibility for all non-teaching aspects of the student's life - registering them for studies, maintaining records, ensuring fees are paid and keeping record of academic achievement (McCaffery, 2010). Consequently, how a student interacts and perceives the administrative processes and indeed the administrative staff, form an important part of international students' pre- and post-arrival experiences.

When considered in the context of student satisfaction and how that satisfaction relates to perceptions of quality, administrative staff are seen as one of the key dimensions (Clemes, Gan & Kao, 2008; Kajenthiran & Karunanithy, 2015) contributing to student satisfaction. Garcia, Menez, Dinglasan and Hornilla (2018) found aspects of student dissatisfaction with "office staff, enrolment processing, accuracy and timeliness in the release of grades, and responsiveness to customer feedbacks, complaints, and concerns" (Garcia et al., 2018, pp. 41-42). Additionally, where the university outsourced services such as the canteen and campus security to third-parties, there was yet more dissatisfaction from students. These findings are consequently of interest and point to the nuance in experiences for international students.

While much of the literature relating to student experience and satisfaction considers academic needs of international students, few explore their administrative needs in detail. As Garcia et al.'s (2018) study uncovers, international student satisfaction in how they are supported requires attention. What it does not do is differentiate between different nationalities of international students. However, as evidenced in Roy, Lu and Loo (2016), there are some nuances in this regard. They found that students from the Middle East and North Africa were consistently dissatisfied with university support services, compared to

other international students (Roy et al., 2016, p. 30). This again points to the multi-faceted

nature of managing international students' administrative support needs.

Aside from the importance given to specific administrative processes (Garcia et al.,

2018), of note are students' views relating to service staff. This indicates that not only do

international students expect a certain level of service delivery from universities, but that

university administrative staff must be effective in their dealings with such students. In this

regard, and as proposed by Brinkworth, McCann, Burke, Hill, King, Luzeckyj... and Palmer

(2013), administrative staff need to be engaged in the development of disseminating their

service proposition as a means to improving service and managing student expectations.

Tamer (2016) also found that non-academic services played a role in contributing to

international students' overall satisfaction with their university experience. Having only

researched international student cohorts, however, the research was not able to assess any

differences in attitude with domestic students. What is therefore not clear from the literature,

is whether differences exist between domestic students' experiences of administration

compared to international students.

Although loosely referenced, Rahilly and Hudson (2018) discussed how international

students needed support when accessing university processes, whether in the use of

healthcare services or library facilities, describing specific examples of international students

struggling to understand how to make and attend doctors' appointments effectively.

Reviewing the relative success of a pathway relationship between a Canadian university and

a private pathway provider, Rahilly and Hudson (2018) discussed the importance of

organisational alignment between the university and its chosen provider. The examination of

a ten-year relationship between the two parties, explored operational areas such as the student

recruitment, curriculum design, the use of student support programmes, progressing students

to the university and integrating them socially, as well as organisational challenges around

leadership and staff engagement. What it did not cover, interestingly, was the international students' engagement in administrative processes, simply noting that university administrative staff need to be adaptive to international student needs. Notwithstanding this, its findings in terms of organisational alignment between the two parties are to be noted.

Adaptiveness is an important area for analysis because, when considered in the context of arrival and induction, international students may have additional and different needs compared to their domestic counterparts. As noted by Garcia et al. (2018), international students appeared dissatisfied with third-party service provision. Perhaps there are some parallels in this manner with pathway providers and their 'service' to universities. It appears, therefore, as a gap in the international student literature and is of relevance to my study when considering student experiences with pathway providers who can be deemed third-party service providers to universities.

Campus Facilities

Upon arrival at their chosen destination, students' impressions of the facilities available to them become a factor in how well they settle. Initial focus turns to accommodation and the campus facilities as a whole. While much of the literature identifies accommodation as a cost factor and consideration in student decision-making, there is little that explores whether or not the information students receive about their accommodation, combined with the relative costs of that service, actually matches their expectations. Although students do tend to use university websites to seek out their accommodation, they actually find some of the information to be misleading, notably the photographs depicting the facility (Badwan, n.d.). Consequently, universities need to ensure comprehensivity and clarity of information pertaining to their accommodation offering. With accommodation a factor in how students make decisions on where to study and thus intertwined with a university's image and

reputation, it is important that students do not immediately experience disappointment as they settle in.

Considering facilities as part of the HEIs' overall service offering to students, what a university provides to students become crucial 'augmenters' (Tamer, 2016) to student satisfaction. Indeed, "campus life augmenters are perceived as the most important factor shaping students' satisfaction with non-academic life" (Tamer, 2016, p. 690), highlighting both the need for pre-information and experiential alignment. Indeed, Tamer (2016) further posits that the facilities a student uses, intertwined as they are with daily life, affect student satisfaction more than any financial or health considerations. Given the links to cost concerns, this is somewhat surprising but equally understandable and provides further evidence that aligning student expectations and experiences are critical for universities if they wish to maintain student satisfaction and protect the university's image.

Aside from accommodation, students spend a large proportion of their time in an HEIs' teaching and learning spaces. 'Physical augmenters' (the campus facilities such as classroom, libraries and recreational facilities), along with those augmenters financial and social, significantly influence student satisfaction (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009). The loyalty a student has towards an HEI and thus their likelihood to act as an advocate with its implicit connection to reputation, are closely linked.

The specific set-up of classrooms from a facilities perspective is not examined in detail in the literature. Factors that affect the quality of the physical environment are considered to be library facilities, educational technology, lecture or classroom facilities and the university layout (Clemes, Gan & Kao, 2008; Tamer, 2016). Aside from notional references to the use of technology in the classroom and general campus layout, there is little in the literature that examines the physical classroom set-up and whether or not such facilities meet student expectations. The teaching and learning environment for students is naturally an integral part

of their learning, thus arguably the design of teaching spaces relative to student expectations

needs further consideration.

Teaching and Learning: Staff and Environment

Other than the reputation for quality and whether or not an HEI recognised students'

qualifications, the next highest factor influencing choice of HEI is its "reputation for quality

and expertise of its staff" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88). Given the 'product' in which

students and their families are investing, that is to say a qualification and by implication the

teaching to support attainment of that qualification, staff are central to students' needs.

Perhaps this should come as no surprise when one considers the commitment students are

making. Four factors were derived from a literature review, the "student-teacher relationship,

experiences provided to the students, on campus student support services and facilities and

teacher preparedness" (Siming, et al., 2015, p. 114). Analysis showed greater weighting in the

category of student-teacher relationship, despite all four factors being closely related to

student satisfaction.

Support provided by teaching staff during the student's early transition into a higher

education, therefore comes into focus. Students need to be supported early in their studies,

especially important for international students when required to navigate new processes and

systems Further, teaching staff should be diverse in terms of nationality, suggesting this as a

means to both appreciate and better engage with diverse international student cohorts

(Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). While this latter claim is not backed up by empirical evidence,

affirmation of at the very least intercultural sensitivity of staff was highlighted by

Schweisfurth and Gu (2009). They found that intercultural transition was a key factor for

international students' early and successful overall transition into higher education.

Consequently, the university environment needed to be nurturing and supportive. Critically,

they concluded that an emphasis needed to be placed "on the institution and on the specific individuals on whom the students rely" (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009, p. 471).

The teaching and learning environment and international students' early adaptation figures as a recurring theme in the literature relating to student experience. It was further identified by Ramachandran (2011) that staff develop culturally relevant programmes to help students identify issues and develop heightened awareness of cultural differences. Endorsing the views of Schweisfurth and Gu (2009), Ramachandran (2011) also proposed that teaching staff profiles needed to be ones capable of responding to the complexities of an international classroom. Within this dynamic teaching environment, staff must be adaptive and flexible to the needs of complex student cohorts. With flexibility to employ "culturally inclusive pedagogy" (De Vita & Case, 2003, p. 392), staff and students can reap the benefits of a dynamic, inclusive, multicultural teaching environment.

Transition from high-school to a higher education context can be found across the international student experience literature. Culture shock aside (Brown & Holloway, 2008), not only must students navigate a new education setting, likely to be demanding in terms of active engagement and independent learning, international students may also be exiting from quite different high-school educational settings than domestic students. Academic adjustment for international students thus potentially has a greater influence than socio-cultural adaptation (Chien, 2013), a period of adjustment being required - on the part of teachers and students alike - in order to find effective ways of working.

For international students studying in a second language in the UK, support and engagement of teaching staff is arguably even more profound than for domestic students studying in their native language. In their synthesis of literature in the field of student disengagement, Chipchase, Davidson, Blackstock, Bye, Colthier, Krupp ... and Williams (2017) discussed the "actions, attitudes and behaviours of teaching staff" (Chipcase et al.,

2017, p. 37) and their effect on student engagement. Referencing Bryson and Hand (2007) the review found that student disengagement could arise if teaching staff either lacked enthusiasm for the subject matter or if they were perceived to be unapproachable (Chipcase et al., 2017, p. 37). While the authors concluded that student disengagement is multi-dimensional and complex, no doubt teaching staff have an important role to play.

Across the literature, international students' views of their early learning experiences appears positive. Whether in reference to library facilities, available resources and technology support, international students express their satisfaction, particularly when compared to learning environments in their home country (Amaechi, Bennett, Kafilatu, Kayit, Lillyman, Okeke & Paticiente, 2013). Proposing a four-stage, cyclical process, Gill (2007) acknowledged that international students bring with them different learning experiences and that UK universities, lured by the financial benefits of growing international student numbers, may not fully respond to student needs. In this sense, the risk of a student expectation and experience mismatch is high, requiring of HEIs to adopt models, such as those proposed by Gill (2007), to support international students' adaptation to new contexts.

It is clear then, that international students expect an engaging and supportive learning environment. Broadly, the literature would seem to support the assertion that international students find their initial learning experiences, facilities and staff support to be positive. The teaching and learning environment cannot, however, be considered separately from the administrative functions and campus facilities. Institutions need to ensure they provide a culturally sensitive learning environment, adapting pedagogy accordingly, while investing in staff that either reflect the diversity of international student cohorts or who are at least qualified, trained and practiced in methods of engaging international students.

Concluding Remarks

My literature review has sought to form a picture of student decision-making, expectations setting and factors important to student satisfaction upon arrival. Operating in a neoliberal, marketized, consumer-centric environment, the evidence creates a picture of where HEIs recruitment and administrative functions should focus efforts to market their organisations' 'service'. Ensuring recruitment activities match the projected institutional image and ensuing student experience so as not to adversely affect or diminish student satisfaction is critical.

In this review of available literature, few studies appear to address the potential risk in mismatch between student recruitment practices and a student's first impressions and experience of campus life (and certainly not in the pathway sector). Using Mazzarol & Soutar's (2002) factors affecting international student choice to form the theoretical basis for my research, I will attempt to partially close this gap in available research, considering the student choice and experience as a continuum and thus seeking to both understand student perspectives and experiences of the recruitment process, relative to the actual lived experience of a cohort of international students at a range of UK universities.

3. Research Design and Methodology

Quantitative research methods through large-scale surveys predominate literature in the fields related to my research question, in particular when concerned with international student recruitment and student decision-making. Largely delivered in questionnaire form, survey samples range from thousands to a few hundred respondents (Carvalho & De Oliviera Mota, 2010; Orîndaru, 2015; Palacio et al., 2002; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010; Siming et al., 2015). Few studies therefore directly engage the student, where value can be gleaned from the immediacy of such insights.

Acknowledging Wong's (2015) view on gathering qualitative data with student groups as it provides "in the students' own words - insight into the "why" of their lived educational experience" (p. 78), one can appreciate the benefits of direct student engagement. To counter-balance the quantitative predominance in the literature, my plan was to employ a qualitative methodology, creating an important point of differentiation and originality for my study compared to existing research in this field.

Adopting a qualitative approach meant I could come "directly into analytic contact with the 'raw data' of everyday practice" (Freebody, 2003, p. 2), permitting me as the researcher to connect directly with students and engage in their lived experiences and stories. As Silverman (1993, 1999) purports, qualitative researchers do not assume regularised standards of practice. Instead it allows them to study and understand educational experiences, seeking patterns in inherently complex contexts to generate new practice paradigms.

My ontological predilections and a tendency towards the naturalist paradigm are influenced by my academic and professional journey. An attraction for me to the University of Liverpool's EdD programme was the emphasis on practitioner-research. While the risk of researcher presence is acknowledged and addressed later in this paper, I strongly believe it is difficult in any form of research for the researcher to be wholly 'absent' of influence on their

research; instead one must embrace the notion that "researchers are part of the world that they

are researching" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 27).

Aim of the Research

My research focus centred on two key areas within a complex international, socio-

economic and professional context related to the recruitment and expectation management of

international students. I firstly wanted to consider why students would choose to enrol at an

overseas HEI - especially one based in the UK and specifically onto an integrated Foundation

programme. Secondly and perhaps most critically, having made the decision to attend a

university and Foundation programme outside of their home country, did early experiences

align with their expectations and if so, in what way?

Consequently, my guiding research questions were: *What influences student choices*

to enrol at a UK academic HEI? and *What tensions exist between the reality of International*

Study Centre experience and an HEP's projected image through its recruitment and

marketing activities? Appreciating what influences student decision-making and whether the

HEP is meeting expectations due to potentially misaligned recruitment practices, will assist in

both better developing international student recruitment practices, while ideally aligning

those expectations to a student's early campus experience. Thus, through my research, the

intention was to gather insights from international students relating to their experience of the

recruitment process prior to enrolling with a UK university's International Study Centre

(operated by Provider A), and their subsequent initial impressions of campus and first-year

study life relative to that recruitment process.

Through a series of focus groups, my research approach was to interact directly with

students at their campuses early in their study journey, seeking their insights after arriving at

their chosen destination and the relative alignment to recruitment experiences. Following on

from these, I then planned to seek further insights from participants during follow-up one-to-

one interviews. In this way, I was able to engage more deeply with a handful of participants later in their time at the Study Centre and build on insights from the focus groups, as well as assessing how their expectations might have evolved, thus adding richness of data to embellish the answering of my research question.

Role of the Researcher

In my current role and in previous professional practice, I have directly observed pressures on private, for-profit commercial educational enterprises to grow student numbers. Therefore, I have approached this research from an inherently subjective position, concerned that in the desire to attract ever-growing numbers of students, the HEP embellishes its 'product' in the eyes of the prospective student-customer creating misalignment and dissatisfaction for the student arriving for their studies. Arguably this is exacerbated in the field of international student recruitment, where access to offer days and campus visits is diminished or non-existent relative to UK domestic students, instead increasing reliance on direct messages from student recruitment teams, in-country agents and printed or digital materials.

It is, however, this very subjectivity that has led me to this research field, desirous as I am to identify practice improvement following direct engagement with students, analysing their stories and experiences, with feedback sought on areas for HEPs to address. Being knowledgeable of Provider A's student recruitment, marketing and operational practices and having engaged with students as part of my general interactions when visiting Centres has afforded me the opportunity to form certain views. Not least the variations across the many Centres operated, where some enrol fewer than 100 students but with the largest accommodating over 1,000. The scale differential naturally affects a Centre dynamic, as does its location relative to university campus buildings and thus available facilities. Consequently, I am able to make subjective assessments of selective marketing assets

developed by the Provider or reflect on my own observations of Centre facilities. My research focus, however, remains the stories of students and while I can reflect on my practitioner subjective insights, to answer my research questions I have chosen to analyse the participants' lived experiences, rather than question the relative validity of their commentary.

Further complexity exists in the relationship with the university in what it means for the approaches to recruitment, marketing messages, availability of teaching space and accommodation (whether the university's buildings are used, Provider A's own operations or other privately provided facilities), access to general facilities and engagement with university academics (critical for both curriculum development and alignment, as well as embedding the Centre's students within the overall university experience). All such factors have a bearing on student experience. For this reason, my approach to sampling acknowledged these variances, seeking as I was a broad spread of Centres, focus group and interview participants.

Finally, my professional interactions to-date with students, Provider A's student recruitment and marketing teams and interactions with in-country agents, has led me to form various perceptions of differences based on a student's country of origin. By way of anecdotal illustration, students from Hong Kong generally have good English language skills; Chinese students are heavily influenced by university rankings; and sponsored students from the Middle-East are highly demanding and service-oriented. These observations and emergent biases shaped my student sampling. My research design has sought ways to establish a spread of student demographic, conscious as I am that certain cultural biases exist and were important to acknowledge during the data analysis.

Thus, my personal role in running the focus groups and individual online interviews needed to be carefully managed through well-formed focus group and interview guides. The ensuing data analysis also needed to be developed in a way to minimise bias. Adopting an

interpretive approach, however, explicitly acknowledges the researcher's influence and involvement (Cohen et al., 2011). The value of a researcher with deep, practical knowledge and experience of the question at hand, should therefore not be underestimated.

Access to the Sites and Participants

Research approval was sought from Provider A's Academic Director (the organisation's head of teaching and learning) and Managing Director for UK and Europe. Ethical procedures through Provider A and those of the University of Liverpool, ensured a process of informed consent (Oliver, 2003), alleviating coercion and subjectivity when inviting participants. As the proposed student participants enrol directly with Provider A, ethical clearance was only required from Provider A's Managing Director and Academic Director. The Centres themselves, while on university campuses, are all run independently by Provider A, meaning access to students and the holding of focus groups would not present issues of access or require ethical clearance via individual university's ethics boards.

With a research design of holding focus groups at a selection of Provider A's Study Centres across the UK, both my participant selection and their ensuing anonymity had to be ensured. Participants invited to attend the focus group at their respective Centre were provided a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B), outlining the research agenda and process, stating clearly how their attendance would be anonymised in any reporting, along with assurances of data privacy and confidentiality, highlighting my plan for securing and password protecting data using cloud storage. Invitations to potential attendees were distributed by the Head of Centre or their teaching staff (dependant on the size of Centre), which required me to pre-brief the staff regarding the research in case they had any concerns themselves or were faced with questions from students.

Approach to Samples

Site Selection

The private provider for whom I work runs International Study Centres on behalf of over 40 universities globally, of which 15 are based at UK universities. At six of Provider A's possible 15 UK-based university Centres is where I intended to hold focus groups. The importance of university ranking as part of a prospective student's choice process is acknowledged (Souto-Otero & Enders, 2017), thus it was relevant to apply such rankings in the selection of a broad range of Centres from where to conduct my focus groups. The Centres were selected by size and ranking based on The Times Ranking of UK Universities 2017 (UKUni, n.d.), with two selected from within the top 30, two in the 31-60 ranking and two ranked below 60. In this manner, I structured the Study Centre sample and was able to identify six appropriate centres.

Focus Groups Sampling Strategy

Noting that in forming a focus group "a degree of randomization may be used, [but that] it is not the primary factor in selection" (Krueger, 2014, p. 80), focus group participants were invited from the selection of Provider A's International Study Centres outlined above. All those targeted were undergraduate students, as opposed to students entering post-graduate studies whose age and existing university experiences could present quite different perspectives. A diversity of gender and country of origin mix was sought, benchmarked to Provider A's national student diversity mix (see Chart 1). However, it must be recognised that with the latter aspect of nationality mix, this is not wholly uniform across Centres - in part driven by student choice and equally by certain diversity parameters set by the university partners. Recognising the need to find balance in a group dynamic (Krueger, 2014), the goal was to have five to eight attendees at each of the focus groups, leading to an overall sample of between 30 to 48 participants.
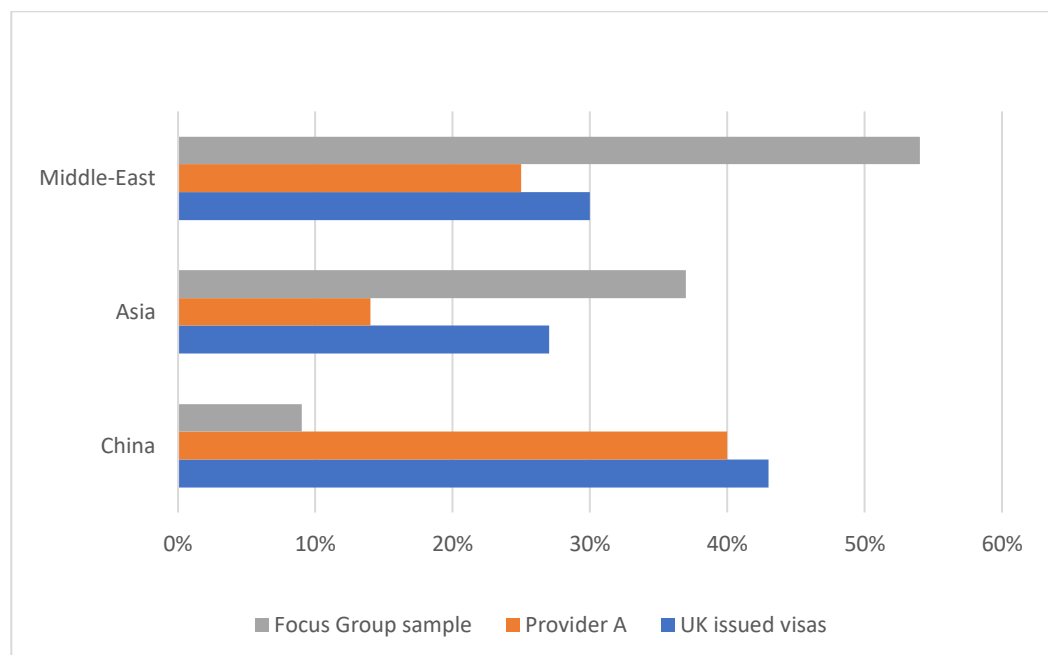
Chart 1: focus group geographic sample compared to Provider A student demographic profile (Provider A, 2018a) and international study visa grants issued by UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI) (UKVI, n.d.).

Focus groups undoubtedly pose practical challenges, not least in the skill of the interviewer ensuring equality of participant voice, but they are certainly recognised for their use when interviewing young people (Cohen et al., 2011). Although my participants were likely to be 18 or over, a small minority start their studies aged 17. In the invitation to attend the focus groups, I therefore had to be mindful that some of the volunteering participants may have been under 18. Thus, the benefit of conducting interviews using this method with young students could initiate the "potential for discussions to develop, thus yielding a wide range of responses" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 432). As discussed later, this approach would also have undoubted practical application in my professional context.

Interviewing further removes students from their everyday life and experiences (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015), so that participants may struggle to articulate and translate lived experiences in the interview context. This was arguably more problematic

during focus group set-ups than in online environments – a more familiar setting for a digital

generation - where the group dynamic and cultural diversity could have compounded the

situational artificiality. A further limitation that cannot be overlooked is that for most

participants, English was their second language. While management of focus groups and

interview processes were designed to acknowledge this challenge, an individual's relative

comfort in speaking English and clearly articulating held views could have been diminished.

