Choosing a university abroad: motivations, information sources and decision factors

In a competitive global environment, attracting international students is increasingly important for higher education institutions (HEIs) calling for effective marketing strategies. We aim at contributing to the understanding of how an international student chooses a HEI. An exploratory qualitative study was carried out in a public university in the North of Portugal to understand how students choose a foreign university abroad. We build on theoretical frameworks for marketing in HEIs and develop a conceptual framework of HEI decision process detailing the stages and factors relevant for this decision such as the motivations to leave the country of origin, the information sources and the decision factors. The developed model constitutes a comprehensive systematization of the choice process. Semistructured interviews are carried out to explore the proposed model. Results suggest important implications for HEIs in designing programmes to attract international students.

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OLIVEIRA, D. and SOARES, A (2015), "Choosing a university abroad: motivations, information sources and decision factors", *Proceedings of the 14th International Marketing Trends Conference 2015*

1. Introduction and Objectives

In a competitive global environment, higher education institutions (HEIs) must seek for strategies allowing them to be more competitive, aiming at attracting more and better students, not only at the national but also at the international level. In fact, social, demographic and economic changes, as well as reduction in the number of students and of available funding have led HEIs to consider strategies in order to attract more students and more funding resources. Education is recognized as a marketable service (Kotler & Fox, 1994; Mazzarol, Soutar, & Thein, 2001). A HEI will therefore seek to implement a marketing orientation (Kotler & Fox, 1994), as this strategy will allow it to determine the needs and wishes of its target markets and satisfy them through adapting its marketing-mix.

From the demand side perspective, additional reasons including the recognition of an education abroad as well as the growing importance of intercultural competencies, contribute to the growing number of students choosing to pursue their studies outside their home country. According to the OECD report Education at a Glance 2012 (OECD, 2012), in 2010 there were about 4 million students pursuing higher education abroad. On the other hand, for students coming from less developed countries, with a small or even inexistent offer of higher education institutions, the international network of HEIs represents an opportunity to access higher education, leading to an increase of the number of international students studying overseas (Mazzarol et al., 2001).

This reality calls for a better understanding of the international students' decision process. Although literature has addressed the students' decision process within different countries, very few studies have looked at the study abroad decision process and a comprehensive model of this decision is lacking. This paper intends to contribute to the understanding of how an international student chooses a HEI. This decision is far more complex that the process of choosing a HEI within the students' home country.

We seek to identify the motivations leading a student to leave his home country and select a certain foreign institution, the information sources consulted during the selection process, as well as the decision factors for his decision. We build upon the literature in consumer behaviour in services, as well as in the choice models for choosing a HEI and the few existing studies on choosing a university abroad, to develop and propose a theoretical framework of HEI decision process, focusing on the pre-purchase stage.

This paper is organised as follows: in the following section, we review the literature relevant for the understanding of the student choice process, including the motivations to study abroad, the information sources and the decision factors. In section 3, we present the research model, which depicts the proposed student decision process, detailing the stages and factors relevant for choosing a university abroad. The research design is presented in section 4 and subsequently we present and discuss the findings. Finally, section 6 presents the conclusions of our study.

2. Literature review: Choosing a university abroad

According to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006), marketing research for educational institutions takes on the conceptual and empirical framework of services marketing, although educational institutions have different characteristics when compared to other services organizations, considering the students' choice process and the factors which influence their decision.

Marketing for HEIs is even more relevant when drastic changes occur in their surrounding environment (Kotler & Fox, 1994; Mazzarol et al., 2001). By defining a marketing strategy, and considering the marketing-mix for education, HEIs therefore aim at

improving the quality of their services thus corresponding to the expectations of their customers (Gajic, 2012). In order to adapt their marketing strategy, it is mandatory that HEIs understand which motivations and factors influence the most the choice behaviour of their consumers, namely, their students (Sion, Mercúrio, Tofoli, & Vendrame, 2011).

