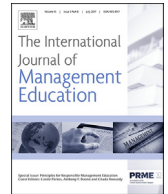


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Trading off benefits and costs in higher education: A qualitative research with international incoming students

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has brought new challenges to Higher Education Institutions such as international exchange programs. In this context, the purpose of this work is to analyse students' value trade-off in their terms abroad. Specifically, a multidimensional framework on value as trade-off is applied: two negative dimensions of sacrifice: monetary (price) and non-monetary (time and efforts), and three groups of benefits: functional (location, facilities, infrastructure, timetables, etc.), social (relationships with instructors, with other students, networks, etc.), and emotional (having fun while being a student). For that purpose, an exploratory research was undertaken using qualitative techniques. Three focus groups were conducted with 17 undergraduate students from eight different nationalities staying at the University of Valencia (UV), Spain. Results have endorsed the idea that academic experiences can be evaluated as a value trade-off (benefits vs. costs) since participants have shown agreements and differences on the five dimensions of value. This suggests that international students show a multifaceted and contrasted experience, which needs to be managed by Universities interested in their positioning as competitive destinations.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the process of creating and attributing value has become a cornerstone of marketing and consumer behavior (Gallarza, Gil-Saura, & Holbrook, 2011). Consumers co-create value in their consumption process, while experiencing the value offered by companies and organizations (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Considering the “Student-as-Customer” orientation (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014), it is clear that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are highly engaged in these value co-creation processes. One crucial decision of this particular behavior concerns international students, as they choose among a wide range of Universities when deciding where to perform their academic experience in a foreign country (through Erasmus program or others), trying to identify and anticipate the student value offered by each option.

Different ways of exploring conceptual representations of customer value for HEIs (e.g. Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp, 2010; Ledden, Kalafatis, & Mathioudakis, 2011, 2007) have been suggested. The most common one is the value trade-off (benefits vs. sacrifices) based on the seminal work by Zeithaml (1988). In accordance with other works that considered perceived value as a multidimensional assessment (Holbrook, 1999; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001; Leroi-

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Werelds, Streukens, Brady, & Swinnen, 2014), these benefits and sacrifices are understood as different experienced perceived values. Thereby, this paper aims to explore the experience of being an international student through a multidimensional value-based approach. In other words, we attempt to analyse the trade-off between benefits and sacrifices made by students in their choice of taking a year or semester abroad. To meet this objective, a qualitative approach was adopted. More specifically, three focus groups were conducted with 17 bachelor students in order to investigate the role of functional, social, and emotional values (Holbrook, 1999; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) along with costs of time and effort (Zeithaml, 1988) that students are facing during their international experience.

The contribution of this proposal comes from both the scope (a behavioral value-based approach, where experiences, utilities and emotions are at a play) and the selected target (international incoming bachelor students at a Spanish University). On one hand, regarding the scope, this value-based approach allows us to explore multidimensionality of value as a trade-off in the international educational experience, by means of applying qualitative methods in search of cultural and social peculiarities of this academic experience. The consideration of several dimensions of value, such as functional, social, and emotional value, in addition to non-monetary sacrifices (time and effort), makes the scope of this paper broader than previous studies. Those studies have focused on the socio-economic characteristics of students (e.g. Bitew, 2016; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001) rather than on behavioral factors such as benefits and costs, or were limited to monetary costs only (e.g. Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Therefore, we attempt to contribute to a broader understanding of international students' behavior within HEIs through the lens of a multidimensional framework on value, thus highlighting the usefulness of the concept of customer value for understanding the experience of studying abroad.

On the other hand, regarding the target population of study, the interest on international students in HE literature has been rather scarce. As recently stated: “the relatively limited number of studies regarding international students' choice of university outside their home countries is surprising” (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015, p. 268). More precisely, and in accordance with Rudd, Djafarova, and Waring (2012, p. 121), “the area is under researched and requires more theoretical underpinning”. Besides this academic justification, international movements of students across the globe are also relevant, both socially and economically (Knight, 2001; Kondacki, van der Broeck, & Yildirim, 2008), thus arising trends and concerns on the students' experience in the global higher education landscape (Abdullah et al., 2014). Indeed, new knowledge can be brought on the field, as internationalization in HEIs remains crucial for global competition (Warwick, 2014). Moreover, intra-European student mobility has been facing new challenges (Ryiza & Teichler, 2007), as new political and social environment (e.g. protectionism, exits from UE, massive immigration flows) are affecting the configuration of the international students' mobility in the following years.

Within this context, according to the latest report of the European Commission, Spain ranks first in receiving incoming Erasmus students with more than 36,000 in the year 2013–2014, and the University of Valencia was the third on the rank of top 500 HEIs receiving Erasmus students (Erasmus Statistics, 2017). The city of Valencia, as well as other cities ranking high in internationalization, have changed their physiognomy towards a multicultural educational arena within the Bologna process. Conducting research with international students as a main stakeholder of the educational service provision is therefore a critical aspect to be explored. In this sense, the current paper offers meaningful insights for HEIs regarding the factors that influence international students' choice behavior by exploring students' perceptions of customer value from different cultural contexts.

This paper starts by describing a conceptual framework on customer value based on literature in the education field. The methodology section is presented then, with the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach, research aims, questions guiding the discussions, and the process for selecting the participants in the study. Finally, results are reported with a selection of the *verbatim*s and conclusions and managerial implications are discussed.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Customer value in marketing and consumer behavior literature

Customer value has been considered a seminal topic for the understanding of both epistemology and practice of marketing (Boksberger & Melsen, 2011; Holbrook, 1999; Leroi-Werelds et al., 2014; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). In fact, consumer value is grounded on fundamental marketing principles, as marketing was defined as a process based on exchanges in which each party gives up something of value in return for something of a greater value (Holbrook, 1999).

The topic of value has raised interest among academicians and practitioners during last 30 years and many different approaches have been proposed regarding its nature and dimensions. Nevertheless, although academic authors seem to agree that value is a multidimensional concept (Holbrook, 1999; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), there is no consensus over the number of dimensions or the criteria for classifying them. Consequently, the range and variety of value dimensions referred in the literature is broad (Boksberger & Melsen, 2011; Gallarza et al., 2011; Leroi-Werelds et al., 2014). In this paper, we have revised and selected the three distinct theoretical models proposed by Zeithaml (1988), Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) and Holbrook (1999) as explained below.

First, the early conceptual proposal made by Zeithaml (1988, p. 14) is the most universally accepted definition of perceived value, among the extensive literature on value. It defines perceived value as “the overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perceptions of what is received and what is given”. In spite of the influence of this conceptualization in trade-off, the interest on the negative dimensions (e.g. restraint to price and, more rarely, risk and other costs) has been scarce. On the

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