Two-thirds of participants were male and as a total sample, participants came from a

large range of countries, as illustrated in Chart 2. Outlined in Table 1, there was broad spread

of focus group participants across all six identified Centres. Only at Centre D were there just

two participants, but overall a sample size of 35 was just at the lower end of my target

number.
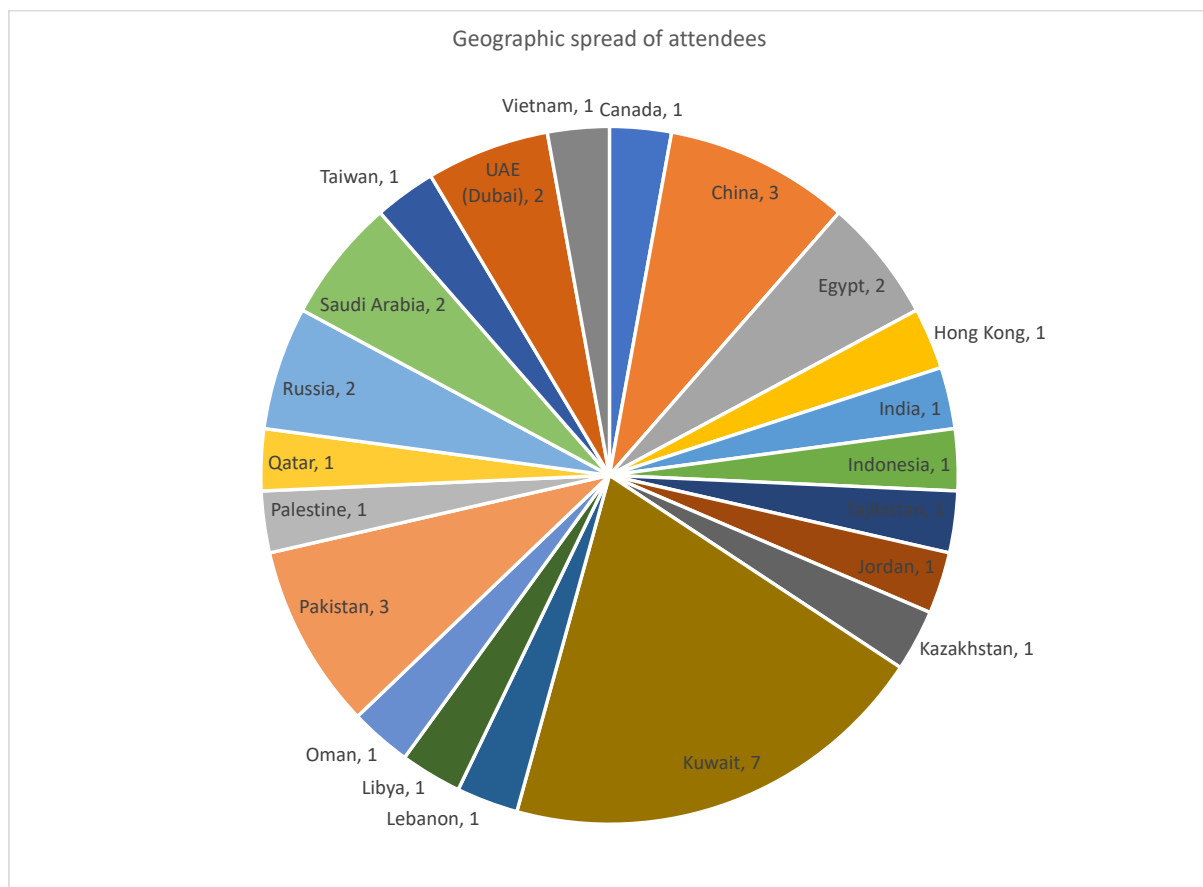
Chart 2: numbers of focus group participants by country of origin

Number	Centre	Identifier	Course	Age	Gender	Home Country
1	A	1	Arts & Social Sciences	18	F	Canada (Dubai)
2	A	2	Economics & Business	18	F	Indonesia
3	A	3	Arts & Social Sciences	18	M	Taiwan
4	A	4	Business & Economics	18	M	Qatar
5	A	5	Economics & Mgt.	18	M	Pakistan
6	A	6	Economics	19	M	Russia
7	A	7	Business & Economics	18	M	Saudi Arabia
8	A	8	Business & Economics	17	F	Kazakhstan
9	B	1	Foundation Business	18	M	Kuwait
10	B	2	Foundation Business	17	F	Vietnam
11	B	3	Foundation Business	22	M	Pakistan
12	B	4	Foundation Business	18	M	Jordan
13	B	5	Foundation Business	27	M	Libya
14	B	6	Foundation Business	18	M	Tajikistan
15	B	7	Foundation Business	18	M	Kuwait
16	C	1	Foundation Business	18	M	Pakistan
17	C	2	Foundation Business	18	M	Palestine
18	C	3	Foundation Business	18	F	Egypt
19	C	4	Foundation Business	20	F	Hong Kong
20	D	1	Business & Management	19	M	China
21	D	2	Mechanical Engineering	18	M	India
22	E	1	Engineering	20	M	Saudi Arabia
23	E	2	Life Sciences	19	F	Kuwait
24	E	3	Engineering	19	M	Oman
25	E	4	Engineering	19	M	Kuwait
26	E	5	Life Sciences	18	F	Kuwait
27	E	6	Life Sciences	19	M	Egypt
28	E	7	Life Sciences	19	M	Kuwait
29	E	8	Engineering	19	F	Kuwait
30	F	1	Science & Engineering	18	M	Russia
31	F	2	Engineering	18	F	UAE (Dubai)
32	F	3	Engineering	18	M	Lebanon
33	F	4	Science & Engineering	17	F	China
34	F	5	Business & Soc. Sci.	21	M	China
35	F	6	Science & Engineering	17	M	UAE (Dubai)

Table 1: focus group participants across all Study Centres.

Online Interviews Sampling Approach

Recognising the challenges of focus groups, particularly with international students conversing in a second language and in a culturally diverse group, which for some would no doubt have been unfamiliar and potentially disconcerting resulting in lower engagement levels, online individual interviews were designed to follow the group sessions. Participants from each Centre focus group were invited for an interview following the group sessions, with the aim to have an additional individual sample of six participants. Participants were invited and contacted based on collected demographic data.

Via the signing of the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B), all focus group participants provided their consent to be contacted for follow-up online interviews. Ten participants were contacted around ten weeks after the focus groups were held, a few weeks into the students' second term which as a rule started in January. While the small sample sizes did not allow for correlations or representation, the participants contacted were selected as a means to seek coverage of all Centres and a spread of country, gender and course coverage. Additionally, I took note of participant responses during the focus groups and in considering the nature of the follow-up interview questions, there was some discretion applied in participant selection to ensure good engagement in the interview process. Six participants responded to say they would be willing to take part in an interview, but only four were then able to schedule a time. Ultimately only three interviews took place as one of the four was not able to attend their session (and then contact was lost, meaning no follow-up could be scheduled). The interview participants consisted of two male and one female participant, from three Centres (see Table 2).

Number	Centre	Identifier	Course	Age	Gender	Home Country	Agree to follow-up interview
1	B	3	Foundation Business	22	M	Pakistan	Y
2	E	8	Engineering	19	F	Kuwait	Y
3	F	1	Science & Engineering	18	M	Russia	Y

Table 2: online interview participant details

While representation of student body per se was not a critical consideration in this research, but rather the richness and depth of insight outweighed these factors as a means to identify participants, establishing a balanced spread of gender, race and age in this following wave of interviews was deemed to add value in the ensuing data analysis. As a consequence, trends emerged to provide additional insights relative to a student's background, gender or field of study, enriching any subsequent findings and practice change recommendations.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was achieved with two primary methods – focus groups in the form of group interviews held at identified Centres and follow-up individual online interviews. Minor reference to secondary data, mainly from Provider A's proprietary student survey findings (Provider A, 2018b) was also made.

Focus Groups

Using open-ended questions, a semi-structured focus group guide was developed to manage the initial sessions, with its form and foundation designed to draw out Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) primary 'pull' factors concerning student choice of HEI. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed and while such an approach could have meant the loss of non-

verbal cues (Cohen et al., 2011), the ensuing value of transcription analysis arguably offset this loss. Further, the synchronicity of the face-to-face process could not be underestimated where the interviewer can respond to social cues (Opdenakker, 2006), an important factor when engaging with young, international, culturally diverse participants and assisting in effectively managing the group dynamic.

Marketing messages to engage, attract, and inform students are naturally designed to entice students to a course of study, but in their effort to do so a student's *actual* experiences of the campus and university may be diametrically opposed. Held in the first four to five weeks of students' first term or semester, in this way the focus groups enabled me to establish primary trends of the student experience of Provider A's recruitment and arrival process and the participants' initial impressions of campus life. This allowed me the possibility of ascertaining any emerging incongruities that could be evident between the recruitment process experienced.

Online Interviews

Collecting data and conducting interviews online, although challenging is becoming increasingly commonplace (Reppel, Gruber, Szmigin, & Voss, 2006; Strzoda, 2006). Leveraging digital messaging tools permits the researcher to engage in personal, written communication, allowing participants to potentially surface more unusual experiences and themes (Schiek & Ullrich, 2017), deepening insights from the focus groups. In addition, one cannot underestimate the relatively 'safe' place of digital communication (Hanna, n.d.), meaning the participant can be, for example, in the comfort of their student accommodation as opposed to a more disconcerting and alien context of traditional face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

For the follow-up individual interviews, an online synchronous, semi-structured interview methodology was employed (Salmons, 2015) using messaging software (platforms

such as Skype messaging, WhatsApp or email), building on the primary themes from the focus groups, while still aligned to aspects of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'pull' factors as well as other student experience and expectations literature. Each interview lasted around an hour and they were held a few weeks into the students' 2nd term (or Semester), in mid-January 2018.

As has been acknowledged, one of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) primary conclusions in terms of key influences for study choice for students, was the "[q]uality of reputation" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 90) of the HEI. The third highest scoring factor within this category was "a reputation for quality and expertise of its staff" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88). Further, in terms of satisfaction measures, the academic delivery, learning environment and student-teacher relationships also figure strongly in the literature (Illias et al., 2008; Siming et al., 2015; Tahar, 2008). My intention during one-to-one follow-up interviews, per this recognition in the literature of the importance of the learning and teaching environment, combined with early insights from my focus groups, was to explore further with individual focus group participants their experiences of the Centre and its facilities, the participants' engagement in their learning environment (in particular, their views on the classroom set-up and attendance monitoring) and an examination of their relationships with teachers.

Follow-up online interviews with the focus group participants who volunteered to take part, were therefore designed to explore further whether or not participant expectations set during the recruitment process were being met. The participants were interviewed approximately three months after their attendance at the focus groups in which they participated and a few weeks into their second term.

From my inductive analysis of the focus group transcripts discussed earlier, participants would have liked to know more about or at least seen an improvement in six primary areas, namely:

  i. Information received from the HEP

  ii. Issues with student registration

  iii. The teaching space

  iv. Relationships with teachers

  v. The sense of still feeling like school

  vi. Accommodation

It was these themes that informed my interview question structure, enabling me to explore them further with participants during their interviews.

   There are multiple ways for a researcher to engage with participants digitally, whether though online forums, digital conferencing, email, audio and video software and tools (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Direct messaging enables both participant and researcher to engage in a written dialogue, the researcher using a guide where the "precise wording or sequence [is] not predetermined" (Salmons, 2014, p. 10). An additional advantage of direct messaging is that compared to web-based digital audio and video platforms, these technologies and connectivity can be notoriously fickle and as experienced in my professional life, come with many challenges. Ideally then, such issues with complex digital platforms should be avoided to sustain the interview synchronicity. It was, however, important to allow a certain amount of flexibility in the chosen direct messaging technology by the interview participants. Navigating a new software could detract from the participants' comfort to engage digitally (Seymour, 2001), just as the setting of a face-to-face interview or focus group can impact on participants' comfort levels and by implication richness of responses. Furthermore, allowing for a certain amount of flexibility means the participant can be comfortable in their use of device (Caliandro & Gandini, 2016).

   The loss of verbal cues with digital messaging research must be acknowledged as an issue. Conversely Shachaf (2005) argues their absence can offset the possibility of

miscommunication from non-verbal cues, misread often because of cultural differences.

Further practical advantages also exist when using digital tools in organising the follow-on

interviews, allowing for greater flexibility on the part of both interviewer and participant;

while also meaning the interviews are by their very nature automatically transcribed. The

synchronous, online interview with individual participants allowed me to build on the themes

drawn from the focus groups, meaning I could engage more deeply with individual students,

establishing experiences of the recruitment process relative to their on-campus study life.

Ethics

My participants being voluntary, as researcher I had to be respectful and attuned to

any of their concerns with the process. The four elements "competence, voluntarism, full

information and comprehension" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 78) therefore needed to be

adequately covered throughout. Given my leadership role with Provider A, and that the

participants were likely to be perceived 'subordinate' to me, I had ensured an opportunity

existed for participants to not only excuse themselves from the focus group process but also

to decline to answer questions. During the interview process, however, it was not apparent

through overt responses of any participant discomfort, nor though any subtle avoidance of

issues through measured responses (Harreveld, Danaher, Lawson, Knight & Busch, 2016).

Aside from the challenge of researching in one's own backyard (Laureate Education,

Inc., 2012), one of the concerns in directly engaging with students was that some could have

been under 18. As an education provider, with some students considered minors, policies and

processes exist within Provider A with regards to the safeguarding of students. These needed

to be adhered to, ensuring appropriate and due processes were followed. Myself and all

Centre staff are safeguarding trained and DBS[3] checked, thus any such concerns were

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[3] DBS is the UK Government's Disclosure and Barring Service that checks staff for any criminal records. It is a statutory requirement when working with minors.

mitigated and no parental consent was required. At all times as a participant and insider

researcher, I respected the process of researching human participants, attending to "respect

for persons, beneficence, and justice" (Derry, Pea, Barron, Engle, Erickson, Goldman, ...

& Sherwin, 2010, p. 35).

The structure of and how I managed the focus groups needed to be sensitive in respect

to the individuals present, being sure to recognise their views. I had to be attuned to the fact I

could be faced with ethical dilemmas where sensitive issues are raised that may have needed

escalating to Centre staff. It was therefore necessary to be clear with participants prior to their

attendance that such matters might need to be taken from the relative and assumed 'safety' of

the focus group. For example, should a student in discussing their experience of campus

accommodation have raised health and safety or safeguarding concerns, it would have been

my duty to ensure the Centre management were made aware and addressed the matters. This

could have had an influence on some of the student participation at certain Centres and

similarly with responses of actual participants involved. Participants could have either

avoided sensitive issues or not agreed to attend in fear that what was discussed and raised

could be escalated beyond the interview. Thus, I needed to ensure a wide enough group was

contacted during the invitation process.

As with any practitioner-research, the "reflective responsibility" (Williams, 2009, p.

212) of the researcher is paramount, not only for surfacing ontological and epistemological

bias but equally in the chosen field of inquiry and ensuing choice of participants. In

referencing Clark and Sharf (2007), Williams (2009) reminds us of the complex nature of

qualitative research and how it investigates the "subjective truths of people's lives"

(Williams, 2009, pp. 211-212). Thus, researchers must be fully cognisant of potential bias not

just in their position of researcher, but equally that of the individuals whom they research.

Given this dynamic, there could have been further compounding risk during the data

collection. Where students as participants were working under a perceived requirement to be involved in the research (given potential perceptions of my position of power) and thus either consciously or unconsciously providing answers biased to perceived needs of the research, or in some way attempting to 'please' the researcher, they may have provided answers they deemed to be 'correct', as opposed to ones that were entirely honest (in the broadest sense). This may be unavoidable but would be acknowledged and surfaced through my data analysis.

Participants from the selected International Study Centres were culturally diverse - largely from Asia Pacific, the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East - with English as their second language. Sensitivity to potential misinterpretation of both the question posed and answer received needed careful consideration, ensuring the questions were neither too complex in subject nor linguistically challenging. This needed further consideration during the online interview phase. While digital modes of communication were both familiar and comfortable for participants, encouraging an openness of benefit to the research, it also presented a sense of security that could have led the participants into sensitive areas. During the interview process this required close monitoring. Digital media also permits the use of additional communication tools, such as emoticons (Salmons, 2015, p. 49), which can again add a level of comfort to the exchanges, whilst similarly disguising interviewee discomfort. Here, it could be difficult for the interviewer to gauge the relative comfort of the participant and should a participant have dropped out mid-interview, I would need to follow up as to whether the issues were technological or emotional in nature. As it happened, only one participant had to break their interview as time had run on and they needed to attend a class. The interview resumed and was completed later in the day.

With this diversity of sample comes richness of perspective. As Christakis (1992) argues, the researcher "must face and accept the indeterminacy of ethical variability" accepting that "the search for a single model of transcultural research ethics would be

fruitless" (Christakis, 1992, p. 1089), instead allowing different ethics codes to enlighten what the other conceals.

Data Management

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed by me with all materials saved to a personal, password protected cloud-based Google drive, ensuring data could not be lost or inadvertently accessed by a third-party. Online interviews using direct messaging software were copied into word documents and similarly saved to a password protected cloud drive. Transcripts of student comments were anonymised by identifying them as participant 1, 2, 3 etc. It was important for me to capture demographic data of participants as I envisaged such data could have bearing on my data analysis and research outcomes. As highlighted later in my findings, this enabled me to examine differences in participant experiences as a consequence, for example, of their country of origin. Participants were therefore asked to complete a simple form prior to the start of each session, recording their gender, age, race, ethnicity and area of study. They were not required to add their name and instead a number was assigned to the form safeguarding their identities.

Data Analysis

In attempting to understand the phenomena of whether international students' recruitment experience was congruent with their early on-campus experience, a reductive analysis process was undertaken to create blocks and groups of data from the transcripts. Data were analysed for their nomothetic properties, seeking to establish emergent trends and similarities in the participant's experiences. Transcripts from focus groups were initially open coded, leveraging the benefits of drawing out patterns, coding them as they emerged (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) in an inductive process. Further coding was additionally developed against 'pull' factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), deductively testing the presence or absence of reference to themes in the literature such as home country conditions, choices

and recommendation of HEP, recruitment and marketing experiences and perceptions of the course, its relative quality, and access to campus resources. Appreciating the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis, themes established from the focus groups through abductive reasoning (Salmons, 2015) were further explored during the online interviews. Practically, this meant an interview questioning route being developed for the online interviews prior to detailed analysis and coding of the focus group transcripts. Using a semi-structured interview approach allowed me to build on themes emergent from the groups, condensing, interpreting and testing further with the individual interview participants (Kvale, 2007, p. 102).

As Wong (2015) posits, one cannot overlook insights gained from individual responses and statements. Thus, drawing from the data, participant responses to questions provided an additional layer of richness against previously identified patterns. Acknowledging that one's unit of analysis in focus groups is the group itself (Cohen et al., 2011), one cannot discount that in any group individual perspectives and views needed to be captured and considered; a further justification for the individual, follow-on interviews and exploration of emergent themes.

Inductive Coding of Focus Group Transcripts

A student experience practitioner model, where students move through a cycle of pre-arrival, first contact, orientation and induction, reorientation and outduction (Morgan, 2013, p. 17), is an apposite method by which to examine the primary themes elucidated from my coding processes. Further, it is helpful to consider the types of 'service' a student might expect when embarking on their post-school educational journey. How students appraise and respond to service delivery in a higher education context is also recognised in their levels of satisfaction. Notable when considering student satisfaction are measures pertaining to academic delivery, the learning environment and student-teacher relationships (Illias et al., 2008; Siming et al., 2015; Tahar, 2008). Structuring the data this way not only provided a

useful student journey narrative for analysis, but also served to illustrate the weightings of coding frequency against the overall coding pattern, thus showing the alignment to my questioning route.

Acknowledging Morgan's (2013) student experience cycle and factors pertaining to student satisfaction, I clustered primary coded themes against each stage of the student journey (Table 3). Seeking to examine expectations raised during the recruitment process relative to a students' on-campus experience, has meant my coding frequency weighting was relatively equally divided, with over 40% of codes categorised as 'pre-arrival' and the balance related to the experience of participants after their recruitment process. Considering the 'experience' phase, the weighting towards academic delivery is perhaps of no surprise. References to the programme of study, the teaching style and engagement with teachers, combined with the way students experienced the learning and teaching environment (whether in the classroom set-up, the monitoring of their attendance, or the technology and materials afforded them), outweighed comments pertaining to non-academic areas, such as the students general support and the Centre facilities. That said, as I will come on to discuss later, the role of the teacher comes through not only as someone supporting participants in their academic journey, but equally in their pastoral support. Additionally, in some cases the teacher is considered a person able to assist students with more general support and integration to the Study Centre and university.

Stage in student journey	Student journey category	Percentage weighting relative to coding frequency	Primary, aggregated coding node
Expectations	Pre-arrival and first contact	41%	Marketing and recruitment engagement
			Impressions of the UK
			Initial expectation setting
			Family connections
			Importance of ranking
			Visa processes
			Perceptions of the weather
Experience	Orientation and induction	4%	Induction feedback
			Culture in the UK
			Issues with food
	Administration	1%	Information provided and received
			Environment
	Support structures	15%	Impressions of the university
			Taking responsibility
			Reflections on transport efficiency and cost
			Employability factors
			Access to activities
	Campus facilities	10%	Centre facilities
			Accommodation set-up
	Academic delivery	29%	The Foundation programme
			Teaching style
			Supportive teachers
			Feelings of still being at school
			Class size and facility
			Attendance policy and monitoring
			English preparation
			Availability of technology
			Use of books and associated resources

Table 3: primary nodes coded during inductive coding process of focus group transcripts,

mapped to the student journey

Of course, Table 3 presents the aggregate coding data. Within each primary code were multiple sub-nodes, some of which may equally have relevance to pre- and post-arrival categories. However, as a proxy for illustrating the coding structure and weighting, and its relative alignment to the student journey I was intending to uncover with the structure of my questioning route for the focus groups, it serves a useful purpose.

Deductive Coding: Considering Mazzarol et al.'s (1997) 'Pull' Factors

From their research, the identified 'pull' factor categories are: knowledge and awareness of the host country, personal recommendations, cost issues, the environment, geographic proximity and social links (Mazzarol et al., 1997, p. 29). In a later study, further influencing factors were identified in student decision-making. The most positive influencing factors highlighted related to the HEI's reputation for quality; its recognition of qualifications; the quality and expertise of the HEI's staff; links with other HEIs; that a large number of international students were already known to be attending the HEI; and that there existed strong, influential alumni (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88). As outlined earlier, aside from an initial inductive approach to transcript coding, my ensuing approach to coding took these high-level 'pull' factors into consideration.

Of initial note is the outcome of the factor analysis undertaken in Mazzarol et al.'s (1997) study. Acknowledging the differentials across participant nationalities, the study established that the six factors ranked in order of importance were: cost issues; knowledge and awareness (of host country); environment; recommendations; social links; and geographic proximity (Mazzarol et al., 1997, pp. 37-38). Undoubtedly, there are sample differences in the respective studies in terms of student nationality. Students researched by Mazzarol et al. (1997) to which the factor analysis applies in Table 4, were from South-East Asian countries and attending universities in Australia. Participants in my focus groups heralded largely from the Middle East, China and Asian countries, and were studying at UK

university International Study Centres. In the transcript coding of my focus groups, the

frequency of occurrence of the primary factors were somewhat at odds with the weightings

applied by Mazzarol et al. (1997), instead the factors led with personal recommendations,

followed by knowledge and awareness; cost issues; geographic proximity; the environment;

and social links (see Table 4).

Mazzarol et al. (1997) 'pull' factors	Factor	Focus Group references	% weighting
Cost Issues	(0.90)	Personal recommendations	53
Social links	(0.87)	Knowledge and awareness	20
Environment	(0.78)	Cost issues	15
Knowledge and awareness	(0.76)	Geographic proximity	6
Personal recommendations	(0.66)	Environment	4
Geographic proximity	n/a	Social links	2

Table 4: Mazzarol et al.'s (1997) identified 'pull' factors and importance weighting, relative to reference occurrences of the same factors in coding of my focus group transcripts.

Notwithstanding these sample differences in both student country of origin and study

destination choice present in my study relative to that of Mazzarol et al. (1997), the

differences in ranking of factors are marked. While the method of arriving at the factor

rankings are not directly comparable, with mine simply a frequency of reference count

converted into a percentage, with no additional acknowledgment of sub-factors or with any

weighting applied (personal recommendations, for example appears with frequency in every

focus group, whereas social links references appeared only in two focus group transcripts),

the differences in ranking are noted. It cannot therefore be argued that my ranking, taken in

statistical isolation, in anyway suggests a level of importance to the participants, unlike that of Mazzarol et al.'s (1997) factor analysis.

As I will discuss later, it is evident from my additional coding approach applied to categories gleaned during the inductive coding process, that there are parallels with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'pull' factors and additional categories identified during my inductive coding process, and thus similarities to primary 'pull' factors. As an indicator, however, it is a useful point from which to analyse the detail behind these coded 'pull' factors, and I will thus address them cognisant of the ranked order in which they emerged from my data analysis.

Coding Online Interviews

Coding of online interviews was a methodological extension to my focus group coding approach. After transcription, the interview data was initially open coded. During this process, I looked for themes emergent in the data both from my implicit knowledge of the earlier focus group transcripts and themes elucidated therein, as well as in relation to key themes from which the questioning route had been developed. There were of course only three transcripts to code and as my interview method had been one of a written online dialogue with participants, my familiarity with the content was in partly established. Consequently, I was relatively quickly able to assess themes of student expectations and experience.

Additional coding themes were then deductively examined against Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'pull' factors, as well as against additional student satisfaction and experience literature upon which the interview questioning route had been based (Siming et al., 2015; Illias et al., 2008; Tahar, 2008). Given Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'pull' factors deal largely with student decision-making, there was very little coding correlation to these factors, with only 'knowledge and awareness' being present in the coding in all three

transcripts but at a low frequency occurrence. As one might have expected, given the purpose

of the interviews was to explore participants' campus experiences rather than further

reflection on their decisions for attending the Foundation programmes, few themes emerged

relating to the recruitment process. In relation to experience literature, I created four specific

themes against which to deductively code the transcripts. The themes were:

i.   Student-teacher relationship

ii.   Experience provided to students

iii.   On-campus student support services

iv.   Facilities and teacher-preparedness

Of these, references to on-campus student support services were limited, referenced only

once and in only one transcript. The other three deductive codes occurred in all three

transcripts at frequencies close to double-digits.

The emergent themes served to embellish my overall findings from the focus groups

relating to student experiences at Study Centres. These were then integrated into my overall

data analysis. As discussed later in my findings, it was clear that general expectations and

specifically those to do with student-teacher relationships, facilities and pre-arrival

information, emerged as primary and continued themes from the participants.

Limitations

My focus group sample and attendance largely fulfilled the guidelines of my research

design. However, for the online interviews, as stated earlier, only three participants took part.

Aside from a disappointing attendance, this meant the richness of insight and diversity of

participant was diminished. While I was not seeking representivity in the interview

participant sample, it goes without saying that interviews with my target number of six to

eight participants can only have added to the richness of data from student insights. With an

eye to data saturation (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), the practicality of three interview participants and the insights gleaned, still served for valuable contribution to my findings.

As discussed earlier, I was not able to undertake member checking due to time constraints and access to participants. Although Abrams (1984, as cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 94) notes that "overt respondent validation is only possible if the results of the analysis are compatible with the self-image of the respondents", it is an undoubted potential limitation in my research design. Despite various methods employed to address validity and reliability in the absence of member checking, it remains a potential concern, particularly given I was the sole transcriber and coder of transcripts. In this regard, research bias and subjectivity could be considered a factor in the research findings. However, the triangulation methods employed (Cohen et al., 2011) arguably somewhat offset this issue, accepting they add "rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5).