The theoretical frameworks of marketing in HEIs are mostly based on studies focusing the consumer behaviour and decision process, aiming at establishing strategies to create competitive advantage in this market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Understanding consumer behaviour is a nuclear concept in marketing. Knowing how consumers make decisions on buying or using services and the specific factors which determine their satisfaction allows creating and offering services aiming at consumer satisfaction (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011, p. 58), namely contributing towards understanding which information sources and decision factors are implied in the decision process (Simões & Soares, 2010).

Drawing on the three stage service consumption process, from pre-purchase (which includes awareness of need, information search, evaluation of alternatives and buying decision), to service encounter (consumption) and evaluation after purchase (post-encounter stage) (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011, p. 59), it is possible to analyse the student's (consumer) behaviour when choosing a destination HEI. The analysis of buying behaviour in what the decision of choosing a HEI is concerned is quite relevant for the design and implementation of marketing strategies and tools which respond to the customers' needs. This is fundamental for the definition of institutional positioning in a competitive environment (Chapman, 1986; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Maringe, 2006).

2.1. Motivations to study abroad

Literature on choosing a HEI has mostly addressed the students' decision process within different countries, as for example in Australia, Scotland or the United Kingdom (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005). Fewer studies have looked at the study abroad decision process; this has been mostly approached in the framework of the push/pull factors (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010; Lam, Ariffin, & Ahmad, 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push factors refer to economic or political issues occurring in the country of origin, influencing firstly the choice of a destination country; the pull factors influence directly the choice of a certain institution and are related to the attraction factors of the destination country, the reputation and quality of the destination HEI, the international recognition of the education and to issues regarding the location of the destination institution (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push factors may be positive or negative, considering repulsive characteristics of the origin country (negative) and attraction factors of the destination country (positive); the pull factors are usually positive and tend to work as attraction factors towards the chosen HEI (Chen, 2007).

In this section, the push/pull factors are thoroughly analysed, aiming at understanding the main motivations which lead a student to decide going abroad. Both push factors influencing the student to leave the country of origin as well as pull factors acting as attraction characteristics of the destination country are considered (Eder et al., 2010; Lam et al., 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992).

The **situation of the origin country**, namely economic decline or stagnation, political instability and lack of capacity of local HEI are the main factors appointed to influence the students to leave their home country in search for an international HEI (Maringe & Carter, 2007; McMahon, 1992).

The **international experience as personal development** is the main motivation referred by Eder et al. (2010), as students state it is an opportunity to become more independent and gain experience abroad. In a research carried out by Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe (2008), the will to travel, have fun and the experience to live in a different country are the three main motivations to study abroad.

The relevance of the international experience for a future professional career is the most valued factor in the study carried out by Lam et al. (2011) and the third most valued according to Eder et al. (2010). Students perceive international experience as valued by future employers. Sison & Brennan (2012) have concluded that students consider an educational experience or traineeship abroad as an important investment in their professional careers.

Learning a foreign language, in particular, English, is referred to by Eder et al. (2010) as the second most important motivation when deciding to study abroad; it is also referred by Lam et al. (2011).

The available **information on the destination country** is also a relevant factor (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This depends not only on the amount of information available but also on how easily the student is able to find that information. The reputation of the destination country and the recognition of the acquired education are also items in this factor.

The **environment**, i. e., the students' perception of the education environment, the physical conditions of the destination country and university, the overall lifestyle (Lam et al., 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), as well as the touristic and cultural attractions of the destination country (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008), are also considered by students when choosing a destination country.

The **spatial proximity** between the origin and the destination country is one of the elements influencing the choice to leave the origin country, bearing in mind that a closer distance between home and destination countries may facilitate to the student's mobility (Lam et al., 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The existing **social reference group**, i. e., family or friends who already live in the destination country, may also be a factor influencing the decision to leave the origin country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The **personal recommendations** that parents, family and friends give on the destination country or institution are also considered (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The perception of the destination institution's reputation is a factor deemed relevant by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), as the authors consider word-of-mouth to be one of the most powerful ways of promotion, which international HEI could strategically rely on.

Another mentioned factor is **cost**, which includes not only tuition fees, living costs or travel, but also social costs such as insecurity, crime and racial discrimination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The opportunity to find a part-time job is also considered as part of this factor.