In my research approach I was attuned to the potential limitations with focus groups and online interviews. Tightly controlled questioning, following the pre-determined 'pull' (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) categories, could have resulted potentially in either no response or answers at odds with participants' held beliefs (Deutscher, Pestello & Pestello, 1993), the artificiality of the situations resulting in skewed interviewee answers. One could also not divorce from the relative inauthenticity of the interview set-up – whether in the group stage or during online interactions. Gathering a group of diverse students into a room, where myself as interviewer worked through a semi-structured questioning process, at all times recording the event, was by no means a 'normal' or familiar environment for participants. Engaging students solely in focus groups could have therefore possibly raised issues of subjectivity and question the research applicability and validity (Cohen et al., 2011) outside of the study's participants.

Despite these acknowledged limitations, it is recognised that the act of storytelling is a powerful construct of knowledge (Mishler, 1991; Riessman, 2008). While the researcher must be mindful not to accept all such stories as factually correspondent to lived experiences, the research process articulated above, specifically the combination of focus groups and online interviews, with codified analysis of responses, only served to deepen the value from the student interactions.

Credibility of Findings

Agar (1993) as cited in Silverman (1993), suggests that the intense engagement of the researcher and participants in qualitative research in itself presents an acceptable level of validity. Although this is contested (Cohen et al., 2011), my research approach has sought a number of ways to address questions of validity and reliability. The range of data sources I collected – through focus groups with student demographic representivity; an even spread of high, mid and low ranked HEIs; from deeper participant engagement using digital interviews; and secondary data to benchmark sampling (from Provider A's large sample data) – means the stories and attitudes are constructed and established from multiple perspectives. The use of multiple methods and sources of data is key in establishing credibility of findings (Harreveld et al., 2016) and strengthens the trustworthiness of the accounts and ensuing analysis.

Due to time constraints and access to participants, member checking was not achieved during my transcript write-up and coding. Although widely acknowledged as a means to addressing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), there are also concerns in how participants might respond to reconstructions of their perceptions, as well as assumptions that one is implicitly questioning the integrity of participant responses. That said, it is a noted omission in my process, and instead I sought other means to address credibility and validity.

Throughout my research process there have been opportunities for triangulation. Evident in my research design has been the use of multiple data sources, for example university rankings and information available to me from Provider A such as demographic data and student experience surveys. In a form of 'time triangulation' (Cohen et al., 2011), I have acknowledged that participant views can change over time by holding focus groups early in the participants' study journey, with follow-up interviews held into their second term. Additionally, the collection of data from participant insights at different times is acknowledged for being applicable in the study of complex phenomenon (Adelman, Kemmis & Jenkins, 1976). If one accepts Cohen et al.'s (2011) definition of triangulation that it is "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 195), then further methodological triangulation exists in my use of two different methods (focus groups and individual interviews) on the same object of study. My research is explicitly interested in the process international students go through over a period of time. Their reflections on their recruitment experience, relative to their immediate experiences at their chosen Study Centre, followed by further insights on their lived experience further into their studies, has meant I have been able to explicitly acknowledge the effects of change over time.

Illustrated in the sampling process, the focus group participants were not necessarily representative of a worldwide international student population, particularly given they entered the UK higher education via a Foundation programme. They did, however, undoubtedly provide direct and valuable insights into experiences of recruitment processes and the ensuing on-campus life. The proposed sampling process was therefore designed to ensure a group largely representative of Provider A's student demographic and university partner profile. In this way, at the very least the findings would have professional

applicability and credibility, with ensuing value to UK university partners and their own brand and market position development.

My development of semi-structured focus group and interview question routes sought to address concerns of validity and reliability. While Oppenheim (1992) argued that wording of questions must be consistent, when interviewing international students whose first language is not English, this was unlikely to be applicable. Instead, the semi-structured approach was designed to address research bias as it enabled participants to exhibit their particular way of experiencing and viewing the world around them (Silverman, 1993).

If one accepts that validity is a process that is "ever present and recursive as opposed to either a 'step' in a linear sequence" (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 327), then some of the methods I employed serve to respond to this position. The reflexive journal I kept throughout the research process, along with the sharing of anonymized data and write-ups with colleagues at Provider A, combined with more informal checking of findings with colleagues at respective UK universities for peer feedback, provided further means to progressively test and improve the relative value of my research findings.

Feasibility and Delimitations

In my study design, as was structured in my original time plan, it was important to be mindful of the practicality of my research. As a professional working in the provision of private education in the form of pathway programmes to universities in the UK and Europe, I am afforded immediate insight and access to the environment for my outlined research. Notwithstanding the ethical considerations and approval processes outlined earlier, the nature of my role relative to my research, providing me direct access to Study Centres, staff and their students, meant I was in a relatively unique position to conduct research.

To that end, choosing to research Provider A's international students on pathway programmes was very much a deliberate and practical decision. Within the UK, there are a

number of companies in the same sector as Provider A, delivering similar programmes and services to other UK universities. However, asking those companies for access to their Study Centres and students could have created a number of logistical and ethical issues. As stated above, researching students who study with the company for whom I work created some logistical benefits. Had I attempted to contact competitor organisations to Provider A, the ethical approval process and logistical access would likely have been considerably complex. Additionally, while participants, universities and the Providers would have been anonymised, inevitably I would have been given privileged access to those organisations' students while gleaning insights to their operations. These competitive concerns of course could have been addressed in any research design through appropriate attendance to ethics, approvals and anonymisation. However, I chose not to place myself, Provider A nor the competitor organisations into a potentially difficult and compromising position. In addition, I felt the number of Centres operated by Provider A and the sample design would be adequate for my research needs.

Given the nature of my research field and question, I consciously chose to hold focus groups with student participants early in their studies, with follow-up interviews a few months later. Had time and personal capacity not been a limiting factor, additional Centre focus groups could have enlarged the sample and further interviews could have been held at the end of the academic year, adding an additional perspective to student experiences. However, as I am interested in expectations set during recruitment processes relative to students' *early* experiences, I was concerned that the further the students were into their studies, their recollections of choosing where to study (and the attendant influences) would have diminished.

My focus group sample of universities covered the breadth of the UK. Thus, careful organisation was required to timetable the focus groups so as to achieve the optimum time

during the students' commencement of studies, as well as being a practical route for my travels (covering over 1600 miles) to the various university campuses. Noting that access and time are key considerations for the successful completion of qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2011), I was mindful to design a sample of focus groups and participants that would serve to provide adequate data for my research question but ensure groups could be organised and run within a practical timeline.

Holding six focus groups at different Centres across the UK required careful organising, ensuring clashes did not exist with time-tabling of classes, student exams or holidays. However, in my role with Provider A, I travel frequently to university's Study Centres and the sessions could therefore dovetail into my work patterns. Further, aside from the value of insights from gathering interview data using digital tools, the ensuing individual online interviews were able to take place any time during the day and week, to the convenience of both my own work obligations and the study commitments of the participants. Of course, they needed to be held within the time frame of the early phase of a students' study, but again I was conscious to be respectful of the participant's personal and study time.

My research sought to engage directly with international students, gathering their recollections on how they made decisions, the influencing factors and their subsequent experiences. In participant references to those influencers, information accessed or experiences of Study Centres, I did not seek to overtly validate those experiences (such as though detailed content analysis of the information they referenced). Instead, I applied my practitioner expertise and knowledge of Provider A, undertaking high-level content reviews and referencing personal experiences and awareness of information provision as high-level commentary on participant insights.

Finally, as a practitioner-researcher aspiring to have some professional application of my research findings and recommendations, I was cognisant to tackle a field where I may have some influence over the identified issues (Hopkins, 1985). My research proposal was therefore discussed and agreed with senior colleagues at Provider A and as I hold an executive role with Provide A, this means there would be greater opportunity to make recommendations within the organisation with a view to effecting positive change.

4. Findings: Pre-Arrival

Given the nature of my research question, examining the relationship between expectations raised during the international student recruitment phase relative to actual experiences once a student is at the International Study Centre, chapters four and five will highlight the themes analysed inductively and deductively from focus groups and online interviews, structuring them into two high-level phases of the student journey – pre-arrival (expectations) and post-arrival (experiences).
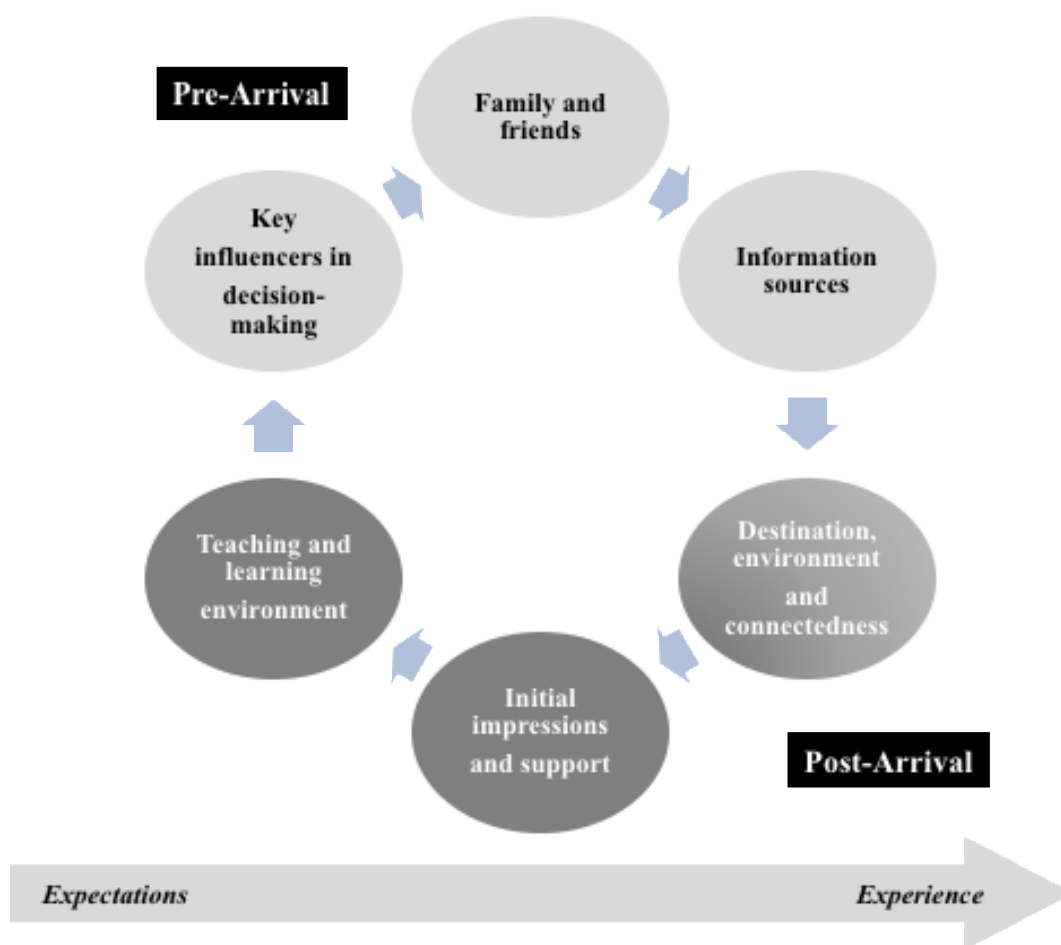
Diagram 1: phases of the student journey – pre-arrival (expectations) and post-arrival (experiences).

In describing the first stage of a student experience practitioner model, Morgan (2013) notes that in most circumstances, first contact for a student with an HEI is during the application process. Feedback from the participants during my focus groups would suggest this is not always the case. While Morgan (2013) herself acknowledges that some students "may have had their expectations raised prior to first contact" (Morgan, 2013, p. 19), she describes this more in the context of encouragement or recommendations from a student's school or college. From a UK domestic context, this could well be the case. Although I would suggest that, given the propensity for UK universities to run taster days for prospective students where future students can gain immediate, tangible experience of the university and its campus and engage with staff, there is a high likelihood of first contact being well in advance of any application.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the primary themes that occurred during the student recruitment journey, a key stage in relation to expectations setting as students anticipate the service (Churchill Jr. & Suprenant, 1982). Two major themes emerged in the context of expectation setting, these were the key influencers on students during their decision-making process; and the information afforded to students (often in support of any influencing actor). Regarding influencers, it came through strongly that agents, sponsors, friends and family were highly prominent in how students made decisions and had expectations set in advance of their studies. From the focus groups, I will draw out how participants considered the various influencers around them. The second theme pertaining to 'information' examines these factors, often secondary but certainly noted for their role in expectations setting (Fripp, n.d.), and how students begin to inform their decision, constructing pre-conceptions of their study choices. The access to and utility of digital information is discussed, along with how events played a role in decision-making and how students began to construct a view on their chosen destination – and thus how expectations begin to take shape.

As students make their choice and prepare for their studies, concerns around the funding of studies (both in terms of study fees and living expenses, especially accommodation) came through strongly and thus my third theme explores impressions of the destination context. Costs materialise as a key concern and a factor for students in terms of the environment in which they expect to study and live. Within that environment, questions of the setting itself - the weather, the host city - all figure both in how student expectations are set and equally how they begin to experience a country. Further, the importance of family and friends continues, with considerations given to a locations' proximity to the students' home country in one aspect and, on the other hand, the nearby presence of friends or family.

Key Influencers in Decision-Making

Evident from international student participant explanations during my focus groups and interviews was the influence of a variety of groups on students in advance of their first contact with the HEP. These influencers were highly present in making recommendations to students as part of their decision-making process.

The influencer sub-themes clustered around how students were influenced by third-parties (in the form of either agents, sponsors or counsellors) and family members. International student recruitment agents are intermediaries based in prospective student's home countries. The agents offer advisory services to prospective students seeking to study overseas. Over two-thirds of UK universities use the services of such agents, paying the agent a commission (typically between two to 15 percent of first-year tuition fee) for the students recruited on behalf of the university (Raimo, Christine & Huang, 2016). In the context of my research, a 'sponsor' is largely based in the Middle East (although they are also known to be active elsewhere, especially Latin America). The term sponsor can have a number of uses and participants in my focus groups tended to use it interchangeably. Essentially though, it was used either in reference to a country or company scholarship scheme that provided financial

aid to fund a student's study or to the individual sponsor-advisor with whom the student engaged. Finally, 'counsellors' although a less frequently used term, was used in reference to local advisors, either those based at a student's high-school or as a fee-paying service the students could access.

At all six Centres and across the spectrum of focus group nationalities, participants spoke about the role of influencers and recommendations made to them. Participants representing 16 different countries spoke about their experience of receiving recommendations, with half of those students emanating from the Middle East. The nationality spread tended to narrow in lower ranked university Centres and those in particular that had a high proportion of students from the Middle East. Consequently, in the two low ranked Centres, 70% of those students who spoke about personal recommendations were from the Middle East, whereas two-thirds of students from more highly ranked centres who discussed personal recommendations, were from regions such as China, South and South-East Asia. These factors in many ways go hand-in-hand, as lower ranked university Centres tended to have a high representation of Middle Eastern participants.

Third-Party Advisory Roles in the Setting of Expectations

Agents. Evident in participant feedback relating to expectations set during the recruitment phase is the role of the agent, the most highly referenced inductive theme in the pre-arrival stage. Interestingly, however, it was not uniformly referenced across all Centres, instead occurring during both the two lowest and two highest ranked university's focus groups. This is intriguing as the lowest ranked university Centres possess the highest proportion of Middle Eastern students - many of whom are likely to have been supported by governmental or commercial sponsors from their home country - whereas the top two ranked university Centres have a far greater diversity of student participants.

The majority of references to agents occurred during the Centre E focus group. Underlying this, however, is perhaps an interchangeability of terminology. For example, references also occurred that related to either counsellor or sponsor and while there are indeed some distinct differences in these roles, discussed later in the chapter, the participant narrative around these references implied they were indeed talking about agents as influencers. That said, the references were fairly equally dispersed across those participants from Middle Eastern countries and those from Asia, with a slight weighting in favour of female participants.

Agents as recommenders figure highly in the comments from participants. Interestingly, the reference occurrence to agents was almost a counterpoint to that of sponsors. As will be discussed, sponsor references were made predominantly by students from Middle Eastern countries. Given a vast majority of students from this geography tended to study at lower ranked HEIs, it should perhaps not be surprising that references to agents making recommendations were more prevalent from students studying at higher ranked HEIs and where the apportion of students from the Middle East was lower. With a slight weighting towards female participants, almost two-thirds of references to agents were thus made by students from Asia.

Aligned to the literature relating to the influence of agents (Huang, Raimo & Humfrey, 2016; Hulme, Thomson, Hulme & Doughty, 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018), students who had used the services of an agent talked about how their agent was an influencing factor in their decision-making process. Although referenced 36 times, the role of the agent is perhaps not quite as influential as one might imagine. While many of the participants talked about their agent recommendations, most validated any such advice either with their own research or affirmed the recommendation through discussions with family and friends. As a female participant from Hong Kong explained when describing how she came

to choose Centre C, "the agent gave me three of those choices, then I did a lot of homework and then I chose here". A male Russian participant described a similar experience, stating:

> They gave us a set of choices all around the world, several countries
>
> - US, Canada, UK. And we decided on [Centre F] as we found the program to be
>
> very… well, we found the reviews to be very satisfactory, and the environment as
>
> well …the agent provided some reviews on certain universities, and then I did some
>
> follow up. (male Russian participant, Centre F)

Inferred by this participant's comments in his use of 'we', is that this was not a decision made on his own. Clearly, he had support around him and was thus not wholly reliant on the influence of an agent. Further, as with the female student from Hong Kong at Centre C, the Russian student at Centre F also undertook his own, web-based research to hone and validate any decision he made.

A further extreme in relation to expectations set by agents was highlighted by the aforementioned female participant from Hong Kong at Centre C. Having described the filtering of HEI choice provided by the agent, she went on to illustrate her scepticism in the agent's information. She explained how the agent had provided a presentation in the form of a Power Point, but that "60% of the information wasn't correct". Of note, is that she only discovered this through feedback from friends who had previously studied the UK. When she spoke to them after the agent presentation and shared the Power Point, it was her friends who "giggled and laughed" at the incorrectness of the information provided. As she then stated, she felt the agent was "just too lazy" to change the presentation. Naturally, given the seemingly influential role played by agents in student recruitment (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018) this is highly concerning, but also further reinforces the need for prospective students to both undertake their own research, as well as ensure the solicitation of feedback from family and friends to avoid negative disconfirmation.

A female Chinese student at a high ranked HEI explained how it was accepted practice in her country to go via an agent when considering studying overseas. As she expounded, the agent from her home town "strongly recommended me to go to [Centre F]" based on the high student satisfaction ratings. As I will examine later, the student did go on to undertake her own research in order to validate the recommendation, but the impetus clearly came from the agent (not a family recommendation). This Chinese student's experience of agents' influence in the decision-making process was validated by participants at other Centres from countries such as Hong Kong and Vietnam. Despite being at universities with markedly different rankings, the two female participants at Centres B and C also described the influence of agents, actually the necessity in guiding them on where to study. Both explained their requirement to study on a Foundation programme in order to enter the UK higher education system, given their home country's schooling structure that lasted only 12 years. Of interest, was how both participants were given three university recommendations by their advising agents, but then explored these options with their own follow-up research.

Elucidated from the focus group feedback, while the information and recommendations agents provide may need affirming and validating through family, friends or secondary research (discussed in depth below), agents do not only provide information and set expectations about possible universities. As one might expect, they also provide additional information about the host country, the environment, the university city and accommodation options. Thus, providing a holistic 'service' as well as a fulsome impression of where the prospective student might choose to study.

Of course, as proven by the female student from Hong Kong at Centre C, that information may not entirely be trustworthy. This variability of information and service is clearly a challenge for students. Describing how they came to choose their university accommodation, one participant was simply sent a website link, informed by their agent that

it was comparable to a website service akin to booking.com and was then left to their own devices (male Saudi Arabian participant, Centre E). Conversely, a male student from Russia found his agent to be very supportive. As he explained, "the agent will help with the Visa and stuff like that. They didn't just recommend the university, they were contacting it, they were helping us with certain documents". Thus we begin to see the variability of information provided to students from different countries during the recruitment process, even from a seemingly comparable source in the form of agents.

One particular female Lebanese participant at Centre F, however, was very clear in her opinion of agents, consciously choosing not to make use of such services. Her explanation of the reasons why was profound, highlighting as she did the complexity and gravity of decisions these young adults have to make:

the reason I didn't personally use an agent, is that the agent would recommend what he finds suitable, based on different opinions, and each person has his own opinion. So, I'm moving away from my home country, and that's like seven to eight hours away by plane, and this is not something easy. I'm going to be living 4 to 5 years here, so it's not an easy choice to take. So, when you look into the options, I was provided options to either go to the UK, US or maybe Canada. And what I found about the UK, and generally [City F], it's a friendly place and foreign people are more welcome here than they are in Canada. Canada is fine, but I think the US would not be as welcoming as [City F], with no offence to the US. I think the community here is friendlier… since there are lots of people from different backgrounds… Yes, one of the reasons I also took into account the opinions of other people, is that I'm going to be living here for 5 years and I need to know, will I be able to fit in this community? So, that's why I think it's very crucial to think about the opinion of other

people, especially from other people that have a similar culture that I came from, and

not just referring to an agent. (female Lebanese participant, Centre F)

Agents, then, are clearly influential and for some a necessary part of the student recruitment

and information gathering process, playing a key role in the setting of student expectations.

Indeed, for certain sending countries, most notably those in Asia, they are integral to the

process (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). Prospective students seeking to study away from

home, however, should (and clearly do as evidenced from participants) act with discernment

when it comes to any information provided to them by an agent. Consciously or not, this

appears key if students are to avoid negative disconfirmation. In parallel, HEP who make use

of agents in their recruitment processes, need to ensure information disseminated through

these channels is consistent and does not exacerbate any misinformation and thus potential

misalignment of student expectation.

Sponsors and counsellors. Akin to the role of the agent is that of the sponsor or

counsellor. However, while there may be parallels between roles of agents and sponsors in

some of the advisory roles they take, there are apparent differences in their relative levels of

influence.

During the Centre E focus group, the differences in experience between those students

from sponsor groups and those who applied with no such support became very apparent. A

discussion between Kuwaiti and Egyptian participants illustrated the considerably different

experiences the students had during the application to their chosen university. One male,

Kuwaiti student went so far as to say, "we paid our fees, we gave them our IELTS[4] certificate

and that's it" (male Kuwaiti participant, Centre E). This comment was further endorsed by a

fellow Kuwaiti student, when she said, "if we are sponsored, we don't do any things like

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[4] IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is the primary English test used for international
study.

that, financial things" (female Kuwaiti participant, Centre E). In contrast, an Egyptian student described how he had to do everything himself:

> I did paperwork on my own, back in Egypt. It's difficult. It takes me like one year or something to do all my paperwork, my visa. I didn't even study for IELTS, I just went for an IELTS exam without any experience in English. (male Egyptian participant, Centre E)

The discussion continued as the two groups compared their different experiences, in particular information received from either the sponsor or the HEP and conceptions of how their expectations were set as they went through the application process. The contrast was brought into stark relief as they spoke about expectations of their ability to work once studying, set by the provision of apparently incorrect communications,

> "for the visa they don't give you a lot of details; what kind of visa what type of visa you should apply to. So, for me the one I got, it has like 8 hours of work and that's …not acceptable. Now they are saying we need to take it out... So, I was like, that's her mistake. the agent who called me, she told me just apply for this kind of visa" (male Egyptian participant, Centre E).

As I explain later, at the time of writing (in 2018) students with international study visas were not permitted to work under the regulations set by the UKVI. For those students supported by sponsors, not only were they unaware of these UKVI restrictions, but because their fees and costs were largely covered by the sponsoring entity, any such need to work for them was also nullified.

For participants who were self-funded, however, this was a different matter. Their apparent frustration was compounded by what they saw as misinformation in relation to their study visa status. During the visa application process, these participants from countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Libya, felt information was not clear, that they

had potentially applied for the incorrect visa or that the process had been made unnecessarily complex. When asked if this was a shared experience, a male Kuwaiti participant said clearly in relation to his fellow, non-sponsored student participants, "the reason why they have problems, is because we have sponsors, and they don't have sponsors". Fellow Kuwaiti participants were quick to endorse this participant's view, explaining how they too could ask for anything, were provided as much information as they needed and that the sponsor would do everything for them.

As a number of participants from Middle Eastern countries remarked, the recommendation of where to study came from their sponsor. A participant from Saudi Arabia commented that the requirement for a course to be recognised by companies or the Ministry of Education in their home country was a necessity. With this, one thus has to consider that any such recommendation from a sponsor naturally comes from a subjective position, one potentially constrained by available finances and other assessment criteria. Indeed, it has been observed that some students often treat their sponsor adviser much like a parent (Leggett, 2013), seeking affirmation for decisions and indeed maintaining a relationship throughout their studies.

Sponsor advice from within country, particularly countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is generally based on the sponsoring country's own, preestablished criteria for study destination acceptability. By way of illustration, via its UK-based Kuwait Cultural Office (KCO), the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education publishes a list of "distinguished universities" (Kuwait Cultural Office, 2017a). These are UK universities with whom the Ministry has established relationships and thus a confidence and assurance in their acceptability for Kuwaiti students to study. Indeed, it even goes so far as to limit the number of places students under its sponsorship can be accepted into certain universities (Kuwait Cultural Office, 2017b), instead directing students to seek alternative HEIs. The criteria for

selection or deselection (other than through numeric capping of places) of HEIs is not published on the KCO website, but it is from this information that a student must filter their choice of HEI and sponsors must provide a recommendation.

In some ways, it is not unusual practice for sponsoring countries and governments to change support and direction for university programmes. Despite the significant growth in students seeking a western education outside of the Middle East (Leggett, 2013; Roy & Luo, 2017), similar practices occur in other Middle Eastern countries (ICEF, 2016b) where financial aid for certain programmes is redirected. Thus, in considering the influence of friends in student decision-making, specifically with regards to students from certain Middle Eastern countries, one cannot divorce the home-country influence and constraints with which those recommendations are likely to have been made and received. Indeed, one could deduce the same from those for friends making any such recommendation. With specific reference to students of Middle Eastern origin, one could infer a notion of self-reinforcement and subjectivity in a friend's recommendation, if they too have been supported and advised via a sponsor.

From the focus group data, 'counsellor' was a much less frequently used term. Explicitly talked about only during the Centre C focus group, it would appear the role of counsellor is one that emanates more from the schooling system. However, in Pakistan for example, prospective students can also make use of private counsellors "if you want your own personal counsellor and you can hire them. So, a lot of people don't do that because it's very expensive, to hire a personal counsellor. He does all of your paperwork and everything" (Pakistan male participant, Centre C). Such counsellors would therefore appear to play a similar role to agents. That said, a counsellor's fee-paying service may not necessarily imply the same concerns as expressed by participants who had made use of agents, where those agents primarily would earn their income from commission paid by universities on the

successful enrolment of a student (María Cubillo et al., 2006). Of course, the student may not consciously connect how agents or fee-based counselling services generate their income, but one can appreciate the concerns of subjectivity implicit in these differing remuneration models.

An interesting dynamic thus emerges where a student is potentially actively selecting their influencer. As the male Pakistani student at Centre C explained, such a counselling service is not open to everyone due to the prohibitive cost, but the service provided appears to be of value, as the counsellor also helped complete all of the students' required paperwork. Naturally, if a counsellor is remunerated solely through a fee, as opposed to an agent whose income is affected by a commission paid by the receiving HEP, arguably the former could be deemed to provide more objective advice, uncompromised as they would be by the lure of additional income from a successful placement. Structuring advisory services income in this manner no doubt has implications both for HEIs but also the repeated consistency of messaging provided to students and thus the risk to misaligned student expectations.

Thus, we see some parallels with the influence of the agent and sponsor. Referenced solely during focus groups at the two lowest ranked university Centres, where the highest proportion of Middle Eastern students attended, we can begin to appreciate the comprehensiveness of support provided by sponsors. As a female Kuwaiti participant at Centre E stated simply, "they [agents] do everything". When considering the role of 'personal recommendations' (Mazzarol et al., 1997), sponsoring governments are highly influential in the choices made by students. Indeed, implied by some of the students during the Centre B focus group, the sponsors themselves encourage students to study, extolling the benefits of students continuing their education overseas. As an intermediary in the decision-making process and the setting of expectations, it would appear from the way participants explained the process that the students actually apply to the sponsor, seeking the sponsors' endorsement

and acceptance prior to that of the university. If the sponsor deems the student to be good or viable, the student will be given choices but the sponsor will then deal with all of the ensuing university correspondence.

The influence of family and friends in decision-making. While personal recommendations came from many sources, friends and family represented the highest frequency combined recommendation reference from most participants. The recommendations, however, took many forms when it came to family members or friends. Given the high levels of investment in marketing activities made by the organisation responsible for running the Centres on behalf of the respective universities (designed to influence and direct student decision-making), it is a fascinating dynamic in the student decision-making process and thence expectations set during recruitment activities. However, the focus groups and ensuing analysis of family impact serve to reinforce findings in relation to Mazzarol et al.'s (1997) primary 'pull' factors, where personal recommendations figure as one of the highest factors.

During the focus groups, references to friends were considerably higher than those made to family (by a factor of 1 to 4 in favour of friends' references). However, when one includes sub-descriptors of family members, such as mother, father, brother, sister etc., then overall references to family and their constituent members, outweighs those references to friends. Despite student participants such as those from Egypt and Kuwait referenced earlier, the sway of friends is particularly interesting given that for many students arriving from Middle Eastern countries, the influence of sponsors is normally paramount.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the nature of the recommendation made to the student could differ, both in terms of the kind of recommendation or from where the recommendation originated. One Indonesian, female student, studying at Centre A for example stated, "my father wanted to choose a university which is close to my grandfather's house" (Centre A,

female Indonesian participant), highlighting not just the influence of family, but also the importance of family ties. As will be discussed later under the theme of 'destination, environment and connectedness' and in alignment to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002, p. 83) findings, family ties associate to the 'social links' factor, where an influencing factor for students is whether or not they have either friends or family living in the country where they intend to study, or indeed have relatives or friends who may have studied in the same country. A female Egyptian student at Centre C, by way of comparison, was influenced by her friend, stating, "I actually found out from my friend… she already came here before me …she's in her second year and she suggested [Centre C]". Friends were equally influential for a male Kuwaiti student studying at Centre E, as he described a situation where he,

> [f]ound out about this university from my friends. They were here last year. They are doing international foundation course, and now they are first year. So, I heard about it from them and they have been to [City E] last year, and they like it, so I decided to go. (Centre E, male Kuwaiti participant)

What is clear from these two latter examples is not just the influence of friends, but that those friends were coming from a position of experience, already studying at the suggested university. In contrast to the Indonesian student, where a practical with perhaps safety and monetary consideration could be inferred in her father's desire for her to be near a senior family member, the Egyptian and Kuwaiti students were having recommendations made to them from positions of the positive experience of others.

Thus it is evident that recommendations, aligned to the findings of Mazzarol et al. (1997), are indeed a significant factor in student decision-making of where to study and by inference the setting of expectations. The only outlier to this was one male, Chinese student studying at Centre D. This student appeared to have been highly influenced by a teacher from his school in Shanghai. He explained how the teacher made recommendations to him on

where to study in the UK and what he needed to consider in his application. As his story

emerged, however, it was clear that behind this lay a fatherly influence, "my father's job is in

finance, so he thinks England finance is greater. So, he let me come to England to study

business, and when I come back to China I can be in his company". So, while on the face of it

the teacher made recommendations around specific HEIs, there existed an additional driving

force behind the decision to study outside of China and specifically in the UK, derived from

his father.

Despite the clear influence of personal recommendations, particularly those of family

(as a general comment made by participants) and family members (those referenced

specifically, such as father, mother, brother, sister, uncle etc.), a university's ranking

(referenced by participants as those services such as the Guardian University Guide (2018)

and the Complete University Guide (2018b)) feature highly in many comments made by

participants as a further influence in their decision-making. This finding in relation to the

sway of university rating or subject ranking, concurs with research where the reputation for

quality of an HEI was found to be the highest rated influence for students choosing an HEI

(Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88).

While a university's stature as reflected in ranking systems is significant in student

choice of HEI, one cannot escape the undoubted influence of recommendations that, it would

appear, somewhat override the influence of university ranking. Here, then, an apparent

dichotomy emerges. It would appear participants from Middle Eastern countries are strongly

influenced by the information and recommendations made to them by their sponsors.

Although half of participants in the focus groups were from Middle Eastern countries, just

over 80% were represented in the two lowest ranked university Centres. Despite being the

lowest ranked university in the sample of Centres, as one Kuwaiti participant stated when

questioned about the importance of rating, they responded, "Yes, because [Centre B] is highly rated and I am sponsored by my country".

Notwithstanding these exceptions, recommendations ostensibly come from either family members, friends, sponsors or agents. It is evident these recommenders are of great importance and influence in the students' decision-making and setting of expectations. Of course, these recommendations cannot be considered in isolation from other factors. As I will come on to discuss, their influence equally interplays with a student's cognisance and understanding of the study destination.

Information Sources

Understandably, the availability and receipt of information are important factors not just for student decision-making, but equally in how their first impressions of an HEP are founded. Information is of course a somewhat catch-all phrase and can cover a multitude of sources. Thus, information provided to or received by participants, came via a number of formats and channels, namely digitally (whether websites, emailed information or social media) and physically (in the form of events and printed materials).

Prospective students, as gleaned from the focus groups, seek out and are provided information in multiple forms. These include advertising (through digital means, particularly websites), events (either in the student's home country or in the form of university open-days), from printed materials (such as prospectuses) and when instructions are sent to students via email (especially in pre-arrival processes concerning their entrance into the UK, the Study Centre and in relation to their first week or so of term or semester). It is these primary sources that emerged from the focus groups and will be explored in the following sections.

Adequacy of digital information received. Information provided during the pre-arrival stage was a major area of discussion at most Centres and in particular during the Centre E focus group. In the discussion at Centre E, a male Egyptian participant voiced his frustration (a likely consequence of him not being supported by a sponsor - a reason of course, but not a justification), when he said:

> I don't know why there's some people get sent things and not send it to the others. I know some people did the online registration, online enrolment, like before they came to the university. But for me I didn't receive anything like that. (male Egyptian participant, Centre E)

In this regard, there did seem to be varied experiences in the pre-arrival process and the perception and utility of information provided. By way of example, two students both at Centre F, one from Russia the other UAE, both had divergent views on information sent to them prior to their arrival. The male Russian student appeared wholly content, describing how he had been sent two emails a few weeks before arriving at the Centre. These emails, he explained, contained all of the information he felt he needed - a schedule of activities, where and when he needed to be at certain meetings or events, along with details of a college tour. Conversely, the female UAE participant did not experience the value of the information received in quite the same way. For her, not enough detail was provided, the information lacked detail and the timing of receipt was inappropriate. However, the difference in her description became apparent when she explained how she had chosen to arrive earlier into the country, prior to the commencement of studies. Thus, information emailed just two to three weeks in advance of her studies, for her was too late as she was already trying to settle in to UK life. Not only do we see variety of experiences and perceptions of information received, then, but equally the contextualisation of that information depending on the individual's situation.

Information in printed or digital form was not the only means by which students could have expectations set of their future study destination. Yet in this search for information, few students referred to printed materials. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise given the propensity of digital information available (in the broadest sense) and that, being international students, the ease of access to printed materials from UK-based HEIs is likely to be diminished. Hence, in feedback during the focus groups, such information sources did not figure highly. In the few instances they were referenced, however, the feedback was not entirely positive. At Centre C, a male Pakistani student felt the photography in a brochure was misleading when it depicted students in lectures, something the particular student had not experienced. A male Chinese student at Centre D was dissuaded by images of Chinese students in a prospectus for another university, stating that he did not want to be at an HEI with so many Chinese students. While it is noted that expectations are formed from an organisations' communications (Fripp, n.d.), generally, printed materials did not emerge as particularly relevant or prevalent sources of information through which to set study expectations.

The challenge of appropriateness and timeliness of information is exacerbated further, however, as highlighted by one male Palestinian participant's comment during the Centre C focus group, when he stated that he didn't read anything, that if the first page did not capture his attention he simply closed the email (male Palestinian participant, Centre C). A fellow female participant from Hong Kong concurred, "every email is so long, I'm just not interested in it", suggesting that the information received was often too detailed, that it was not "catchy" and that shortening sentences would help (female Hong Kong participant, Centre C). This female participant's reference to sentence length perhaps also highlights an additional challenge, that none of these students are native or first-language English speakers. In this regard, copious amounts of information, written most likely by first-language English

marketeers, may not be entirely sensitive and attuned to prospective students who are non-native English speakers and readers.

Issues pertaining to information adequacy are thus highlighted in these participants comments, posing challenges for the HEP operating Study Centres. These include the volume of information shared with arriving students, as well as the timing, ensuring sensitivity to students' personal circumstances. Additionally, the match between student identity and the characteristics of the HEI must be considered (Liang-Hsuan, 2008). Information exchanged between student and HEP alike are important factors in ensuring a good decision made by the student, as well as the university's preparedness for their needs.

Attendance at events. In addition to information being sought out or received digitally and on occasion through printed materials, there was mention of attendance at various physical events. In a similar fashion to printed materials, it was not uniformly spoken about, participants at only three focus groups referring to events as a means through which to attain information. Events themselves were largely in the form of either in-country exhibitions or an open-day at the university. Only one student at Centre A referenced the latter, when she had an opportunity to attend an open day at the university. Although the female student from UAE found it exciting and informative and enough to sway her decision on where to study, it became clear from further comments that it did not prepare her for studying at the Centre. In addition, three participants from India, Egypt and Indonesia spoke briefly of in-country events they had attended. All three, however, were undoubtedly influenced in their decision-making as a consequence of their attendance at the event. The female Indonesian student at Centre A explained her experiences, stating:

> I went to an exhibition in my country, [in] Jakarta. It's where like most top UK
> universities gathered there… So, we saw [University A], and we talked to the person.
> She was very kind and described the course that I want which is in a very high rating,

yeah… and then, so I chose to study [at University A]. (female Indonesian participant,

Centre A)

In a similar fashion, a male Egyptian student at Centre E who learnt about an event taking

place in Cairo via Facebook, found the event he attended to be influential in his decision-

making, along with the impression it created for him. Although he had a friend who had

previously studied at the same university, he was still undecided at the time of the event. He

explained that the event in Cairo had multiple universities in attendance, but that finding

information about the location of the university and its city environment meant it took him

"one second" to choose University E, and from then on his mind was set.

Evidently events are both informative and can have an influential and profound effect

on prospective students. As stated earlier, few international students have an opportunity to

physically visit overseas universities as part of their decision-making process, despite being

noted for their effect in offering prospective students an opportunity to start their study

journey, meet staff and get a sense of the study and living environment (Morgan, 2013). First

contact for prospective international students must instead take place at local events, where a

comparable experience to campus-based events must be created. This form of first contact in

its broadest sense clearly creates an impression of where students desire to study. In this

manner, it lays the foundations of their expectations against which to measure actual

experiences.

Research and processes prior to arrival. In terms of where the participants were

considering to study - whether the UK as a destination, the specific university and in the

context of my research, the International Study Centre – my focus group participants

appeared to initially seek out information in relation to their preferred university, followed by

additional information relating to the Study Centre and Foundation programme. As with

some opinions regarding information provided by agents, there were divergent experiences of

the depth and utility of information provided, especially relating to websites. A female

Indonesian participant at Centre A felt she could find adequate information online about the

university, but that when it came to the foundation programme and International Study

Centre, she "didn't really know what to expect". In contrast, a male Pakistani student at

Centre B felt everything he needed was on the website, not just information about the Centre,

but equally "the classes, teachers and teaching methodology".

      A stated above, there appear differing views on the level of information prospective

students have access to or feel would be of use (and that they are able to uncover). In general,

however, a theme from participants at most Centres and across the spectrum of nationalities,

was the sense of a dearth of needed information, specifically when it came to the Study

Centre. As a male participant at Centre E commented:

> a few weeks before arriving, I had no clue about what I'm going to face in here. I just
>
> came like that, I didn't know anything about it. I only know this place. I know that I'm
>
> going to study in here, that's it. (male Saudi Arabian participant, Centre E)

A similar experience was described by two female participants at Centre A, one from UAE,

the other Indonesia. Their experience was of little information available to them on the

website, meaning they did not know what to expect, specifically in relation to the Foundation

programme. The student from UAE expanded saying:

> applying to the Study Centre was a little bit blind for me. They had the requirements
>
> in degrees and stuff, but they didn't have which progression degree would lead to
>
> what. They didn't have the specific requirements for other course people with other
>
> course backgrounds … so, it was little bit blind, I had to search for a little bit and that
>
> wasn't so easy. (female UAE participant, Centre A)

      Of 18 participants across three Centres, four participants from Kuwait, Oman and

Egypt concurred with this view, feeling that not enough information was provided to them

about the Centre, the classes and timetabling. In this void of information as expressed by some participants, no doubt creates issues for how expectations could misalign to eventual experience. Additionally, it may also point to how gaps are created and filled as a means to anticipate where students will be studying.

Aside from these views on the pre-arrival information, concerns were also expressed around some of the pre-arrival processes. A male Indian student at Centre D captured the challenge of the application process for international students, as well as some potential weaknesses in the processes laid out by the Centre itself. As he described,

> it wasn't a clean, steady flow process. There was a lot of turbulence, in terms of the documentation that was needed. The instructions that I was given used to change email by email. So, they used to make it clearer after I'd sent an email with everything they needed, and then they would send back an email saying 'no, we need this', and I would be like, ok you could have said that in the previous email. And then I would send that, and again I would get a response as well, saying 'ok, we need this as well' (male Indian participant, Centre D).

Process challenges, in terms of how the participants experienced them, were compounded further by response times. As a male student at Centre C described, during his accommodation application process he would receive emails stating a 24-hour response time, but then would have to chase after two days for a response to his enquiry. In any service industry, such a break in promises will no doubt have a detrimental impact on the customer experience and perception of the organisation from which they are purchasing (Mario Cubillo et al., 2006). For sure, this "first service image on the prospective student… may be the crucial moment" (Mario Cubillo et al., 2006, p. 104). Noting that ease of admissions and immigration procedures are highly ranked factors in student decision-making (Binsardi &

Ekwulugo, 2003), no doubt a poor experience could negatively disconfirm expectations established prior to arrival.

Pre-conceptions of the destination. Emerging from the focus group participant feedback was that to either validate or reinforce any information provided to them by friends, family, agent or sponsor, about the country, city, university or Study Centre, participants would tend to undertake their own research. While sub-categories relevant to knowledge and awareness evidenced by Mazzarol et al. (1997) included factors such as information available, the awareness of the HEIs' quality and reputation, as well as whether or not a participant's qualifications would be accepted, most of the focus group participant pre-conceptions centred on the host country.

Accepting that it can never entirely be clear when a service begins (Grönroos, 1997), it was not conclusive from participant responses as to the sequencing of approaches when using information from other sources. For example, from participant responses it was not possible to ascertain whether their decision journey started with a recommendation, with the students' ensuing research undertaken to validate that recommendation, or whether they may have researched a country and its HEPs first, then narrowed down their choice through a discussion with family or friends. However, one male participant from Pakistan simply commented, "in terms of research, I just asked my brother", going on to say, "I did no research because I already knew [Centre C] was a good university and stuff. And if I got accepted here, it would be better than going to [any] other University." It could be argued, that an assumption is made by a number of participants regarding their understanding of the UK (if not entirely the HEP), stating that they already have an impression (whether though contacts or media); and that "as a well-known country, and… a first-world country" the UK is familiar to them (male Russian participant, Centre F).

A students' pre-conceptions of where to study, either in terms of location or university, are naturally imbued by those personal connections and recommenders referenced earlier. Thus participants' pre-conceptions focussed on the UK itself, the culture and its people, along with various cities (including the one where they chose to study). Noting above the high proportion of family and friends recommending the country or HEI, often based on family connections or actual experience, one cannot divorce from where the subsequent notion of prior knowledge was therefore derived. As a male student from Saudi Arabia studying at Centre E explained:

> For me I know a lot about British culture, about the people living here. Because a lot of my friends, my family they've been here, they studied, and they stayed here. Like one of my brothers have been here for 20 years now. Also, I've been to the UK three or four times before coming to study here. So, I think I know pretty much about how it is here.

This perspective of preceding familiarity of the UK was reinforced by a male, Pakistani student at Centre C who commented, "I've been coming here since I was a kid, I've been going to London and stuff. So, I was comfortable here". The theme of familiarity with the country and HEI peppers the participant comments in relation to knowledge and awareness, and as a factor in their decision-making was consistently referenced at all focus groups.

Seemingly unsubstantiated impressions of the UK gleaned from unverified sources in many cases – namely word of mouth - emerged as a trend in participant responses. A number of participants discussed how they had developed an impression of the UK, its people and an often-referenced factor, the UK weather. Considered in the context of Mazzarol et al. (1997), given the high proportion of recommendations for both country and HEI destination, the availability of information appears largely to come from 'physical' sources, that is to say, family members, friends, agents or sponsors. That is not to say, as was highlighted earlier,

students did not make use of additional information such as prospectuses, websites, fairs or exhibitions, but these appear to be as supporting information sources, as opposed to the primary font of information from which to build an impression of their forthcoming destination.

Potentially, of course, solely relying on subjective, individual perceptions of a country can be a limiting approach to constructing a conception of a country and its people. This was starkly illustrated by a male, Pakistani student at Centre B, as he described how a negative impression prior to his arrival into the UK changed as he became more familiar with his surrounds and environment:

Before coming I had the impression that people often are really racist and that they drink a lot. But when I came here, I found that not all of them… that mostly people are really nice towards you. They help you a lot whenever they can, they really can. So that impression changed. Like, I had the impression that they were mostly drunk and mostly racist. But when I came here, I found out that it's totally different.

Fortunately for this student, a negative impression did not prevent him from making a choice of where to study. Although as he explained he did have family living in the UK, he had never visited and was nervous about the prospect before deciding where to study. Yet it was his family who made suggestions about where he should apply. Having verified their recommendations with research into the university's reputation and ranking - a factor acknowledged as key in student decision-making - he made his decision.

This male Pakistani student's experience, however, was not entirely representative of all the participants. While it did trigger a discussion during the Centre B focus group concerning local society issues of drunken behaviour or racism, for most students when discussing from where their knowledge and awareness derived, and the influence of family and friends, it was not with such initially negative conceptions. For most participants

discussing this theme, they were provided positive views of both the country, the university and city within which it resided, and the Study Centre itself.

The Destination, Environment and Connectedness

References to cost concerns, the fees for study, the price of accommodation or managing money occurred at all focus groups, although with considerably lower frequency compared to other aforementioned 'pull' factors. Concerns around paying for studies (in a sustainable manner), the relative fees charged by HEPs, fees for accommodation and additional administrative charges (such as visa application processing or the taking of IELTS tests), all figured in participants' comments.

Interestingly, and in contrast to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) findings, the choice of destination country as influenced by its relative proximity to a students' home country or time zone did not appear to be such a major factor. While the location and choice of country was referenced in the decision-making process, for my focus group participants the decision they made was generally between whether to study in the UK, US or Canada. Never was the location alluded to in the context of how close it was to their home country. That said, proximity from family no doubt became a factor as they arrived into the UK and spent time away from their family. And while environmental factors played a part in how settled they felt, for certain participants, having friends or family near-by was undoubtedly of value and an influence in their destination choice.

Concerns Regarding Cost of Study

Although fees and the cost of studies were raised by participants, it did not always appear to be solely in relation to those fees being high or unaffordable. Participants also voiced cost concerns to do with the administrative processes. However, for some participants, the cost of tuition, followed by the cost of accommodation and living, were undoubtedly factors in where they ultimately chose to study. Of interest was that participants at one of the

lowest ranked Centres, and the one with the joint lowest fees, discussed the cost of tuition most frequently. Notably, Centre E has the highest proportion of Middle Eastern students, many of whom were sponsored either by a home-country embassy, via government agencies or through work-related sponsorship programmes.

Notwithstanding the factors pertaining to recommendations and awareness discussed earlier, and the notable influence of family and friends' recommendations, at Centre B in particular the fees emerged as a primary consideration in choice of where to study. Participants were clearly attuned to the affordability of the tuition fees. Although none made overt reference to Study Centres at other universities being more expensive, in essence this was inferred through their comments. As one male, Kuwaiti participant commented, "why I chose [Centre B] in particular, was the fees. And because it's not near London, London is really expensive…". This latter comment was further endorsed by a female, Vietnamese student at the same university. Although the affordability of tuition fees was of importance to her, and she had additionally been supported by a scholarship "to help reduce my financial burden and my family", being away from a large metropolis such as London, equally was a factor in considering the relative cost of living.

The level of fee charged is almost inversely proportional to where the university ranks (Table 5). As outlined in my sample, the six Centres where I held my focus groups are all at top 100 ranked UK universities, based on the Times UK university rankings (UKUni, n.d.). Centres C and F are in the top 30, Centres A and D rank between 31 and 60, with Centres B and E ranked between 61 to 100. For the purposes of anonymity, I am not stating the precise rankings. Table 5 shows the lowest ranked university has the lowest fee (typically this would be in the region of £11,000 for the 2017/18 academic year), compared to the top ranked university where fees are in excess of 40% more expensive.

Centre	Relative University Ranking	Fee ratio for Foundation programme, compared to a relative baseline of £11,000
E	6	100%
B	5	100%
D	4	117%
A	3	135%
F	2	143%
C	1	145%

Table 5: relative fee levels of focus group Centres in comparison to university ranking (to ensure anonymity of university, rankings shown are not actual ranking, but how the Centres order against their university's ranking position).