Personal recommendations and **cost** may also be considered as pull factors towards the destination HEI, as will be explored later on.

2.2. Information Sources

Information search is a key element in buyer decision models (Beatty & Smith, 1987). Understanding the information search process in the pre-purchase stage is fundamental, as this is one of the most influent stages in the buying decision process (Murray, 1991). Information search is even more relevant when the purchase risk is higher, as is the case of services. The service consumers have therefore different information needs when compared to product consumers (McColl-Kennedy & Jr, 1999; Murray, 1991). The information search may be a longer and more thoughtful process when the product or service represents a larger investment (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006, p. 55).

When choosing a destination HEI, the candidate will gather the most information possible on existing HEIs and educational programmes. The availability of accurate and trustable information responding to the students' main questions contributes to reduce the risk which choosing a HEI represents, especially a foreign institution (Mortimer, 1997).

Information sources may be classified as internal and external (Murray, 1991). The internal sources refer to the memories and previous experiences, related to former buying processes. The external sources represent the consumer's initiative to look for information in the surrounding environment.

As far as external sources are concerned, they can be classified as (Beatty & Smith, 1987): media search (ads), retailer search (direct contact with retailer); interpersonal search (reference people such as friends, relatives); and neutral search (third party reports or similar neutral publications).

Referring to entering Higher Education, several authors have researched on which information sources are sought after by the students in their decision process. Information sources referred in literature on this theme (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Eder et al., 2010; Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Mortimer, 1997; Murray, 1991; Simões & Soares, 2010) are categorized according to three different types:
- internal sources, controlled by the institution;
- interpersonal sources;
- external sources, not controlled by the institution.

Internal sources refer to internet (HEI's institutional website), leaflets, educational programme guides or other official documentation.

Internet is considered by several authors as one of the main sources of information (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Eder et al., 2010; Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Moogan et al., 1999; Simões & Soares, 2010). Students tend to access the official websites of the chosen destination HEIs or look for information through specialized search engines (Gomes & Murphy, 2003). **Printed information** may be available through promotional brochures, leaflets, official institutional guides or educational programme guides. However, this type of information is less sought after in comparison with online information (Simões & Soares, 2010). Nevertheless, Maringe (2006) considers that the traditional sources of information, such as brochures or even the official website are not deemed the most relevant. According to the author, HEIs must seek for new ways to promote their programme offers, using, for example, "Ambassador" programmes and adapting available content to the candidate's needs.

Interpersonal sources of information, such as the student's reference group (family, friends, professors, former students) are also very important sources of information (Murray, 1991). According to Murray (1991), service consumers tend to rely more on personal sources of information when buying services. In this framework, word-of-mouth is referred to as the most relevant source of information when it comes to buying risk reduction. Word-of-mouth has the most impact on consumers, as it allows immediate feedback; the experience of former students is also very relevant and considered as a trustable source (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Moogan et al., 1999; Murray, 1991). Simões & Soares (2010) refer that former students and professors are the second most relevant source of information in the decision process.

External sources of information, with content which is not controlled by the institution, may be considered as third party information (external entities' assessment reports, for example). This type of information source is identified as the least relevant (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Simões & Soares, 2010).

Apart from identifying the type of information sources used by the students, it is also important to understand whether the provided information is responding to the candidate's needs. An informed and trustful decision depends on the quality of the available information (Briggs & Wilson, 2007), especially given the degree of commitment involved in choosing a

HEI, even more so in an international experience. The lack of adequate reply or lack of information may even be perceived as a negative characteristic of the welcoming institution (Mortimer, 1997).

2.3. Decision Factors

It is fundamental to understand the main factors which influence a students' decision. As a result, the institution will be able to maximize those factors, aiming at increasing its attractiveness and at satisfying the needs and expectations of its current and potential students (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Shanka et al., 2005).

As far as international students are concerned, the attraction towards a certain destination country or destination HEI has been analysed in the framework of push/pull factors (Eder et al., 2010; Lam et al., 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Regarding the choice of a destination HEI, the decision factors have been appointed as pull factors of the destination institution (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Conard & Conard, 2000; Lam et al., 2011; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Maringe, 2006; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Moogan et al., 1999; Pimpa, 2003; Price et al., 2003; Shanka et al., 2005; Simões & Soares, 2010).