Naturally, student participants come from varied countries, backgrounds and family situations. Much like the female Vietnamese student at Centre B, the awareness of cost and its impact on family, and indeed the sustainability of funding studies, was equally of concern to a female, Hong Kong student studying at Centre C. She described her middle-class background and upbringing, stating that her father would even tell her he would sell things in order for her to continue her degree studies. As she said, "it feels unsafe, because maybe when he's run out of cash, and then maybe there's still two years to go, and what should I do? So yes, I'm trying to keep all the things down to budget". In this regard, she was very budget aware and sensitised to her family's circumstances. Her comments bring into stark relief the burden under which she studied, as well as the maturity in awareness of her family's financial situation. It serves as a powerful reminder of the emotional and psychological burden under which many students study.

Tuition fees aside, cost of living and concerns relating to accommodation fees were the next most referenced attribute. The cost of accommodation was often talked about in the context both of its relative quality and the choices available to international students. A male Chinese student at Centre D, complained that his kitchen was too small and that he was not able to cook Chinese food (that required using multiple cooking hobs). Yet, he had not been given any great choice during the selection process and felt that it was too expensive relative to what he was provided. This was echoed by students at a four Centres, who upon arriving at the university accommodation, were quickly able to make comparisons to other students - often domestic students - who, from participants' perspectives at least, appeared to have better and more varied accommodation, "it's kind of not fair, you pay the same price, but get a different room it might be smaller" (female UAE participant, Centre A). In this regard, the cost per se may not actually have been the issue, but rather the choices available for rooms and equality of provision of amenities.

Many of the cost of living issues were stated relative to the participants' home country and fluctuations in currency. Altbach (1991) acknowledged how host and sending countries' economic difficulties (and the likely changes in current values) are a primary factor in restricting international student mobility. This was illustrated by a male Taiwanese student at Centre A, who stated that the weakened British pound in recent years had been a contributing factor in his decision to study in the UK.

Other cost of living issues centred around travel. Discussed later, there are some undoubted cultural differences and observations of transport availability and effectiveness in the UK; but with regards to the cost of travel, the views were somewhat divergent. Some participants during the Centre B focus group engaged in a debate about the cost of their local travel. Train travel in particular they found to be expensive and consequently restrictive. They were further aggrieved that the status of domestic students at the Centre B university

meant such students were able to receive student discount travel cards, an option not open to international students. The issue was further compounded as, due to the nature of their international study visa, international students were not permitted to work. Thus, a compounding budget and cost issue emerged where they were neither able to fully access student discount options (open to domestic students), and concurrently unable to work due to their study visa restrictions. Conversely students at Centre E commented on how good and variable the transport options were compared to their Middle Eastern home countries, with no issues about the cost of use. A female, Vietnamese participant at Centre B, also commented on the contingent benefits of using public transport, explaining how she preferred to use the bus and would consciously sit next to home students as another opportunity to practice English.

Interestingly, visa costs emerged as an issue for students, despite their relatively low value compared to tuition fees and accommodation costs. However, the primary issue appeared to be more a matter of process, "I had to wait 15 days and the second time I had to wait another 15 days and it's too long. And because it's really confusing I don't know whether my visa application will be a success or not, I need to buy the books for my studies" (female Vietnamese participant, Centre B), only then to be exacerbated by the cost of the visa application. At centre F, a male Russian student described in detail the process he and his family had to go through to secure his study and travel visas. For international students, there is also the requirement to take a UKVI recognised IELTS test. The process of multiple steps, each with costs attached, compounded the sense of dissatisfaction with the process, with the fees charged aggravating the situation. As one student further explained, once they had finished their studies at the Centre, they would have to go through the process all over again in order for the university to accept them, an additional worry during their studies.

How participants managed their money also emerged as an issue with which to contend. A male Indian student at Centre D, vividly and eloquently captured his situation and concerns that equally peppered other participant comments. He explained how he had been "pampered all my life" and had never been "accountable for the money I've spent". He went on to describe the stress of managing money for the first time, spending a great deal early on and having to adapt consequently, tracking expenditure but never really certain whether his outgoings might be too high or too low. His story concluded by affirming that money "was my major concern, because coming over here was fine, my English is… well, I speak well. I also get along with people quite easily, but I think money was the major concern for me."

Costs issues are varied and complex. Many of the sub-themes that emerged did indeed concur with Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). However, associated to costs issues with relation to 'social cost issues' (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 86), which may be indicative both of the specific point in time of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research, the demographic profile of participants (predominantly south-east Asian), and their arriving country being Australia. Similarly, no evidence came through relating to visa application cost issues. Again, this may be to do with both the profile of sending and receiving countries.

Recent UKVI changes have certainly made for more tortuous and costly processes for international students wanting to study in the UK. The situation is further compounded by the participants in my focus groups entirely studying on Foundation programmes delivered by a private provider. In the UK, providers of private education to universities do not currently operate under the same UKVI policies as universities. Although the universities either approve or validate the pathway programmes, they do not run them and instead the provider operates under an embedded college status (QAA, n.d.). Students studying on such programmes, therefore, are not issued a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) by the university for their Foundation studies. Consequently, if they successfully complete their

Foundation programme and are accepted onto their desired university degree course, they must reapply for a study visa, returning to their home country before formally entering their degree studies. As highlighted above, this creates both an additional layer of anxiety, while magnifying the associated process costs.

Environmental Factors

In contemplating the environment in relation to study destination choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), one is seeking themes relating to physical conditions - the weather, the city, university location; as well as themes relating to lifestyle and the teaching and learning environment. Undoubtedly, the environment in this context was a concern for participants. Explicit references to the 'environment' were considerably fewer compared to other 'pull' factors (Mazzarol et al., 1997). With the majority of students living away from home for the first time - regardless of whether they had family and friends or had visited the UK previously - expectations of what they might experience emerged. As a male student from Pakistan, studying at Centre B explained,

> …one of the main issues for me was that I have never stayed away from home, so it was going to be a big issue staying here one year and then 3 years for the University. And what was popping up in my mind, was the environment and the people here, it was going to be totally different from my country. So, these were two issues that worried me.

Encapsulated here are the concerns additionally expressed by a number of participants, that is, anxieties about the unknown and unfamiliar environment; particularly compared to their home country. Here, we can also discern the choice differences and consequent considerations for participants at city-based universities, and those where the campus is self-contained, away from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan life. Two of the six Centres in my study would be considered campus-based universities. Neither is particularly close to a city,

instead being largely self-contained on the outskirts of smaller UK towns. For a male, Russian participant at Campus A, this was certainly a consideration, the campus-based nature of the environment being a tipping point in his decision of where to study. In contrast, a male student at Centre F, a university and Study Centre in the heart of a large UK city, the draw of this environment was a key consideration of where to study.

Of course, aside from personal preference, it often comes down to perception. While the notion of a city-based campus was a draw for a female participant from UAE studying at Centre F, when she compared it to London she referred to it as "more of a village-type of life", commenting that it was "very easy to reach and friendlier when it comes to communication". So, although located within a large UK city, this participant still felt the location of Centre F was preferable to a capital city such as London. Similarly, for participants at Centre E (also a mid-sized UK city), comparisons were made to both London and Manchester. Participants did not feel as though they were studying in a city, at least in comparison to the aforementioned city locations, feeling that such cities were "too busy… with too many distractions" (female Kuwaiti student, Centre E).

Location aside, another often referenced physical environmental factor was the weather. Interestingly, few participants had anything dramatically negative to say. Of those participants who specifically talked about the weather, almost 80% were male, with some two-thirds from Middle Eastern countries. All had researched the environment in which they would be living, so cold, gloomy, rainy conditions were not in themselves a surprise. My focus groups largely took place during late October and early November and thus the UK was moving into wintery conditions. All acknowledged the differences to their home country, a high proportion of comments from those participants from Middle Eastern countries being accustomed to considerably higher temperatures. Despite this, some actually appreciated the change in environment. For example, a female Indonesian student reflected on how, in her

home country, the discomfort brought on by heat and consequently sweating whenever she walked anywhere. Alongside comments about the weather, descriptors such as 'drab', 'gloomy', 'cold' and 'rain' were ever present. Despite this, it was not a deterrent to their decision-making.

Distance from Home Country

With comments of homesickness and the local presence of family members, one could infer that distance from a participants' home country was an influencing factor, yet it was never stated explicitly. However, until a student travels they would not know if they would be homesick, although they may harbour concerns. The only reference to the location of study relative to a participants' home country was from a female participant from Hong Kong. Studying at Centre C, one of the primary attributes for her choosing a university and destination country was making sure it was far from her home. For her, escaping a stultifying home life and, as she described, a mother who depended on her all of the time, was a key factor in her study destination choice. She explained Thailand had also been a consideration, but she did not feel that was far enough away. Noting the time zone differences, she went on to talk about how she was still connected to her mother, but that they could only really speak either in the morning or evening given the time zone differences, allowing the student some much needed freedom.

A similar situation was described by a male Qatari participant at Centre A. As he said, "I'm the one who wanted to be away from home, I don't want to be with my parents, I want to decide my own life". Thus, again, we see geographic proximity being an influencing factor, but one counter to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), instead with a few students (from UAE, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) making very deliberate decisions to use distance from their home country as a means to their independence.

Local Connections

The presence of friends or family, either living or studying within the host country, is undoubtedly an influencing factor in where students chose to study and how they formed impressions of the host location. As described above, personal recommendations from family and friends are key influencing factors in how students' make decisions on where to study. Secondary to this, is whether those recommenders are also present in the destination country.

References to friends and family were of high frequency during the focus groups, with the highest weighting for Centres B and E. These two Centres at the lowest ranked universities, contained the highest proportion of students from countries in the Middle East. On the whole, the higher the ranking of the university, the fewer references. The only outlier was Centre C, the second highest ranked university. A smaller focus group in terms of participants admittedly, but a group all the same where half of the attendees were from the Middle East. Further, nearly three-quarters of the references to friends and family came from those two students, suggesting again a relationship in the importance, and a greater importance relative to participants from other countries in my focus groups, of friends and family to students emanating from Middle Eastern countries.

In my analysis of personal recommendations earlier, friends emerge as factors in influencing choice of study destination - both in terms of the host country and university. Often, it appears, this is through those friends' personal experiences themselves. Many of the comments relating to friends as influencers also note that they have either studied, or in the context of social links, are studying at the same university. For students having left their home country, no doubt feeling part of a community is important, so knowing there might be friends within the same HEP must be a draw. However, this is a largely inferred conclusion, as few students overtly discussed the importance of friends studying presently being an influence, other than the lived experience reinforcing the weight of their friends'

recommendation. A male Kuwaiti student studying at Centre E, captured the essence when he said:

> the atmosphere here in [City E] is like a family, very friendly. My cousin told me about it, but when I experienced it here, it was different. So, I didn't feel, like, a difference between here and home. Of course, it's a different country, but I feel like I'm home because I have a lot of friends here.

Thus, while this student's friends influenced his decision due to their prior experience, their continued presence in the university city also helped him settle into his new environment.

One cannot undervalue the draw of social inclusion and the weighted effect when a recommendation is received from a friend studying at the same HEP. Noting the culture shock experienced by non-EU students arriving for studies in the UK (Ramachandran, 2011) and the importance of cultural acceptance and integration, particularly those students with heightened sensitivities to religious beliefs or from protected environments, the power of a friend's recommendation is evidently strong. While universities continue their work to develop diversity and inclusivity programmes in support of students from multiple countries of origin and social or religious beliefs, the comfort and security of a friend advising another friend from a similar background, reinforcing and perpetuating the presence of one's own country of origin and thus social alignment, cannot be underestimated.

Leaving one's family to study abroad is a major step for anyone, magnified for sure when you are a relatively young, non-native English speaker and perhaps have no experience of your chosen destination country. Family, then, not only play a part in influencing a students' decision, but their presence in-country is also a factor. However, aside from the female Indonesian participant at Centre A referenced earlier, whose father recommended a university close to her grandfather's house to give peace of mind in relation to her welfare, few participants were in quite such close proximity to their family. That said, the closest

example of a family connection was that of a female Egyptian participant at Centre C. Along with one of her friends, her sister was not only an influencer in her decision of where to study, they also lived together in the same accommodation, "it wasn't the same as I expected it to be. I thought it would have been different. but then because I lived in the studio thing with my sister, it's completely different". Such an example was most certainly an outlier in the data, there being no others in participant responses.

While references to friends and family for participants from the Middle East figure highly, but in large part as decision influencers as opposed to a majority of social connections, there was one differential with a female, Hong Kong participant at Centre C. Although she had described her need to escape the influence of her mother, a family member in the form of her cousin actually helped her settle in. Her cousin had been an influencer in her decision to come to the UK (along with a Hong Kong-based agent) and was studying in Bournemouth. Thus, her relative proximity to this participants' university was of undoubted help during her arrival process. No doubt, then, this presence of friends and family assists students in their transition, from home country to life at university and in a new country.

Summary Comments

As a pre-cursor to their arrival, evident in the data is how students' expectations are formed, shaped from multiple influencing forces. Not all of these are necessarily overtly designed by the HEP, instead coming from strong views of family members and friends, potentially derived from some form of prior experience. Advisors, particularly recruitment agents, have a further significant role to play, both in the dissemination of information as well as suggesting ideal destinations. Notably, their 'advice' may well be coloured by their own relationship and incentivisation from the HEP. Information about potential study destinations is consumed by prospective students, ostensibly in digital format, building their anticipation of the HEP environment into which they might arrive. Concerns materialise, particularly in

around the expense of their forthcoming studies and further anxieties surface during the

administrative preparations. Thus, a picture is formed of the pre-arrival stages during which

expectations are formed. As noted in the literature (Fripp, n.d.; Miller, 1077), these establish

over time as the emergent 'customer' anticipates the 'service', entering the disconfirmation

paradigm.

5. Findings: Post-Arrival

Upon arrival and at the outset of their studies, entering as it were their 'experience' phase, the first few weeks settling in to university and the Study Centre are critical. As Morgan (2013) states, "[e]xpectations set during the first contact… and pre-arrival stages need to be met and continually managed to ensure students have faith in the education in which they are investing" (Morgan, 2013, p. 22). Thus, it is important to understand how students responded to their arrival and orientation, as well as their first impressions of staff. As Morgan (2013) further argues, "the academic imperative" (Morgan, 2013, p. 21) must be front and centre of any arrival, induction and orientation process.

Thus, the fourth overall theme to emerge was in relation to participants' initial impressions of the university and Study Centre, and their arrival experiences. Student arrival, induction and administration process experiences are examined, along with participants preliminary views of the study environment and notably, their experiences of whether or not they start to connect to the university and Study Centre environment.

Finally, my fifth theme explores participants' experiences of the teaching and learning environment. With prior knowledge of a Foundation programme seemingly established from participant responses, key issues pertaining to the course structure and participants' relationship with their teaching staff are discussed widely. Additionally, concerns are voiced by both focus group and interview participants in relation to the 'school-like' nature of the Foundation programme structure. To conclude this final theme, there is an examination of student learning experiences.

Initial Impressions and Support During Arrival

Participants' observations of their arrival into the UK and the first few weeks at their university and in the Study Centre, converged upon themes around how they were supported upon arrival and were made welcome; along with the teaching and learning environment

itself. Feedback was provided about the induction process and administrative support, along with the appropriateness of the Study Centre facility, specifically in relation to the Foundation structure, as well as the 'mechanics' around the programme in terms of the timetabling, student attendance and classroom set-up.

Having travelled long distances and for most participants, arriving for the first time not just into the UK but equally at their selected university and Study Centre, making them feel welcome and supported during this arrival and orientation phase is critical to maintaining the no doubt already established sense of anticipation and excitement, tinged with apprehension (Morgan, 2013). While the Centre will likely be informed about the individual arriving students and experienced in inducting a diverse group of international students, not all students will be arriving with the same level of preparation. Further, as exemplified in the themes illustrated below, conceptions of the learning and teaching environment - understandably central to the overall student experience - present a wide spectrum of experiences. Transitioning students in this manner, from expectations set during their recruitment to the Study Centre, compounded by students arriving into a relatively alien context, no doubt creates challenges for the Centre's receiving staff, risking in resultant negative disconfirmation.

Arrival and Induction

Having founded expectations during their decision-making and recruitment process, students' first impressions of the university and its Study Centre is upon arrival into the UK. A few participants commented on their physical arrival into the UK. Two male students, one from Kuwait, the other Russia, at Centres B and F respectively, talked about landing into the UK and travelling to the Centre. Neither had any major issues - although they did comment on the expense of transport. Yet both felt they had few issues and that the Centre staff were there to support them had they encountered any problems. The low frequency of comments

on this phase of arrival, which one would have assumed to be quite a nerve-ranking undertaking, perhaps implies the process worked well and that it therefore was not a significant area of concern. Instead, participants at all except one Centre remarked on their experience of the weather as they arrived, a number from the Middle East, along with one or two from Asia, noting the considerable temperature difference.

Four focus groups discussed their experiences of Centre induction programmes - clustered at the two lowest and two highest ranked HEIs. Interestingly, of the eight participants who spoke about their experience of the induction process and programme, only two were not from the Middle East (as they were, being from Russia and Vietnam). This is of particular note given observations made when students from the Middle East discussed the influence of advisors in their decision-making and information receipt, specifically those advised and supported by sponsors.

For nearly all participants, this method of introduction to the Centre and university, was of help to them. Only one male Palestinian participant at Centre C found the induction "boring", mostly in relation to the delivery of information, as he did admit that the information itself was helpful. All other participants across the four Centres, however, found the induction to be of great help. Essentially, the provision of more information about their course, the progression options open to them, the Centre facilities and teaching methods came through, providing them additional clarity as to what they would be doing during their studies. Touring the university campus, the city in which they were based and some of the specific facilities such as the library, figured highly in comments relating to the induction. As a Russian participant at Centre F neatly captured,

> the induction week, which was conducted by the college, helped a great deal - to see
> the city (there was a city tour), there was a campus tour, then they helped us with such
> things as, NHS and police registration, which is required for some students. Then

there are actually many more things that I can't even think of straight away, but right

now as of today, thanks to the induction week, I have no issues dealing with them.

(male Russian participant, Centre F)

For these participants newly arriving into the UK and the university Study Centre, the

physical delivery of information during an induction, combined with tours of the city and

campus, clearly brought their expectations to life and began their process of acculturation.

Impressions of the Study Centre and Accommodation

As with participant experiences of registration and feeling part of the university,

differing opinions of the Study Centre itself were evident amongst participants. One female

Vietnamese participant at Centre B was delighted by the Study Centre being as it was at "the

heart of… the university" with "easy access to all the facilities". Similarly, for a male

Chinese participant at Centre F, the facility played a major part in his decision-making and he

was impressed by the "fantastic facility". However, on the whole these comments tended to

be in the minority. Across all focus groups, participant comments about their respective

Centres' facilities ranged from being 'surprised' to 'shocked' by what they encountered. For

participants at Centre A, they were surprised how separate the Study Centre was relative to

the main university campus.

This sense of separateness was echoed by Centre D participants, who admitted that

they were aware the Study Centre would be a separate building, but not that it would feel

quite so isolated from the central campus. Those same participants at Centre A were equally

surprised to find the facility somewhat run-down, more "like a house… than a proper

building" (female Indonesian participant, Centre A). "Shocked" was how one male Egyptian

participant at Centre E described his initial impression of the Centre. He went on to say, "it

should have been better to be honest, the building (I'm talking about the building). I didn't

imagine it to be like this, I thought it was going to be something big and new". A discussion

ensued between the participants during the Centre E focus group, with a female Kuwaiti

participant agreeing with her Egyptian colleague, adding how the facility did not make them

feel like university students. When questioned further, it became apparent they had not

previously seen pictures of the building that housed the Study Centre, instead they referred to

images they had seen in materials shared with them of other university buildings. And in

making those comparisons, they felt their building to be less well-kept and older than those

used by university students. Such an experience was echoed by a Middle Eastern student at

Centre F, who reflected on his thoughts regarding his early impressions of the Centre: "Did I

come all the way from Dubai to be in this sort of building?". No doubt, where students'

teaching and learning is housed is of importance, and clearly there was a general sense from

participants of not feeling fully informed or prepared for what they initially encountered at

the Study Centres.

    In follow-up one-to-one interviews participants' feedback relating to the Centre

facilities were equally not always entirely positive. From the interview participants, none had

seen pictures or images of the Centre in advance of their arrival. It would appear, largely

gleaned from the specific university websites, participants had viewed some images of the

university facilities – such as certain campus buildings, the library and sports facilities for

example. However, when it came to the Centre, this remained a surprise. For the male

Russian interview participant, he had not expected the Centre "to be located in an office

centre" (male Russian participant, Centre F), voicing his and fellow student concerns that the

rooms would therefore not be adequate for holding classes and seminars. Aside from some

minor operating niggles (such as with lifts or from time-to-time classroom smart board

software issues) he did, however, acknowledge that everything largely worked well in terms

of the Centre facility and teaching set-up. The male Pakistani interview participant explained

how he had envisaged "huge lecture halls… [with] one single teacher teaching at the

bottom". Instead, he found himself in a more traditional classroom arrangement. This was not considered a negative, though. As he went on to explain, a consequence of the smaller class sizes meant that "the teacher [could] give his attention to all students who require it" (male Pakistani interview participant, Centre B).

There was, then, a negative disconfirmation of expectations when interview participants' actually experienced the Centre facility. Although interview participants, still relatively early in their studies, may not have deemed it entirely detrimental to their studies, a clear mismatch emerged. Quality is noted as the number one factor influencing student choice of HEI (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Acknowledging further that facilities rate highly as a measure when considering the notion of a university's quality (Mei & Mark, 2007; Pimpa, 2005), this is a noted issue for managing student expectations.

Teaching and learning facilities aside, the participants' accommodation was also a point of discussion and indeed contention. A highly referenced theme, participants' impressions of where they were staying were discussed at every focus group. Of the participants who engaged in a discussion about accommodation, only two Middle Eastern participants at Centre's B and C respectively, lived outside of university rooms. These two participants instead lived in houses with a relative. For those who used university provided accommodation, once again there was a sense that they had not entirely been treated fairly, relative to domestic students. At the Centre A and E focus groups, two participants, both female, one from UAE and the other Egypt, made similar remarks regarding an impression that first year university students had been given the 'better' accommodation.

The size of the facility relative to the cost, was equally a discussion point of note. At three Centres (A, D and E), participants felt that the price paid for accommodation was too high, particularly in light of the size of either their rooms, the bathroom and kitchen facilities. Not surprisingly, as they settled in and met people, they could make direct comparisons to

what other students were afforded, reinforcing this sense that somehow they had not been treated equitably. "It's shocking that we pay the same price, but we get different rooms", was how a female Indonesian participant at Centre A voiced her concerns, echoed by a male Indian student at Centre D who felt that "for the kind of money that they asked us to pay, they could have given something that was a lot better". Thus, as with the Centre facility, these international student participants across the focus groups, were left with an impression that they were not entirely treated equitably, and further were charged too high a price for the service and facility provided.

Administration Processes

Induction aside, students' arrival into the UK and the Study Centre required a considerable amount of administration. Participants commented on the processes they had to undertake upon arrival - such as registration with the local police, Visa processes, registration with the university and settling into accommodation. While seemingly burdensome, generally the participants appeared to cope with all that was required. Again, there were only one or two instances where participants felt things could have gone more smoothly.

As international students enrolled onto a Foundation programme run by a third-party but embedded within the university, students have access to most university facilities (such as the library, online resources, sports facilities etc.). They are generally considered 'affiliate' students and must therefore register with both the university and the Centre. For participants at Centre B, this was not deemed to be a positive experience. While they felt the processes within the Centre ran smoothly, when they were required to register with the university they felt they were given a very tight window of opportunity (one day), meaning a somewhat long and arduous process. The consequence was that it did not make them feel wholly part of the university (a sub-theme discussed below), which as part of their overall welcome to their new study home did not make for a good impression.

On the positive side, a number of participants commented on the supportiveness of Centre staff when it came to administration and settling them into their environment. As a female Vietnamese participant at Centre B commented, "I was really impressed with the staff here, because they are very welcome, warm and friendly. Everybody is helpful and informative and enthusiastic with students, that's my impression". At Centre A, a female participant from UAE also talked positively about how Centre staff, especially welfare support, would sit with her and take her through what needed to be done, always checking in with her to ensure she was coping. 'Friendly' being the most commonly used descriptor when it came to participants talking about their experiences with support from staff and teachers, this experience and perception was echoed by participants at other Centres and across the nationality spectrum.

A Sense of Belonging

Considering the student experience when registering with the university itself, as illustrated above there appeared to be contrasting experiences from participants in feeling part of and welcome at the university itself. One female participant from UAE at Centre A was incredibly excited to be at the university, feeling energised when first on campus, surrounded by fellow students. Participants at Centre C also commented on the scale of the university and its campus, being 'impressed' by the number of students. However, as a male Palestinian participant remarked, this was "sometimes good, sometimes bad". In this regard, he actually felt the number of international students to be a surprise to him and not something that he had considered (or been made aware of) prior to his arrival. In a similar fashion, a male Kuwaiti participant at Centre E, did not feel as international students they were entirely part of the university. As the Centre was only for international students, he implied a sense of separateness from the university, where there were "a lot of English students", and thus was

acutely aware of the difference in studying in a Centre solely accommodating international students.

For some participants, this early sense of not entirely belonging or not being treated equitably, flowed into comments regarding activities outside of their studies - such as through sports clubs or university societies. Referenced during four of the focus groups (at Centres A, B, D and F), there was an acknowledgement that most universities provided good facilities, certainly when it came to sports. The comments instead focussed more on the set up of activities and the relative levels of engagement. Most of the participants at these aforementioned Centre focus groups, had assumed multiple societies, with three participants at Centre B commenting how they had read about all of the various societies on the university website. It appeared, however, that a combination of exclusivity and lethargy existed. As a male participant from Tajikistan explained, while the facilities were indeed available, few events were advertised effectively around the campus, thus making it difficult to build engagement. Of greater concern to participants was the number of international societies. "I think that every different nationality has their own Society", was how a female Hong Kong participant at Centre C put it, with a female Egyptian student also at Centre C embellishing saying, "sometimes it's bad, because everyone, for example in the Arab Society, they all end up sitting there, they don't get out of their circle".

While societies for students from the same nationality create a sense of community, in some ways they also came as a cost, risking students losing the sense of inclusion when studying in a highly multi-cultural university setting. Thus, while there was an impression that access to societies was limited, there was equally acknowledgement that international students themselves played a role in perpetuating the limitations.

Teaching and Learning Environment

For many international students seeking to study in the UK, and certainly for most of the participants attending my focus groups, taking a Foundation programme in advance of entering an undergraduate degree was almost certainly a necessity. Most of the participants explained how their schooling system, often 12 years in duration and completing with something akin to a high school diploma, was not recognised for direct access to UK universities.

Comments pertaining to national schooling systems and their appropriateness for access to UK universities, were made across the nationality spectrum, from the Middle East (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Qatar,) and across North, South and South East Asia (Indonesia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Pakistan). Of note, however, is that for some of the participants - notably from Kuwait and Egypt - a number of them had been educated in an American school system, "because I graduated from an American school, I didn't have a lot of choices to go to any other places" (female Kuwaiti participant, Centre E) meaning they exited with a qualification not accepted for direct entry into the UK university sector. Whilst familiarity with the concept of a Foundation programme was therefore not uncommon, participants' early experiences of the teaching and learning environment misaligned to expectations. For interview participants later in their studies, though, there did appear to be a shift, as will be discussed below.

Foundation Programme Structure

Given participants' high-level of necessity to follow a Foundation programme study path in order to gain access to UK universities, no doubt participants' initial experiences of the Foundation programme were not entirely meeting what they had anticipated. Although the Foundation programme was understood to be a preparatory phase for participants in advance of entering a university Degree course, having consciously chosen this route as

opposed to undertaking additional study in their home country, there were conflicting opinions of how participants expected the course to run.

Encouragingly, six participants from Centres A, B and F talked positively about their studies. The maturity they exhibited in appreciating their personal needs for preparation in advance of formally entering the university was marked. For two female participants at Centre A, one from Indonesia the other UAE, they talked about not wanting to "mess up" and doing things more slowly to ensure they were fully prepared for university study-life. During the Centre B focus group, two male students from Pakistan and Jordan, also talked about the value of their preparation, "if I didn't do the foundation course I would just go to the university and everything would be new and it could be a burden for me. So that's why I chose the foundation course so it wouldn't be a burden once I had learnt the new things" (male Pakistan participant, Centre E). His fellow Jordanian participant also echoed this, describing how the familiarity with his study environment was assisting in preparing him more effectively for future studies.

Study skills were also briefly mentioned as valuable aspects incorporated in the Foundation programme structure. For example, a female Vietnamese participant at Centre B commented that one of her friends had gone straight into the university but was not familiar with academic referencing, whereas the Foundation programme covered this skill area and thus, in her view, better prepared her for university studies. Finally, a male Russian participant at Centre F embellished on this issue of skills development, explaining how the course also taught him to use laboratories - which as a science student was critical - as well as the skill of self-study (not something he had developed from his schooling days). Additionally, he felt the depth of study for particular subjects – specifically Chemistry and Physics - were preparing him well for his future university studies in Bioengineering.

Relationship with Teaching Staff

While an HEIs' reputation is noted in its importance to students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88) and was indeed reflected in focus group comments with some 34 references relating to university and subject rating and ranking, staff expertise was talked about considerably less during the focus groups. In one-to-one interviews, however, all participants spoke about their views on and experiences with teachers. During one interview, a female subject simply stated, "my relationships with the teachers is great" (female Kuwaiti subject, Centre E), with both male participants reflecting on the attentiveness of teaching staff to student needs. Notwithstanding the male Pakistani participant's concern about his initial thoughts of teachers, all participants' comments largely concurred with their positive views relating to teaching staff.

Continuing on the affirmative experiences of their studies, many participants reflected on the positive support received from teaching staff. Teachers were often described as being 'helpful', 'friendly' and 'patient'. Participants at Centre A affirmed this view, commenting that the teaching was "really, really good" (female Indonesian participant, Centre A) and that the teaching staff were "friendly… [and] really, really welcoming" (female Kazakhstani participant, Centre A). At Centre B, a female Vietnamese student captured this when she described her experience of the Centre teaching as "a student-centred approach". She went on to describe her study approach, the amount of literature she accessed in the library and the need to "take part in various activities in the class". In this way it made her feel "more active, …more engaged" with her learning and meant she was constantly developing her communication skills.

Aligning to the literature relating to the importance of teaching staff and student-teacher relationships (Illias et al., 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the female Kuwaiti interview participant noted how "the relationship between a student and his teacher is very important". She was particularly keen to emphasise the need for teachers to engage students

and "make the students like the subject, not hate it" (female Kuwaiti interview participant, centre E). Interestingly, however, researching the university and Centre teaching staff was not something she had undertaken in advance. This apparent dichotomy was further exemplified in the male Russian interview participant's comments. As with the other interview participants, he also noted how the staff were "mostly friendly and eager to help", but equally admitted he had "not done any research on any of the teachers before arriving in [Centre F]".

If it follows that quality can be regarded the most important influencing factor in student choice of study destination and where teaching staff are the third highest factor in that measure of quality (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), HEPs can make far more of the valuable asset that is their teaching staff, helping in some of the expectations alignment. If facilities themselves take time to improve, an obvious offset to any shortfall in facility provision has to be the value of the HEP's staff. Here, then, we find a challenge for both the HEP and students. It would seem from interview participants experience, none had actively undertaken their own research to find out more about teaching staff at the Centre. Yet it would appear, as is evidenced in the literature, they acknowledge the importance of teaching staff.

All three interviewed participants reflected on their initial expectations, relating to the Centre set-up, before arriving. The female subject voiced anxieties she had before arriving at the Centre and to city E, specifically with regards to the study environment. The two male participants also talked about how they had envisaged the learning environment. For the male Pakistani participant, his concerns initially related to the teachers, with quite a surprising comment when he said, "honestly I thought that the teachers would be kind of rude and racist". Fortunately, this did not turn out to be the case, but his initial conception was quite startling. It differed too from the male Russian participant, whose expectation of the study environment, he felt, had largely been confirmed, specifically in relation to the learning environment, access to facilities and materials provided for study.

As one might perhaps expect, however, not everything was entirely rosy in relation to teaching staff. While 'helpful' was a common word used in relation to staff as per the focus groups, this was not an experience across the board. The male Russian participant, for example, noted his awareness that not all teachers were the same and that he had heard feedback from other students that some teachers were harder to understand. It was not clear whether or not this was largely a language barrier or to do with specific subject matter. He did, however, recount an issue when a teacher apparently came into a classroom and simply said 'speak English', and then walked out. While he was not present at the event, it had obviously struck a chord which him, reflecting the need for staff to be cognisant of the impression their actions may create for students.

With regards to student understanding, in interview the female Kuwaiti participant did reference specific concerns about an Applied Maths tutor. Again, it is obviously complex in fully appreciating the inference in her comments when, for example, she described how the Applied Maths teacher had posed a "really, really difficult" question. Now it may well be that the question referred to was indeed demanding, especially if the subject matter is new and challenging to students. But for this particular student, she felt it to be an unnecessary and uncomfortable approach adopted by the teacher. Such student observations are implicitly subjective, but they perhaps infer other challenges posed for international students studying in a second-language. It is entirely possible the subject matter itself is not wholly the issue, instead reflecting on how international students are taught and engaged by teaching staff. Indeed, the female interview participant went on to infer just this issue, when she stated that teachers should be "given information and background about how to teach" (female Kuwaiti participant, Centre E) in relation to international students. Again, a challenge is posed for the Centre, where certainly the teaching staff are well liked and regarded highly, but perhaps the

academic staff variability of experience in teaching international students is something to be addressed.

As these interview participants entered their second term of learning, there appeared to be a positive recognition towards the teaching staff. No doubt this is an encouraging indicator for the Centre and HEP, and arguably should be made more of during the recruitment phase. Indeed, as will be highlighted later, the favourable experiences with and support from teachers was a recommendation in information availability and dissemination made by some of the participants.

Transitioning from High School

Unfortunately, there were also some criticisms pertaining to the teaching and learning environment. Essentially, these concentrated on the sense of being treated like a high-school student. Whether it was the classroom set-up, the busy timetable or the attendance policy, participants did not feel they were experiencing the university set-up they had envisaged. Most vocal in this regard were Middle Eastern students. Participants at Centres B and E were particularly aggrieved and discussed this issue at length among themselves during the respective focus groups. In the course of the Centre E focus group, a debate ensued following a comment from one female Kuwaiti participant when she said, "since I came here, I was shocked because we have no lectures, it was like we were taking classes like we're in high school or something - we take like easy and simple things in our materials". Immediately, she was questioned by a fellow female national who reminded her compatriot they were on a Foundation programme and that it was meant to be different from university. Her view was countered as the first female Kuwaiti participant said they should have lectures, just as undergraduate students would experience. A male Egyptian participant chimed in stating, "it's the most important thing for me to be at the same level as first year and second year, that's what I didn't expect, now I'm treated like a high school student". These divergent

issues of what a Foundation programme should be and how it should be structured, illustrate the challenge of aligning student expectations set during the recruitment process.

This notion of still being at high-school and not treated like a university student, continued into discussions about the timetable. In advance of arriving at the Centre, no participant had had sight of how their typical study day or week would be structured, perhaps leading to the emotions when discussing this topic. Again, a male Egyptian participant at Centre E was most outspoken, saying "I don't want to be treated like a high school student, taking class every day. [The] attendance policy is very stupid for me…100% attendance is very stupid to me". With comments on this subject attributable entirely to Middle Eastern students, they appeared to object not only to crammed days where their full attendance was expected, but also that the days might start at 9am or finish at 6pm. Thus, the unexpectedly full study week was compounded by an impression of an inflexible approach to attendance. Although a male Pakistani participant at Centre C had earlier commented on the relative liberalness of the Centre environment when compared to his home country, he still felt the attendance monitoring to be "very strict" and, much along the lines of comments concerning the overall structure of the Foundation programme, that they were treated differently to first-year university students.

Akin to comments around the Foundation structure and absence of lectures, some students did not expect small class sizes, instead assuming "it would be like lectures, a bit more like the way they show them in the movies" (male Pakistani participant, Centre C). At the same Centre C focus group, a male Palestinian participant also felt the balance between classes and lectures could be improved, assisting their learning while preparing them for a university lecture environment. In contradiction however, when explored further during individual interviews, it emerged that for the Centre C students they did have a lecture once a week. The same male Pakistani participant and a female Egyptian student then discussed the

lecture set-up, explaining that it could be "boring" with the lecturer "talking and talking and talking" saying "a lot about one thing". Unlike the small classroom environment, they also described how few of their international student compatriots felt confident in asking a question when in a 100-person lecture hall, and thus in that regard they did not get value from the lecture process. Here we see a continuation of contradictory and divergent outlooks, perhaps as a consequence of expectations not being set effectively during the recruitment or pre-arrival processes.

The Learning Experiences

Varied impressions of the study environment aside, along with a view of the generally supportive teaching staff, all of the participants interviewed discussed their concerns relating to the timetable and attendance. In advance of arriving at the Centre, none of the interview participants had been provided a timetable, creating a negative disconfirmation in their expectation of how the study day might be structured. All of the interview participants reinforced opinions expressed during the focus groups. "It was a bit of a shock", was how the female Kuwaiti subject expressed her initial experience of the study environment. For the male Pakistani participant at Centre B, he did not feel the study timetable was equivalent to that of the university. With classes five days a week and starting at 9am, he did not believe this to be comparable to how the university day was structured, and thus it appeared at odds with his early conception, expecting as he had classes two or three times a week, with occasional evenings. In this regard, there was an undoubted misalignment in his expectation relative to the actual learning experience.

Interestingly, however, despite these concerns, none of the interview participants felt it was actually detrimental to their experience. "Not problematic" was how the male Russian participant at Centre F explained his view of the teaching environments, while for the male

Pakistani participant at Centre B, he did not see it impacting his decision of where to study, despite his initial surprise at the busy study week.

Unanimously referenced by all three interview participants when thinking about what might have helped improve either their actual experience or at least better managed their expectations in advance of arriving at the Study Centre, was what could broadly be categorised as the 'awareness of the learning environment'. Specifically, the participants commented on the lack of information in relation to the study day, that is to say the structure and timetable. Both Middle Eastern participants in particular felt advance knowledge, during the pre-arrival stage of how their day was going to be structured, would have helped them better organise themselves "if these things the class timings and the schedules would have also been told it would have been better" (male Pakistan participant, Centre B). While again the induction was referenced in terms of its usefulness for preparing them for their time at the Centre, it was clear from their comments that a gap in information provided to them existed. Interestingly, however, for the male Pakistani subject, he was also keen to emphasise that it would not have affected his decision on where to study.

Aside from the male Russian participant, studying an Engineering pathway and thus perhaps in need of specific facilities, none of the participants specifically referenced issues with regards to the Study Centre amenities. The Russian interview participant felt prior knowledge of the Centre, its set-up and the facilities available, again would have been useful for his specific circumstances. But in all, it seemed a relatively minor point.

Notwithstanding these experiences, none of the focus group or interview participants expressed any concern with the decision they had made of where to study. No doubt the Study Centre could make more use of their teaching staff in their recruitment and marketing messages, considering they clearly come across as a valuable asset and one highly appreciated by students. Further, providing prospective students in advance of their studies, a

more tangible sense of how their learning lives will be structured and the facility in which they will study, would appear to be welcomed and may well help with their preparedness and acculturation to the study environment.

Concluding Remarks on Overall Findings

With my analysis of focus group transcripts, drawing out primary themes from the coding process outlined earlier, mapped to a student experience lifecycle (Morgan, 2013), a picture is created of the key areas of influence and expectation setting in advance of participants' studies; through to their initial impressions and experiences of arriving and studying. Structured this way, it is possible to identify the primary factors that help form students' initial expectations, namely those in advisory roles (such as agents, sponsors and counsellors); and the key information sources (digital, print and physical). In addition, students' initial experiences are framed in their arrival and induction process (and the ease or otherwise of administration); the impression of their teaching and accommodation facilities; and their views on the Foundation programme structure and delivery.

As will be discussed later, no doubt there are some areas where students' expectations positively disconfirmed their early experiences; but in contrast, areas pertaining to the Centre facility and Foundation programme itself, where clearly an absence of adequate information existed, creates a sense of disappointment and disenfranchisement.

6. Discussion

Given funding challenges for the UK higher education sector (OECD, 2011) precipitated by a neoliberal zeitgeist, UK universities are increasingly reliant on student tuition fees to bolster income. As pressure mounts on domestic student fees, UK universities have increasingly sought to attract greater numbers of international students, who typically pay 30% to 100% more than their domestic counterparts (UKUni, n.d.). To extend their student recruitment market, UK universities have developed pathway programmes as a means to attract a wider international student population. Consequently, many universities in the UK have turned to the private sector, partnering with pathway providers who both recruit and deliver pathway programmes for international students. Pathway providers in the UK largely operate an embedded college model (QAA, n.d.), often with an International Study Centre based on the university campus from which the provider teaches the international students it recruits. No doubt this has contributed to recent growth in international students enrolling in UK universities with the relatively nascent sector establishing itself in the last decade.

The need for growth in international student enrolments, combined with public-private partnerships raises a number of concerns for this sector. As someone who holds a leadership position in a pathway provider, I know that universities contract with pathway providers - typically for five to ten-year periods - who set recruitment and progression targets, holding the company to account for delivering against those goals, sometimes with the inclusion of financial incentives or penalties. The challenge this presents is ensuring the pathway providers' recruitment practices, relative to the actual offering to the prospective students, remain aligned. Given the nature of the contractual relationships between the private provider and its university partner, one has to consider whether recruitment practices to attract students may precipitate disconfirmation of expectations (Miller, 1977).

In the context of a disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1977), my research has investigated the expectations pathway providers' recruitment activities set for international students, relative to their early experiences at their study destination. From a series of focus groups and individual interviews with international students studying on a Foundation programme run by a pathway provider across six different universities, I have sought to explore student decisions for studying away from their home country and their reason for choosing the UK as a destination as well as a pathway programme. From that, my engagements with students examined whether recollections of their recruitment, the decisions they made and the influences that came to bear on them, had an effect on their initial experiences at the Study Centre.

Diagram 2: mapping key findings to the student experience lifecycle (Morgan, 2013)

Considering this research problem, there now follows a discussion of some of the major findings from my data analysis and the key claims and application to practice that emanate therein. I will discuss how specific measures can serve to align student experience and expectations (illustrated in Diagram 2) across an international students' pre- and post-arrival phases.

The first area to highlight is the need for marketeers to recognise the impact of families on not only students' decision-making about where to study, but equally in embellishing students' pre-conceptions, anticipation and expectations, as well as then supporting their onward studies. Secondly, I discuss the importance of information sources for international students, especially the need for accurate, relevant and useful digital information and specifically the use of emails. An HEPs' need to personalise their digital resources and the sending of such digital information to students is a key aspect to effecting a positive arrival experience. The third discussion area relates to students' concerns around the costs and funding of their studies. Of note is that despite the high costs associated with studying away from home, it can seemingly be the smaller costs relating to administrative processes that frustrate students. An international students' arrival into a foreign country and a new city and HEP is undoubtedly a daunting experience. I therefore show the need for HEPs to be responsive to student needs, having effective, clear administrative processes to ensure student satisfaction remains at the fore. Fourthly, I discuss how HEPs not only need to provide well-designed and managed arrivals process for new international students, but how they must also match the students' campus experience to any expectations set during pre-arrival. Finally, I will discuss the students' experiences and expectations pertaining to their teaching and learning environment. Understandably, this is a critical aspect for students in their decision-making, but in particular highlights the need for pathway providers to make more of their quality and experienced teaching staff. This I have found to be an under-marketed factor,

where addressing this could have positive implications for both HEPs and international

students' expectations and experience alignment.

Engaging with International Students' Families

As a researcher-practitioner, I was concerned private pathway providers might set

unrealistic expectations in the minds of prospective students through commercially-driven

recruitment practices. My research has uncovered that of the key influencers in student

decision-making and setting of expectations, family members appear significantly overlooked

in recruitment and marketing activities. Without doubt, international students do not make

their decision to study abroad and at which HEP in isolation. The influencing factors on

students' decision-making processes are multiple, complex and profound. Apparent in my

data was that the family's effect on students' decision-making occurred as the most

frequently referenced of all such influencers, by a factor of four to one compared to other

primary influencers. Depending on a student's country of origin, there will undoubtedly be

other actors likely to influence the student, most notably friends, international recruitment

agents and sponsors. However, the family influence remains a constant throughout the

students' decision-making journey, who seek affirmation and validation prior to accepting

any such recommendation outside of the family sphere.

The consequential effect of family members influencing where a student chooses to

study means the family plays an important role in the setting of expectations for students.

Evident in my findings and within the literature is that the suggestion of which country,

location and HEP by a family member is augmented by their own prior knowledge and

experience. The literature supports this view (Altbach, 1991; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Pimpa,

2005) and notes that if family members have visited a country, lived or studied there before,

the factor ranks even more highly. What is not mentioned, but arguably is inferred, is the

understandable bias this creates in a family members' recommendation. Indeed, it is noted in

my findings that students' pre-conceptions of their study destination are often developed due to their family's prior knowledge and awareness. Considered against a disconfirmation paradigm, this creates issues for HEP who are not engaging key recommenders and thus risk brand-image misrepresentation.

Family members are also often the source of funding for a student's overseas education. The literature acknowledges this (Lu & Tian, 2018), noting also how the consideration of study costs has an effect on the choice of study location (an area I discuss later). My findings further evidenced this with four participants of different nationalities, acutely aware of their obligation to manage a budget and equally the potentially precarious nature of their studies. While working in higher education in both the UK and South Africa, I experienced this first hand. When students' source of family funding ceased for whatever reason, the ensuing impact on students was understandably devastating.

Should a student have family in the chosen country and city this also has a bearing on their arrival. For international students, the arrival and acculturation are important facets to their successful studies onwards (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Whether the family can simply be nearby to assist the student settling in or, as with some of my participants, where family in the students' home country insisted that the student lived near to or with a family member, no doubt plays a part in the overall influencing and settling-in process.

My research design used Mazzarol et al. (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'pull' factors as the theoretical construct to structure a large part of my focus group questioning. These factors equally formed part of my inductive coding process. Consequently, one could surmise that family influencers were highly likely to appear frequently in my findings. I would argue, however, I have extended the existing literature relating to student decision-making. Not only can I affirm the role of family members in the student processes when entering UK universities via pathway programmes, compared to

those international students entering university directly, but I also highlight that family members are more than just 'influencers'. Families set expectations of study destinations (especially from prior experience); they act as funders to the students; and can equally play a part in supporting students' arrival to their new living and study environment.

With the family playing such a significant role in influencing a students' decision of where to study, setting their expectations of the chosen destination and HEP, being a source of funding and sometimes acting as support once in-country (both practical and emotional), it is clear that HEPs must pay closer attention to these often 'behind the scenes' influencers and supporters. An examination of some of Provider A's website material, shows content and student-centric imagery dominates. It is not easy to find information on fees or student safety for example, areas no doubt of interest to family. A simple fix would be for HEP to have a tab in the horizontal navigation headed 'information for families'. Here, relevant content (related to fees, accommodation, administration processes and student safety) could be housed, immediately 'speaking' to and engaging interested and concerned influencers. If universities and their respective pathway providers are to attract more international students and avoid negative disconfirmation, consideration must be given to engagement with a prospective student's family. University and pathway provider marketing teams need to work on key messages that will resonate with family members, understanding any concerns or misgivings they may have (perhaps based on established pre-conceptions) that could influence a students' decision away from a particular HEP.

Personalising Digital Information

A primary question in my research was the tensions that might exist between how an HEP projects itself to students and their actual experience upon arrival. My research uncovered the need for personalised, timely email communication to prospective international students as a means to partially manage this tension. Aligned to the effect of

family members on student decision-making, the role of digital information provided to

students plays a critical role in the setting of expectations.

Prospective students access and receive information from many sources and channels.

They may, for example, be provided pamphlets or prospectuses at events such as university

fairs. Most likely, as evidenced in my findings, information sources tend to be digital in

nature. The university website being an often-referenced source of information during the

student decision-making process. Additionally, information is received by students in email

form, seemingly largely from the university itself (but no doubt also from international

recruitment agents and sponsors involved in the students' decision-making and administrative

processes) and in particular during the pre-arrival phase. It is in addressing and adapting these

email communications that marketing teams can improve on both enticing students and

aligning their expectations.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) equally established that information sources play a key

role in decision-making. It was found that ease of access to information was the most

important factor when developing international students' knowledge and awareness of a

prospective destination. The study acknowledged, however, that simply having access to

information in of itself would not affect a student's choice. Instead, it was argued the

information sources worked in tandem with prior knowledge of a destination, its perceived

reputation, the quality of the available education and whether or not the identified

qualifications were recognised in a students' home country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). What

the study did not address, however, were the means of access to information sources that

students might find helpful during that process.

Literature that explores prospective students' use of information tends to find that

digital information from sources such as the internet or email, are most frequently used

(Cleopatra et al., 2004; Simões & Soares, 2010). When referring to the internet as a source of

information, this largely tends to be the university website. While participants in my research did indeed use a wide variety of information sources, it was clear that digital information was the most highly used. Participants in my research equally tended to access university websites when seeking out information.

Aligned to the literature, the importance of course content on a university website came through. While studies into international students' digital information needs are somewhat limited, those studies that examine the types of information students expect to find on university websites, namely programme and course detail (Felix, 2006; Moogan, 2011), align to participant needs in my research. Given my research participants were international students studying on UK university pathway programmes, their criticism of available website information was noted, reinforcing again the need for HEPs to provide full and accurate information via the web.

However, in the morass of information with which international students have to contend, there is little in the literature that makes detailed reference to email as a form of digital information distribution. Participants in my research expressed concerns with both the volume, accuracy and timeliness of emailed information from the HEP. While some literature notes that information must extend beyond course content to also cover details relating to areas such as costs, accommodation and travel information (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014), the focus on information sources still centres on university websites. Participants in my study took issue with the website information pertaining to their Study Centre and my own high-level examination and understanding of Provider A's website content, further endorsed this view. For pathway providers working on behalf of UK universities who often use the university brand on their websites, providing detailed course and Study Centre information is essential to manage student expectations and provide for a positive arrival experience.