Academic reputation is referred to in literature as one of the main factors influencing the choice of a destination HEI (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Lam et al., 2011; Maringe, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka et al., 2005; Simões & Soares, 2010). The students' perception of academic reputation was analysed by Conard & Conard (2000); the researchers have concluded that employment rates and the faculty's competences are two of the most relevant items regarding the students' perception of the academic reputation of the chosen institution. Other less valued items are the percentage of graduates with successful careers, the number of graduate programmes, advanced technological infrastructures, tuition fees, level of difficulty of courses, academic quality of the enrolled students, location and surrounding area to the campus, access and number of buildings (Conard & Conard, 2000).

The **educational offer** is also one of the most valued factors, especially the number and variety of available programmes (Price et al., 2003; Shanka et al., 2005), the scientific areas, graduate programmes and programme organization in general (Maringe, 2006).

Quality is a complex factor, assessable according to several dimensions: the reputation of the institution, the quality of the HEI, the reputation of the faculty, the reputation of research, infrastructures or safety, support activities (accommodation, social services) and the flexibility of educational programmes (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Shanka et al., 2005). According to Shanka et al. (2005), quality, in its set of dimensions, is the third factor which influences the most the choice of a destination.

Cost is one of the factors mentioned in literature as influencing the choice of a HEI (Lam et al., 2011). Cost includes not only the tuition fee, but also cost of living, especially considering a student who chooses to go abroad (Shanka et al., 2005). Cost also includes travel, living and accommodation expenses (Shanka et al., 2005). Maringe (2006) concludes that cost is the second most determinant factor in choosing a HEI. However, Briggs & Wilson (2007) find that cost is not the most determinant factor in comparison with others when it comes to the final decision. The availability of realistic and up-to-date information on the full costs is also referred to as a very relevant aspect, as well as references to possible scholarships.

The **available information** is also one of the factors which influence the student's decision. Candidates search for information to reduce the decision risk. The decision itself is made according to a set of references which includes the available information, third-party information (word-of-mouth), the candidate's perception of the HEI and the reputation of the institution (Briggs & Wilson, 2007). In order for HEIs to reduce the complexity of the

decision process, it is important that they know exactly what kind of information is considered as most relevant by the candidates. Institutions must focus on the quality of information. They should also strategically consider a service marketing perspective and adapt their information policy to the needs of the target audiences (Briggs & Wilson, 2007). Information may be conveyed through leaflets/brochures, the institution's official website or events such as "Open Days" (Briggs & Wilson, 2007).

The **location** of the institution, namely the city in which it is located and the distance to the student's home, is also considered a relevant factor in the choice of the destination HEI (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Lam et al., 2011; Moogan et al., 1999; Shanka et al., 2005). As far as international education experiences are concerned, academic tourism is presently analysing the choice of a destination country for its tourism features along with educational offer (Lam et al., 2011).