My research has therefore identified that international students on UK pathway programmes have issues with the receipt of information via email. While some opinions varied, it was clear that emails received by participants were not appropriate on multiple levels. Firstly, participants voiced concerns about the sheer volume of information they received, some going so far as to say that if the email seemed to contain too much information, they would simply ignore it. Secondly, the question of information accuracy occurred, especially in relation to administrative processes and specifically visa applications. Quite understandably, the students expect to get clear and accurate instructions in this regard, given that in the UK they simply cannot study without an appropriate visa. Finally, the timeliness of emails was raised. Again, there was some variability in participant responses, but it was felt that emails were not always received at a time appropriate to the student.

While not a digital marketeer myself but user of many digital services, it is clear as that personalisation is at the fore of digital communications. Higher education providers must embrace this trend towards personalisation, using digital tools available to them in order to ensure the correct information is provided to prospective students, received in a form and at a time that matches the students' needs. Given the clear dependence on digital information provided to international students, universities must attend to prospective and arriving student needs with care. One practical output would be for Provider A to develop a 'student arrival portal'. Akin to how e-commerce websites take a customer through a staged journey, Provider A could mimic such service provision. Airline websites, for example, provide clear stages for ticket purchasing, where customers must also provide key information before flying. Adopting similar principles may help international students manage their information absorption process as they would clearly see what they needed to read and provide. Aside from the noted requirement for information on university websites to be broad and accurate, HEP must better understand their prospective and arriving students' needs. In doing so, they

can apply this either to improved email communications (a key channel through which to communicate with students and one that no doubt influences their decision-making and affects their expectations) or improved digital delivery more generally.

Providing Responsive 'Customer' Service

In understanding the dynamic between influences on student decision-making and the disconfirmation of expectations, cost factors play a considerable role and rang true in my research. When discussing the pre-arrival decision-making process, participants' references to the cost of study and living expenses were the third highest factor. The costs for students choosing to study away from home are substantial as they are varied. Tuition fees, accommodation costs, living expenses (such as food and clothing) administrative charges and the cost of travel - both in terms of getting to and from the chosen destination, as well as in-country travel costs - were all commented upon to varying degrees by participants. Yet as my research has shown, surprisingly it was often the smaller administrative costs that from an experiential perspective affected the students impressions of the study destination.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that for any student and their respective funders, when making a decision to undertake a course of higher education study as an international student, the investment required figures highly. Further, how the student and funders subsequently perceive the value they receive from their education is an additional factor in the overall student experience and satisfaction. Within much of the literature relating to international student choice of study destination, cost concerns frequently occur. Of the six 'pull' factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), cost issues were the third highest. Within this factor, the largest costs students are likely to encounter, namely tuition fees, living and travel expenses, figured highly. Further, an associated 'cost' was the presence of an existing international student population. The interpretation of this cost category was that if newly arrived international students were more easily accepted into the study environment, there

would be a relative cost offset. Few participants in my research overtly discussed this notion of 'social cost', with just one student describing some of his initial perceptions of racism in the UK, but on arrival finding those perceptions to be largely unfounded. Similarly, crime and overall safety were hardly discussed. Rather, for some students whose family wanted them to be close to family members in the study destination country, there was an inference that this gave those family members remaining in the students' home country peace of mind the student would be safe.

Deciding to study away from home is a big decision for students and cost issues recur throughout the literature. Whether students originated from south-east Asia or the Middle East, tuition and accommodation costs consistently factored highly (Bodycott, 2009; Leggett, 2013; María Cubillo et al., 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2017; Pimpa, 2005; Shanka et al., 2005; Wilkins et al., 2012). Participants in my study similarly made reference to costs. Tuition fees charged by HEPs and the cost of accommodation were key concerns for students. On the former however, the concerns voiced were more in relation to being able to sustainably fund their studies, rather than the actual cost. Although Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) argued that tuition fees played a role in where students' ultimately chose to study, none of my participants discussed fees in the context of their decision-making process.

Tuition fees, the cost of living, specifically accommodation, are the largest expense considerations for any international student. When combined with travel expenses, they rank as one of the highest factors after tuition fees (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka et al., 2005). As is often the case when one begins to consider the effect of costs on student experience and expectations, the issues turn to the relative quality of the 'product' or service being delivered and received. Badwan (n.d.) noted this issue, when students felt the information provided to

them pre-arrival was misleading relative to their lived experience. This played out in feedback from my focus group participants.

Aside from issues with the price participants paid for accommodation, their concerns related to whether or not that represented value, key to acknowledge in the perceived performance of a product (Oliver, 1977). Perceptions of value related to whether the kitchen facilities were deemed adequate, if shared recreation areas were of an appropriate size or indeed whether their room itself was the size they had expected. Upon arrival, students were naturally able to make direct comparisons with other accommodation facilities, especially those inhabited by domestic students. Here, aside from general concerns about what they were being provided relative to what they had expected and the fee charged (and thus its perceived value for money), issues in relation to equality surfaced. For a few students, the sense that somehow they were not being treated fairly relative to domestic students did not sit comfortably. As with Badwan's (n.d.) findings, this creates issues for HEPs that must not only clearly reflect in information provided to students the service they will receive, but also ensure that those students are treated fairly.

Although 'indirect' costs are also referenced that is to say those less tangible costs such as an international students' right to work part-time while studying (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), their ability to integrate into the local living and study community, as well as costs associated with social cohesion (safety, discrimination, crime etc.) and administration were largely absent. This absence holds true in much of the literature relating to costs as a factor in decision-making, as well as their effect on expectations setting and arrival satisfaction. Yet for participants in my study, costs related to administration and specifically the visa application process and its associated expenses were an issue. When approaching the visa application process for the first-time, no doubt this could be a daunting prospect for new students. In some ways the stakes are deceptively high in that, if a visa is not issued in a

timely manner or indeed refused, quite simply the students' dreams of studying abroad are dashed.

As with many service industries, it is often the seemingly smaller costs that can affect satisfaction if they are not attended to effectively and efficiently. A number of participants in my study complained that the process was overly complex and long, with too often slow or incorrect communication received from Centre staff. Combining that experience to the costs associated with the application process creates avoidable anxiety and makes for a poor student experience. In this regard, those responsible in HEPs for developing procedures and designing communication processes to aid international students administrative application needs, especially around visas, need to create very clear guidelines. Again, comparable digital tools to those found in e-commerce environments could be employed, allowing a prospective student to monitor online the progress of their application. Further, HEPs must ensure administrative staff are trained and resourced to be highly responsive and attentive to international student needs; ready to turnaround responses in a swift and accurate manner. Failure to do so may lead to negative disconfirmation (Fripp, n.d.) with the attendant corollary to poor satisfaction levels with students upon arrival.

Managing the Critical First Impressions Upon Arrival

Addressing the question of student experiences relative to expectations, I have discovered the necessity for universities who contract with private pathway providers to provide acceptable Study Centre facilities. Without these, the risk exists that pathway provider marketeers mispresent the study environment to prospective students. In doing so, a vacuum of information occurs resulting in disconfirmation of beliefs (Oliver, 1977) for newly arriving students. The consequence of this mismatch in expectation could result in low student satisfaction leading to poor academic accomplishments going forward.

Having made their choice of where to study overseas, receiving an acceptance to study and then completing the necessary administration to embark upon their journey, a students' arrival to their chosen country and HEP is a critical phase in matching expectations raised during recruitment and marketing. The sensitivity and criticality of this phase is noted in much of the literature, where a poorly managed arrival process and experience for students can be traumatic (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). With students travelling long distances, often arriving into the country and HEP for the first time, contending with unfamiliar customs and environment, as well as having to converse in a foreign language, HEPs need to take steps to support students. These steps can be as basic as meeting students at the airport, to ensuring information provided in advance is easy to understand and comprehensive. Initial disappointment with campus facilities can have a profound impact on student satisfaction (Tamer, 2016), intertwined as the facilities are with the students' overall education experience. What is absolutely clear, therefore, is that wherever possible the students' arrival at the HEP facility should align to expectations.

Inevitably, during their decision-making process with all of the available information and influencing actors that impress upon them, international students anticipate attributes of where they have chosen to study. Only when they actually arrive at the HEP, do those established views coalesce and become a reality. Yet of note in Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) findings, is the absence of importance related to an HEI's facilities. The primary positive factors influencing students' decisions in relation to the HEI tended instead to centre both on the reputation for quality generally as well as staff and whether or not a student's qualifications were recognised. What was not expanded upon, was in general terms how quality was defined. As Dennis et al. (2016) note, the perception of quality is closely linked to institutional reputation, but how that perception is established is a complex interplay

between image, identity and marketing relative to satisfaction, trust and commitment (Dennis et al., 2016).

If one accepts Morgan's (2013) assertion that managing a students' first impressions sets the foundations for their onward academic success, then students' arrival and orientation experiences are fundamental. While my study did not itself explore the onward academic success of the participants, on the whole few students appeared to have had poor initial arrival experiences. As one might imagine there were some travel issues related to either not being met at the airport and then having to navigate to the Study Centre alone or surprise at the cost of travel, but these appeared to be relatively low-level issues.

Of greater importance to newly arrived students is the induction programme. An induction is one of the critical phases to successfully orientate students and settle them in to their living and study environment (Morgan, 2013). This is supported in the literature (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Gbadomosi, 2018; Stokes, 2017), with particular emphasis given to the need for sensitivity in the design of such programmes. Certainly this was evident with my participants, where it was discussed during four of the six focus groups. Save for one male, Middle Eastern participant who felt the induction programme he attended to be 'boring', the other 34 participants unanimously found their induction to be of great help. As evidenced in participant comments, it would appear the Study Centre's had developed rounded programmes that adequately provided additional information about their courses of study, the university and the campus facilities. What is less clear is whether the programmes were effectively designed to address any personal issues students may have had or attended to their social acculturation (Gbadomosi, 2018). This would require extended research and is certainly an area where HEPs should spend more time considering student needs.

Facilities for students are closely associated with their overall satisfaction (Tamer, 2016) and in this regard participants in my study certainly expected to have had more study

environment information. 'Augmenters' pertaining to the campus and physical surrounds (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009; Tamer, 2016) are deemed to affect student satisfaction to a greater degree than financial, health and socially related factors. Part of the challenge for pathway providers is that often they are dependent on the university to provide Study Centre facilities. With optimal use of space always a concern for universities, from my professional experience pathway providers may not always be offered an ideal option from where to run their operation. This became evident in participant comments who tended to be rather 'surprised' or even 'shocked' at their study environment. Apparent in their comments was a mismatch of expectation. They may have seen photographs and images of the university campus, but not the Study Centre itself. Thus, when they arrived, they found they were not necessarily close to the centre of the campus. Perhaps of greater disappointment was the facility itself. In this regard there were many negative comments whether in relation to the building design and 'feel', or down to the classroom size and set-up.

Both pathway providers and their respective university partners alike are advised to address this mismatch of expectations in two key areas. Firstly, they must ensure international students housed in stand-alone Study Centres on the university campus are provided facilities equivalent to those used by other university students, avoiding any sense of inferiority. Secondly, facilities must be adequately and effectively portrayed in marketing literature. While part of the paucity in Study Centre information and photography may have been down to the very fact the facilities were not up to standard, that is not an excuse to avoid clarity for students concerning their likely study environment. A high-level analysis of Provider A's Study Centre websites where my focus groups were held, reinforced students' assertions that little or no imagery of the Study Centre was available, a finding endorsed in Badwan's (n.d.) more extensive research. Instead, imagery focussed on the universities buildings and students in classroom settings (where it was unclear if these were in the Study

Centre). Pathway providers must therefore negotiate equitable teaching space and provide prospective students website imagery. To better manage student expectations, a 360-degree virtual tour could be provided, ensuring the students familiarise themselves with their likely study home.

By addressing this issue, not only will HEPs begin to better manage student satisfaction and expectations, but in addition they could well be supporting any ensuing academic performance. No doubt more research connecting these two areas could be undertaken but noting the literature, one has to assume there exists a relationship between this aspect of expectation management, student satisfaction and preparedness for successful studies.

Making More of the Teaching and Learning Environment

The projection of an HEP's offering through its marketing and recruitment activities must ideally align to the likely student experience. Teaching staff are a key component of any educational offering and my research into private pathway provision has evidenced that such staff are an under-marketed asset. During their early Study Centre experiences, international students appeared highly content with their teaching staff. Yet few knew of this quality academic and support environment into which they would arrive. This is a key discovery unrepresented in existing pathway literature and shows the benefits both to the providers themselves and the students in setting their expectations of what can only be regarded a positive student experience.

Aside from the general perception of institutional quality and recognition of a students' qualifications, one of the highest-ranking factors pertaining to student choice of HEI was the "quality and expertise of its staff" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88). The importance and competence of an HEI's teaching staff, especially in the context of international students is similarly widely referenced in the literature. In particular the relationships that are developed between the staff and students are noted for their positive effect on student satisfaction

(Siming et al., 2015). This was widely affirmed by participants in my study who largely only had positive comments concerning their Centre's teaching staff. Of course, there is always an element of subjectivity in a student-teacher relationship and as one might expect there were occasional negative comments made about one or two specific staff and their teaching style. On the whole, however, teaching staff were described as being 'friendly', 'helpful' and 'patient'.

What emerged, however, is that despite this positive experience and the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), none of the participants in my study had specifically researched the teaching staff at their study destination. Neither during their decision-making process nor in advance of arrival did they appear to pay attention to teaching staff (and with that, the staff's 'quality' or expertise) or have information provided to them by the HEP. Fortunately, with students' positive impressions of staff this could be deemed not to be an issue, but for HEPs it is a missed opportunity to share greater levels of information with prospective students about the teaching staff with whom they will engage.

For UK national teaching staff, it is highly likely that teaching international students comes with additional challenges compared to domestic students. In an attempt to overcome or address some of the likely cultural and language issues, the literature suggests that a multicultural and adaptive profile of teaching staff (Chipcase et al., 2017; Ramachandran, 2011; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009) is required in order to create a positive teaching and learning environment. While my study did not research the profile of teaching staff specifically nor raise questions to draw out why teaching staff were deemed to be so helpful and engaged with their students, one could infer that the teaching staff across the Study Centres was on the whole adequately trained and diverse. Perhaps this is somewhat of a leap to make such a connection but from my own professional knowledge, I know the training and development staff are provided, specifically related to the engagement, support and teaching

of international students. So when participants in my study reflected on the attentiveness of staff to their personal needs and the sense they had of a student-centred attitude, given the assertions in the literature, one can infer that teaching staff at the Study Centre were adaptive and culturally sensitive.

As noted earlier, participant impressions of the Study Centre and facilities relative to their expectations somewhat fell short. Intertwined in these expectations is the teaching and learning environment itself. In many cases the negative impression of the physical space was compounded by a sense that more information could have been provided, specifically relating to their course of study. Most students appreciated they were on a Foundation programme and thus, while they were based at a university campus, they accepted they were not yet formally on a university course. Despite this, a number commented on the parallels to the high-school environments they had recently left. Complaints centred on the Centre's busy timetable, the lack of lectures and the monitoring of their attendance. Akin to Chien's (2013) assertions, the adjustment required by international students to a UK university environment, suggests that both teachers and students alike required time to settle in to a new academic context. Arguably, this is the very purpose of a Foundation programme, providing time for students to adapt, preparing them effectively for their onward university education.

Missing, is the Centre managing student expectations around the structure of their learning when entering a Foundation programme. It is clear a number of students arrived with perceptions of a different style and method of study. While the structure of the Foundation courses may be entirely validated, arguably addressing as they are issues of culture shock and student transition (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Chien, 2013), the students did not appear to arrive with that knowledge or expectation. It is important for HEPs to acknowledge however, that when pressed none of my participants would have altered their choices. In this regard, aside from an almost moral obligation to better inform students about the study environment,

HEPs should explain clearly to students what to expect. It may well be that a Foundation programme is not entirely comparable to a university Degree programme's mode and method of delivery, but there are distinct pedagogical reasons for this that could be turned to a benefit in attracting students. HEP such as Provider A have undoubted pedagogical expertise in the realm of international students' education and their models of delivery should therefore be more overtly espoused such as the integration and expertise of English-language development within the curriculum and a highly supportive environment with multiple-tutorial support sessions as teaching staff are unencumbered by demands of academic research. At the very least it would ensure students' initial impressions and experience of the teaching and learning environment were not at odds with their expectations.

Given the importance of teaching staff expertise, their 'quality', cultural sensitivity and adaptiveness when it comes to teaching international students, it is striking and somewhat unexpected that students on international Foundation programmes appear largely content and indeed surprised by their teaching staff. Whether or not this translates into the university environment is not entirely clear. The advice from some of the literature (Chien, 2013; Chipcase et al., 2017; Ramachandran, 2011; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009) would imply it is not entirely the case. In this regard, universities could perhaps learn from the pathway providers themselves. Additionally, those providers of Foundation programmes for universities should make a great deal more of their teaching staff. Mock classes could be videoed or teacher vignettes provided online, for example, to give prospective students a 'taster' of both the quality of teacher as well as insights to the mode of delivery. No doubt, teaching staff are a critical component to the successful delivery of a programme as well as to the entire experience for international students. Pathway providers would do well to make more of this positive attribute, both for attracting more students and to ensure those students arrive into their study environment knowing they will be in good hands.

Limitations and Weaknesses in my Claims

My findings have been drawn out from research with a sample of international students studying on UK-based Foundation programmes. These programmes are delivered by a private pathway provider that runs them at various International Study Centres at universities across the UK. In this regard, the expectations set by the HEPs' recruitment and marketing process and the subsequent experiences of campus life, are of course applicable only to those contexts.

Areas relating to the influence of family members, personalised digital information and good 'customer' service, I would argue could transpose into other UK and indeed international higher education contexts. It is widely accepted in the literature the influence of family members (Altbach, 1991; Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Pimpa, 2005), thus recommendations for improved engagement and messaging to these influencers seems relevant. Similarly, the personalisation of digital information is not a new finding per se, with the literature acknowledging the need for HEIs to leverage digital tools in order to engage their stakeholders (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). As acknowledged in my research design, I have reflected on my own knowledge of Provider A's digital information provision. Given participants were attending multiple universities and referenced a wide range of information source (websites, email content, prospectuses, event literature etc.), it was neither in scope nor feasible within the time and thesis limitations to take this assessment further. Finally, the notion of 'customer service' in higher education is not new (Guilbault, 2018; Hanaysha, 2011; Paswan & Ganesh, 2009), and thus recommendations to ensure effective processes would seem valid. Perhaps an area of weakness in my claims is not knowing whether participants in my study simply experienced the highlighted issues with Provider A, whereas other such HEPs may already have processes, avoiding the occurrence of such

experiences. It would therefore be good to extend research to a wider pool of pathway providers.

As discussed previously, UK-based, privately owned pathway providers operate in somewhat of a unique and complex operating environment. With Provider A for whom I work, the International Study Centres operate under an embedded college regulatory framework (QAA, n.d.). The programmes and the Centres are marketed to prospective students under the respective university brands. Further, the Centres themselves are largely based on the university campus. In this regard, for many prospective students they are effectively starting a course of study at their chosen university, the Foundation course they are on simply being run by an alternative provider.

My findings relating to expectations and experiences of Centre facilities and the teaching and learning environment could thus be considered contextually bound. As I have shown, Provider A in marketing its Centres under the respective university brands does not clearly provide information and images of the specific Centre facility. This may well be because the facility is not deemed marketable, but this creates an expectation mismatch for arriving international students. This, then, could be a relatively unique set of circumstances and thus not wholly applicable to other HEPs' contexts. Similarly, Provider A may not offer information relating to its teaching staff expertise and quality compared to how a university undertakes such messaging. However, I would again turn to the literature where the importance of campus facilities were identified in enhancing student satisfaction (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009; Tamer, 2016) and similarly, the quality and expertise of staff is a noted factor in international student decision-making of where to study (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Notwithstanding these identified weaknesses and limitations of my claims to new knowledge, gathering insights directly from student participants has allowed me to uncover specific actions that can be employed to bridge the gap between student expectations and

experiences. Although a relatively small and contextually bound sample, the benefit of my direct engagement with student-participants cannot be underestimated, with the qualitative data and ensuing analysis creating a density, complexity and richness of insight (Gibbs, 2007).

Practical Implications

In tackling my research problem of whether expectations set during the recruitment process for international students seeking to study on a UK-based Foundation programme matched their expectations, my interpretation of participant data has sought to draw-out key issues HEPs need to address. In order to maintain and improve student satisfaction, a noted corollary to academic attainment (Illias et al. 2008; Siming et al., 2015; Tahar, 2008), seeking alignment between what is marketed to students relative to their actual campus experience needs a degree of attention. Institutions can address some of the identified mismatches in the following ways.

Firstly, close engagement with a students' family members will have benefit both for student expectations management, as well as positive messaging to reinforce study decisions. As key influencers in the students' decision-making (Altbach, 1991; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Pimpa, 2005), ensuring family members have correct and appropriate information pertaining to an HEPs' study environment should mean not only that a student is attracted to a specific HEP, but importantly that upon arrival there are few surprises. This is important in the context of student-centred marketing approaches. Including a family-focussed approach in marketing plans, directing them to relevant content, would mean information and messages of importance resonate directly with family members. The providers' marketing success would be less reliant on students' family members either having to engage with materials designed for student consumption. This would avoid families bringing to bear their own pre-established biases where material did not 'speak' to them specifically.

In a digital-age where access to online information is ubiquitous, it perhaps comes as no surprise that HEPs should seek to leverage the power of digital marketing tools. Social media channels and personalised emails in and of themselves are not new, but certainly should form part of any student recruitment processes. If HEPs are to ensure international students receive the appropriate information, personalised to them and delivered at the optimum time, my second recommendation is that they must ensure effective digital marketing strategies are weaved throughout the recruitment experience with particular attention paid to evolving email communications into portal-style models of engagement. Leveraging personalised digital messaging in this way, will mean international students immediately begin to feel part of the HEP, while ensuring the information they receive is actually absorbed and used, manages their expectations and making their arrival experiences more acceptable.

The costs related to an international higher education are significant and a major factor in a student's decision of where to study (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Entering a UK degree course via a Foundation programme means four years of study to attain an undergraduate qualification. Participants in my study are likely to be investing in the region of £100,000 in their education. Yet even so, I have found it is the smaller, administrative related costs that can sometimes create a negative experience. In this regard, adopting practices from the world of e-commerce HEPs must ensure clear guidelines are provided to prospective students (particularly in relation to visa applications). From this, the HEPs' administrative processes must be highly responsive. Applying to an HEP for an international course of study is a big decision and no doubt an anxious time. This must be acknowledged and addressed by HEPs, ensuring they have responsive 'customer' service cultures and processes within their administrative functions.

My fourth area to be addressed is perhaps one most closely associated with pathway provision but could arguably extend to providers outside of the UK. The relationship between

a university and its selected pathway provider should not be seen as one akin to other campus-based service providers (such as catering for example). The educational facilities made available to the pathway provider by its university partner for its International Study Centre, clearly have a direct bearing on student satisfaction. That said, it is also contingent on the provider to ensure its facilities are correctly marketed to prospective students. An international student arriving into their new study environment, should not be surprised by its location or look and feel and 360-degree tours would permit them a digital, pre-arrival immersive experience. Noting the effect of campus facilities on student satisfaction (Tamer, 2016), HEPs must ensure their available facilities are appropriately presented to prospective students.

Finally, pathway providers are advised to make more of their teaching staff. With academic quality and expert teaching staff a key factor in student decision-making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), their apparent absence in pathway provider marketing literature is striking. Instead, the teaching staff's noted support for international students should be brought to the fore in attracting prospective students, foregrounding staff talents with engaging, asynchronous video content. Of course, in doing so, HEPs do need to make sure those staff meet the expectations set for students, but it would seem to be a missed opportunity, particularly where pathway providers are concerned.

In essence my research has explored the disconfirmation of international student satisfaction, potentially a group being over-sold and under-delivered to in relation to their higher education expectations and experiences. Arguably, this is not a unique dynamic. Universities themselves face ever-increasing funding pressures, continually seeking to diversify income streams and specifically in the context of my research, growth of their international student population. My research underlines issues that can be immediately addressed. If Provider A's management adopts the recommendations in my research findings

and they prove to have positive effect on student experience - both pre- and post-enrolment - the actions could have value to the university partners too, themselves under increasing pressure to recruit diverse groups of students.

As a private provider, Provider A has an obligation to its owners to produce expected commercial returns. Further, its partner universities have contractual expectations to have recruited and progressed into the university's programmes agreed student numbers. These contractual pressures and commercial arrangements can often appear at odds with the students' experience, support and academic progression, presenting a risk of mismatches in recruitment practices relative to campus deliverables. Findings from my research should therefore have immediate and beneficial application to my professional practice. To extend this further, follow-up research could explore some of the specific areas of recommendation. In particular, it would be interesting to examine these students' actual academic success. Examining students' level of satisfaction upon arrival, relative to both expectations set and their ensuing academic success, could help refine and focus some of the key areas HEPs must address so as not to negatively impact student success.

7. Conclusion

In my thesis, I have explored the disconfirmation of international student satisfaction against the backdrop of expectations and experiences of international students enrolled on privately-provided, UK-based Foundation programmes. Informed by neoliberal practices, in the UK and across the world higher education models of funding are constantly evolving. With the exponential growth of international students in recent decades (British Council, 2004), for many English-speaking western countries the attraction of international students has proven to be highly appealing and competitive. As one means to attract a growing proportion of international students, universities partner with private pathway providers. In the UK, these providers largely operate as embedded colleges (QAA, n.d.), contracted to recruit international students into university-based Study Centres, preparing those students linguistically and academically for Degree programmes.

The issue this raised for me as someone who holds a senior role with one such pathway provider, was understanding whether or not international student recruitment practices set realistic expectations for students, and if those established expectations then aligned to students' experiences upon arrival at their chosen Study Centre. With this higher education backdrop, I have outlined the issue I perceived, namely that under pressure to drive international student growth, there could exist a mismatch in what is promised to international students relative to what they actually experience upon arrival. The literature in the fields of international education, specifically focusing on student expectations and experience, provided a backdrop of key themes to consider. These themes ranged from the positioning of HEIs; how student expectations are set; the influences and influencers of students; the criticality of information; how students actually experience campus life and the teaching and learning environment.

In order to address this perceived issue, I designed a research approach where I could engage directly with international students at a selection of my organisations' UK-based Study Centres. Holding direct conversations with 35 international students from 21 different countries via a number of focus groups, I hoped to gain insights into how international students made decisions on where to study, the influencing factors in that decision-making process, and how they actually experienced the Study Centre. Embellishing these insights with follow-on, one-to-one online interviews later in the students' studies, enabled me to expand upon those group conversations, assessing if their views had evolved and how they were settling in to the Centre and their studies. My research findings suggested that in the dynamic environment of recruiting international students and working to align their expectations to actual experiences during the early phase of their Foundation studies, HEPs have a number of areas to develop. Working to respond to international student expectations and needs along the student journey will only serve to improve the overall experience and thus progress throughout their higher education.

Findings in Theory and Practice

From my direct interactions with students, I have been able to draw out key themes that a private pathway provider and its respective university partners should seek to address. Considering the process as a continuum from an HEPs' first contact with a prospective student until that student arrives and begins to settle in to their new living and learning environment, it is clear that providers can make specific and incremental improvements along the entire student journey. By considering the student journey both holistically and at the component stages, pathway providers can adjust messaging and interactions to iron out any potential for misaligned experiences from poorly set expectations, ultimately seeking student's positive disconfirmation of satisfaction. Given student satisfaction's close

association to student attainment (Illias et al., 2008; Siming et al., 2015; Tahar, 2008), HEPs and their students will collectively benefit from such a process examination.

Further I have extended the theoretical basis for my research design. Aside from the noted sample extension relative to the work of Mazzarol et al. (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), as well as my contribution to the pathway sector, my findings build on their identified 'pull' factors (Mazzarol et al., 1997, Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). While there were acknowledged similarities in the 'pull' factors from my participant responses, the greatest factor divergence was in the importance associated to 'personal recommendations'. Although I have recognised the relative methodological comparability of Mazzarol et al.'s (1997) factor analysis to my coding frequency, nowhere in their research findings do personal recommendations figure as the highest factor. Additionally, unlike my findings and discussion, Mazzarol et al. (1997) tend to make little connection between recruitment agents and family as influencers. As my research highlights, family members are a consistent presence 'behind the scenes'. They thus not only play a role in influencing a student's decision-making, but by inference they influence agent interactions. Further, they play a role as funder and arrival supporter. Given Mazzarol et al. (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research primarily focuses on student decision-making, I have been able to extend insights by also student experiences during arrival.

My findings suggested that as part of their recruitment activities, HEPs should pay more attention to families. Emerging from the data was the consistent and complex influence of students' families. Of course, these are not the only people who play a role in influencing students. Sponsors, counsellors and international recruitment agents additionally have an effect on student choice, but family members emerged in my research as a consistent presence. A family's influencing role in student decision-making is acknowledged (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) but my research has extended that recognition to a wider nationality sample

and to the pathway sector. My research further adds to the literature in highlighting the extent of family influence not only in student decision-making but additionally as funders and in some instances supporting students' arrival.

Given the nature of international student marketing and recruitment, much of the activity undertaken by HEPs is likely to be weighted towards digital channels. While international students do attend events when they are held in their home country, with a few having the opportunity to visit university campuses directly, my research established that digital communications play an essential role in the setting of student expectations, whilst preparing them for their arrival and studies. As digital marketing trends towards personalisation, it is important that international student recruitment marketers embrace these tools. Aside from literature that supports the need for the provision of clear and comprehensive digital information via an HEIs' website (Badwan, n.d.; Cleopatra et al., 2004; Felix, 2006), my research highlighted the need for effective email communication. My recommendation was for HEP to adopt practices evident in e-commerce, guiding students through the information provision and requirements process. Such a step-up in service can both ensure students consume the right information at the right time, but also can track their own requirements.

An international education is a significant investment and factors highly in much of the literature (Bodycott, 2009; Leggett, 2013; Maria Cubillo et al., 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2017; Pimpa, 2005; Shanka et al., 2005; Wilkins et al., 2012). Despite the likely six-figure sum required for a four-year course of study in the UK (that is, a one-year Foundation and three-year Degree), drawn from my data was the student annoyance with smaller costs. Inextricably linked to engaging communications highlighted above, poor administration particularly around visa applications, that lead to additional costs for students, was palpably frustrating. One can also imagine the anxiety this

creates for students. Quite simply, without a visa to study the student cannot enter the country. The frustration with administrative process information sub-optimally delivered, overlaid with students' anxiety that such processes were contingent on their ability to study, were compounded with ensuing additional costs. My finding here adds to the body of knowledge concerning study costs, establishing that HEPs must pay careful attention to how and when administrative information is delivered. Specifically, they must effectively leverage digital personalisation tools to optimise processes and make for better student experiences and arrival.

The physical location and environment of where a student studies is an important facet in both their decision-making and the students' relative satisfaction (Tamer, 2006). Pathway providers are often reliant on their partner HEI to provide adequate facilities for the Study Centre. Given the paucity of research in relation to private pathway provision, my research uniquely shows that both the university and provider must acknowledge the importance of the facility. During my focus groups, it was apparent the students' surprise and disappointment with their teaching facilities. Universities must contractually agree to treat their pathway partner as part of their own infrastructure, ensuring the facilities provided are equal to those across the university estate. Further, the pathway provider must be clear in its marketing messages about the Study Centre. Providing prospective students 360-degree 'tours' of the facility for their studies, will engage them in their future studies, manage expectations and prepare them for arrival. In this way, international students would arrive with pre-established knowledge of the study environment and not feel they are being treated inequitably to other students. All key components in the disconfirmation paradigm, that is managing expectations so as to avoid negative disconfirmation and ensuing poor satisfaction.

Perhaps the greatest surprise in my research was the value placed on teaching staff. Literature notes the importance of academic staff in student decision-making (Mazzarol &

Soutar, 2002), but this was based on a narrow international student sample and targeted only

at students directly entering university. It was apparent in pathway marketing that little

reference was made to the Study Centre teaching staff. Unlike the facility issues noted above,

this was a pleasant surprise for students. Thus, not all setting of expectations and

misalignment need be negatively disconfirmed. In this regard the pathway sector has an

opportunity to make more of the teaching support it provides international students. It should

take steps to 'codify' its pedagogical approach to international student teaching, noting the

high-levels of support and embeddedness of English language provision. The model of

delivery is arguably unique to the sector and the staff that deliver are specialists in its

transmittal. There is no literature that acknowledges this and is therefore a key finding for the

pathway sector.

Practical Application and Implications

The findings from my research will be shared with the organisation for which I work.

I will be seeking to engage with recruitment and marketing colleagues and Centre teams alike

to examine existing practices against my recommendations. My organisation runs regular

student satisfaction surveys and holds annual student councils (with student representatives

from all UK Study Centres). From this proprietary data, 'information and induction' and

'quality of teaching and learning' (Provider A, 2017) emerged as key themes to address. My

findings will compliment these areas, offering practical measures to improve student

experience. Marketing and recruitment colleagues will be asked to review their practice,

particularly undertaking reviews of digital content, developing ways to engage families. Visa

application process mapping will be undertaken too with admissions colleagues. Combining

this with digital marketing communications, teams will have an opportunity to optimise these

key messaging channels and the provider will be encouraged to invest in digital tools

comparable to those found in e-commerce. Photographic materials relating to Study Centres

will need to be updated and 360-degree tours developed, ensuring they reflect a students'

future study environment. Finally, an examination into how the organisation reflects its

delivery model and the quality of its teaching staff will be effected. Providing personal video

messages or sample classes online would be one means to reflect the quality teaching staff,

while engaging students through interactive digital materials.

Notwithstanding my major findings above, when I asked participants if they would

choose a different HEP had they known some of the mis-alignment they subsequently

experienced, none would do so. This then begs the question as to why HEPs might seek to

address my recommendations. I would argue that HEPs need to consider the negative 'word

of mouth' effect. Positive word of mouth can lead to improved student perception of HEIs

(Clemes et al., 2008). Ensuring existing students have a good experience leading to improved

satisfaction, can have a halo effect on ensuing recruitment and marketing activities, where

word of mouth inevitably plays a part (Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015; Smith & Ennew, 2001).

Recommendations for Further Research

As highlighted in my limitations, my study sample consisted of international students

enrolled with one private provider at six of the organisations' UK university-based Study

Centres. Taking the global provider for whom I work, this sample could be extended further

to include international students at Centres outside of the UK, comparing student experience

and expectations when arriving into different countries. Equally as per my limitations

discussion, private providers included in the sample could also be extended, assessing

whether or not differences exist amongst the various providers and their respective

recruitment and marketing practices. Having only researched international students on

Foundation programmes delivered by one private pathway provider, my research has not

established whether these factors exist with other such providers. Had my sample of Centres

been one that traversed both the UK university sector as well as multiple pathway providers, I

may have been able to draw out such conclusions. However, for any pathway provider operating International Study Centres, it would certainly be a valid exercise for them to assess the content and nature of their student recruitment processes, assessing their activities relative to my recommendations. As my research design was not one of discourse analysis, a further line of inquiry could be to undertake a multi-modal analysis of information accessed by prospective international students. Acknowledged in my limitations, I took a high-level practitioner approach in this regard to answer my research questions, but a valuable extension to the study could be to assess participant responses to content relative to their actual experiences.

Inferred in my findings is that should HEPs follow some of my recommendations, there could be improved alignment in student expectations and their consequent experiences. Taking this further, it would be interesting to explore whether new processes implemented through the recruitment activities, directly improve student satisfaction (and by implication, attainment). Undertaking a longitudinal study assessing the effect of stage-by-stage recruitment activity adjustments, along the themes of my primary findings above, would enable HEPs to better assess the efficacy of the interventions.

In undertaking this course of research, I have been able to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of international education. Considering student recruitment and expectations setting, I have evidenced expectation and experience misalignment for international students studying at UK-based Foundation programmes. To address this, I proposed five practical interventions for HEP to consider. Little research has been undertaken into the pathway sector and certainly none that examines whether or not pathway providers undertake clear and effective marketing that aligns to international student expectations at UK university-based Study Centres. I hope in this regard pathway providers and their university partners alike will benefit from these findings. After all, each party has an interest

in attracting increasing numbers of international students. Importantly, in a fiercely competitive environment, what they must not do is stray into over-promising and under-delivering, likely to result in poor student satisfaction and consequential attainment. By factoring in recommendations from my research, I hope HEPs can continue to be both competitive and effective, while concurrently ensuring the best possible student experience and success.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval from Provider A. Letter has been anonymised to protect Provider A's

identity.

Dr Lucilla Crosta,
Chair of the EdD Virtual Programme Ethics Committee (VPREC),
The University of Liverpool
Liverpool
L69 3BX

Subject: Mr Mark Cunnington, Ed.D. Thesis/Research.

Thesis title: How do international student experiences of UK University
                international study centres match expectations raised during the
                recruitment process?

To: The Chair of the Virtual Programme Ethics Committee

Dear Dr Crosta,

Mark tendered his application for ethics approval for the above referenced
doctoral research in July of this year. As part of our due diligence process Mark
was asked to clear our own ethical approval process and obtain permission to
undertake this research as a Study Group employee.

I can confirm that ethical clearance for activities associated with this research,
based upon the submission of an application form and supporting documentation
was approved by our Research and Scholarship sub-committee on the 18th July.
On behalf of the Managing Director Higher Education UK & Europe and I, as Chair
of the Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee, thereby give formal notice
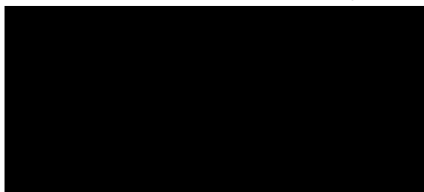of this approval.

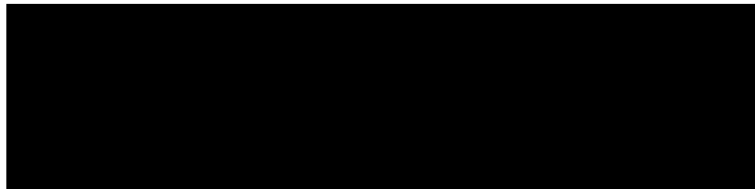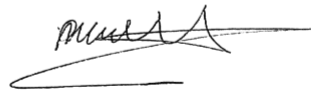As part of this clearance Mark has been asked to submit further details of the
centres and students that he will be working with to complete this research in

due course and ahead of any activity being taken. Agreement of this request has been received.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if there is anything else you require as part of your own University process.

We wish Mark every success in his research.

Yours sincerely,

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL | ONLINE PROGRAMMES

Dear Mark Cunnington	
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.	

Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)	
Review type:	Expedited	
School:	Lifelong Learning	
Title:	How do international student experiences of UK University international study centres match expectations raised during the recruitment process?	
First Reviewer:	Prof. Dr. Morag A. Gray	
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Mary Johnson	
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Lucilla Crosta; Dr. Rita Kop	
Date of Approval:	11th September 2017	

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

Conditions		
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.

This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta Chair, EdD. VPREC

Appendix B

Participant Information Sheet[5]

September/October 2017

Dear Student

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, fellow students and Personal Tutor if you wish.

I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for considering this request.

Kind regards
Mark Cunnington

Title of Research Study

How do international student experiences of UK University International Study Centres match expectations raised during the recruitment process?

Purpose of the Research Study

As you may know, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ works closely with UK Universities to provide Foundation programmes for International students. This enables students, such as you, the academic and English preparation prior to starting a UK under-graduate Degree programme.

As a researcher, who also works for ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ I am interested to understand student experiences of the recruitment process – the decision-making process you went through and why that has meant you are now at your chosen University. Importantly, in asking you to participate in this research, I want to understand how your initial experiences of being at the University, compare to how you thought they would be. For example, is the Campus how you expected it to be; do the tutors and teaching facilities meet your expectations; was your arrival smooth and straightforward?

By gathering insights from you into your experiences, I hope this research will assist Study Group and its University partners in continuing to improve student experiences.

Why have I been chosen to take part?
You have been asked to take part in this research as you are a recently arrived international student to one of our UK University Study Centres. I am seeking to invite other such students from your

_____

[5] Original has been anonymised to protect Provider A identity.

course and year group at the Centre to participate in the research to ensure I have a good representation of students from different countries.

███████ works with many Universities in the UK, and your participation will form part of a series of groups I am running at five other Universities. I am hoping in total there will be up to 48 participants across the different University campuses.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and at any time you are free to withdraw without any need for explanation. Any such withdrawal would not cause you any disadvantage whatsoever.

What will happen if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the research, you will be invited to attend a Focus Group at the International Study Centre. There will likely be 6-8 participants at the Focus Group – all similarly on a Foundation programme having recently started their studies. Following the Focus Group, one or two attendees may be asked to be contacted for a brief follow-up, online interview conducted via instant messaging.

I will be leading the Focus Group and follow-up interviews, asking several questions relating to your experience of joining the University's Study Centre and your experiences so far.

When you come to the Focus Group, you will be asked to complete a short document confirming your attendance, your name and nationality. At that time, you will be assigned a number. Gathering this information will mean I can anonymise any responses – so you can be assured no-one is made aware in any report of your specific responses. Knowing your nationality will assist me in my analysis as to whether there are any patterns or comparisons to be made across different nationalities.

The Focus Group is expected to run for around 60-90 minutes and I would ask that you contribute as much as you can, sharing your experiences so far. Refreshments will be provided but no other reimbursement. The session will be organised for a specific time and duration so as not to impact any of your studies and lesson time.

I will be audio recording the Focus Group for the full duration. This will help me fully engage in the discussion (as I will not have to make notes) and will also assist afterwards as I transcribe and listen again to the various responses to my questions. You should note that only I will have access to the recording and it will not be shared with anyone else.

Following the Focus Group, I may need to contact one or two students who attended the group to explore a few of the key themes that came up. You will be contacted by me via email and be asked to engage in a short, online interview where I will ask some additional interviews via instant messaging (e.g. Skype or WhatsApp). This interview should take no more than 20 minutes.

Are there any risks in taking part?

As explained above, I am keen to understand student experiences of Campus life relative to the recruitment process. Consequently, I am only seeking your views and opinions and no way will any views you express be detrimental to your studies. If at any time, you are uncomfortable or feel

disadvantaged in anyway, please be sure to let me know immediately. You do not have to answer the questions I pose if you feel uncomfortable or simply do not want to.

And as a reminder, your participation is entirely voluntary, so you can feel free to withdraw from the research at any time.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

There are no specific benefits to your taking part in this research. However, your views may help me make recommendations to ██████████ in how we can continuously improve experiences for future students who study at our International Study Centres.

What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting me at mcunnington@██████ com and I will try to help. Alternatively, you can also contact my Doctoral supervisor, Alla Korzh at alla.korzh@online.liverpool.ac.uk. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me or my supervisor with, then you should contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved (me), and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

Will my participation be kept confidential?

As stated above, the Focus Group will be recorded by me. The recording will remain solely in my possession and will be stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder to which only I have access. The audio recording will be transcribed by me and similarly saved to the Google Drive folder. Any online follow-up interview will also only be accessible by me and a copy of the questions and your responses saved to a secure, password protected file. No data will be shared with anyone during this process. All the information will be anonymised, so no-one could attribute responses to you specifically. Should I need to directly quote any comments from the Focus Group, you will be contacted to gain permission and to provide a pseudonym so you cannot be identified. Data will be stored until the successful completion of the research, data analysis and thesis submission and for five years thereafter, after which all data will be deleted.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the research will be produced in my University of Liverpool Doctoral thesis. The study findings will be made available to ██████████ in order to seek improvements to student experience. From the study, it will not be possible to attribute your attendance or any comments made by you.

What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

You can withdraw from the research process at any time, without explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for this to be done. Otherwise you can request that they are destroyed and no further use is made of them.

Who can I contact if I have further questions?

Alla Korzh alla.korzh@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: *How do international student experiences of UK University International Study Centres match expectations raised during the recruitment process?*

Researcher: Mark Cunnington

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated October 2017 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.

4. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.

5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.

6. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the purposes of transcription and analysis

7. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for the researcher to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

8. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name	Date	Signature
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix D

Focus Group Set-up

Six Centres
Order: Centre A[6]; Centre B[7]; Centre C[8]; Centre D[9]; Centre E[10]; Centre F[11]

Target 6-8 participants
2-hour session booked
Refreshments (lunch) available

Questioning time allowed: 60-90mins

Venue(s):
Centre classroom / meeting room
Chairs set in semi-circle
Small table in the middle (place for recording device)
Facilitator chair at head

Set-up (15mins)
Small talk as participants arrive
Invite them to partake of refreshments

Gather the group to their chairs
Ask participants to complete attendance document
Set the scene/context

---

[6] 23 October
[7] 24 October
[8] 31 October
[9] 2 November
[10] 6 November
[11] 7 November

Example Questioning Route

			Minutes
Opening	1	Tell me who you are, where you are from, and what you are studying.	5
Introduction	2	How did you first find out about this programme?	5
Transition	3	Thinking back to when you were first considering studying in a different country, what were the first issues on your mind?	10
Key	4	What was your knowledge of the UK before you thought about studying here?	5
	5	What were the main factors you considered when selecting Centre A University?	10
	6	What made you choose to enter UK / Centre A University through a Foundation programme?	5
	7	When you first arrived at Centre A, what were your first impressions?	10
	8	When you think about the recruitment process – so the information that was available to you in making your study choice – how do you feel that met the experiences you have had since joining Centre A / University?	10
Ending	9	If there was something you could change – some information you would need or like presented/provided differently – what would that be?	10
	10	We constantly strive to improve the experiences of students who study with us, if there were things you could change or improve at the Centre A what would they be?	10
		Total	75

Appendix E

Follow-up online interview guides (Original Notes)

Rationale, Sample and Question Route

Follow-up, online interview questions will explore further on where participant expectations

were met and/or not met.

- Focus groups largely appear to reaffirm Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) primary

  'PULL' factor categories.

- Analysis and coding is to follow, but 'geographic proximity' seems to be least

  referenced.

One of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) primary conclusions, in terms of key influences for

study choice, was the "[q]uality of reputation" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 90) of the HEI.

The third highest scoring factor within this category was "a reputation for quality and

expertise of its staff" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 88).

In terms of satisfaction measures, the academic delivery/learning environment and student-

teacher relationship come out strongly too (Illias, Hassan, Rahman & Yasoa, 2008; Siming,

Niamatullah, Gao, Xu & Shaf, 2015; Tahar, 2008). So, it is this area I wish to explore further

in follow-up online interviews.

From an inductive analysis of the focus group transcripts, participants would have liked to

know more about (or seen an improvement in):

1. Email information

   a. Induction (information overload)

2. Registration process

    a. admin

3. Teaching space

4. Feels like school

    a. Attendance

    b. Classrooms

5. Schedule / timetable (busy)

6. Teachers (relationship)

7. Accommodation

My intention, per the literature, is to explore further with participants, their experiences in the Centre (facilities), their engagement in the learning environment (classroom and attendance), and an examination of their teacher relationships.

Proposed participants:

	Study Centre[12]	Name[13]	Nationality	Gender	Contact details[14]
1	*Centre A*	███	Dubai	Female	████████
2	*Centre B*	███	Kuwait	Male	████████
3	*Centre C*	███	Jordan	Male	████████
4	*Centre D*	███	India	Male	████████
5	*Centre E*	███	Kuwait	Female	████████
6	*Centre F*	███	China	Female	████████
7	*Centre A*	███	Taiwan	Male	████████
8	*Centre B*	███	Pakistan	Male	████████
9	*Centre C*	███	Egypt	Female	████████
10	*Centre E*	███	Russia	Male	████████

Participants have been selected based on their engagement in the focus groups, as well as their country of origin and gender representivity.

A representative match will never be entirely met (either of the focus group participants, or Provider A's national student demography, but per my research proposal, although seeking some sort of representivity, the primary goal and interest is the stories of the students in their own words.

Across the focus group sample

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[12] Centre name has been deleted and amended to protect anonymity
[13] Participant name has been deleted to protect anonymity
[14] Contact details have been removed to protect anonymity

- 54% came from the Middle East. Thus, 4 of the 6 come from that region (although

    different countries);

- China/Asia were 29%, thus a participant from China was selected (China and the Asia

    region for Study Group as a whole is one of the largest sending countries/regions);

- with India/Pakistan accounting for 20% or Focus Group participants, thus one

    participant selected from India.

Question route

Per my research proposal, a semi-structured, open-ended interview question approach will be

adopted, likely over Skype messaging or email. The interview will be 1-2-1, and

synchronous, likely over a 15-20-minute period.

Facilities

During the focus group, some of the discuss centred on the teaching space and facilities.

1. Can tell me a bit more about what you had expected before you arrived?

    a. What else would you have liked to know?

2. Having spent more time at the Centre, what is your view now?

    a. What would you like to see improved?

    b. What do you feel you should have been told in advance?

Learning experience

Some of the focus group discussions, referenced how the experience of being at the Centre is

still like school.

3. Can you explain a bit more what you were expecting before arriving?

    a. What did the pre-arrival information tell you?

    b. If you were advised by an agent/sponsor, how did they explain the set-up to

       you?

4. Having been on the course a for almost 14 (15/16) weeks, how are you now finding

   the running of the course (especially the attendance monitoring)?

    a. What do you think could improve your experience?

    b. If there was something else you could have been told in advance, what would

       that be?

Teacher relationship(s)

The engagement and welcoming nature of the Centre staff and teachers was mentioned in the focus group.

5. What expectations did you have of what the teachers would be like?

    a. What research did you do into the teaching staff at the Centre/University?

    b. Is there something that could be improved in this regard?

6. How is your relationship with the teaching staff now?

    a. Are they any aspects you would change or improve?

7. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences at the Centre, and information that could have been provided to you to improve the experience?

Thank you.

ENDS

Diagram 3: mind map developed during focus group transcription. Mind map illustrates key, emergent themes to help structure the questioning route