Employability rates, which include the number of employed students, the institution's reputation on employability and existing recruitment offices, are considered by Mazzarol et al. (2001) as the main decision factor. For Briggs e Wilson (2007), this is the third most valued factor.
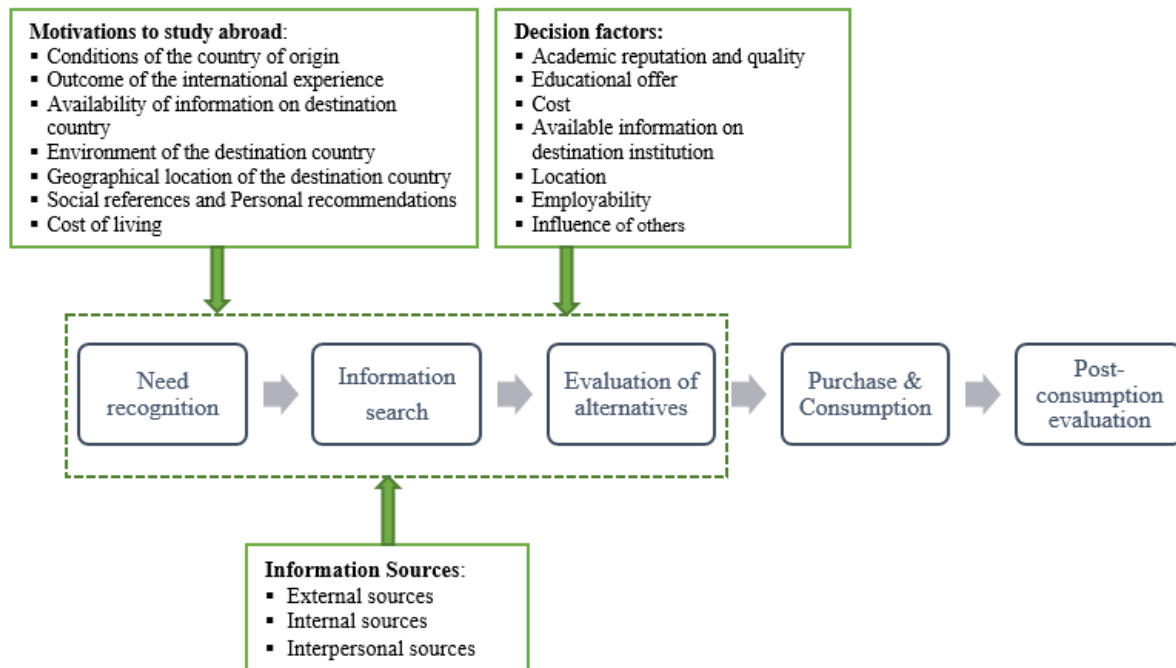
Influence of others, namely the influence of parents, the family's social status, as well as the opinion of family, friends and other significant individuals also affect the student's decision of a destination HEI (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Simões & Soares, 2010). Recommendations received from tutors/supervisors are also significantly considered within this item (Lam et al., 2011; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Furthermore, opinions and perceptions of HEIs' former students largely affect the decision, regardless of these perceptions being positive or negative.

To sum up, literature refers to a broad set of decision factors which may influence a prospective student to choose a destination HEI: academic reputation, educational offer, quality, cost, available information, location, employability and influence of others.

3. Research model

In the framework of the decision process concerning the choice of a destination HEI, several authors have proposed theoretical models aiming at understanding the student's decision behaviour (Chapman, 1986; Kotler & Fox, 1994; Maringe, 2006; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). Considering these models, it is possible to conclude that the motivations and decision factors which influence the student's choice act upon the first three stages of the buying/decision process: need awareness, information search and evaluation of alternatives. Bearing in mind the models presented by several authors, a conceptual model focused on the pre-purchase stage of the decision process is proposed (Figure 1). The research will further seek to explore the relevance of each item through analysing the various perspectives and assigned meanings of each participant (Creswell, 2008, p. 129).

Figure 1. Conceptual model for the decision process of international students

Motivations to study abroad:
- Conditions of the country of origin
- Outcome of the international experience
- Availability of information on destination country
- Environment of the destination country
- Geographical location of the destination country
- Social references and Personal recommendations
- Cost of living

Decision factors:
- Academic reputation and quality
- Educational offer
- Cost
- Available information on destination institution
- Location
- Employability
- Influence of others

Need recognition → Information search → Evaluation of alternatives → Purchase & Consumption → Post-consumption evaluation

Information Sources:
- External sources
- Internal sources
- Interpersonal sources

4. Method

In order to thoroughly understand the complex decision process of an international student, a qualitative approach was selected, aiming at providing an exploratory insight on the proposed theoretical model. Adopting qualitative methodology allows researchers to understand personal perceptions and motivations of international students bearing in mind the aforementioned theoretical framework (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, p. 102). In qualitative designs, data are collected through qualitative methods, which allows the researcher to gather insights on motivations, emotions and personality traits which may influence buyer behaviour and decision making (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2014). Although most of the previously analysed research studies on decision factors and information sources are based on quantitative approaches (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Conard & Conard, 2000; Lam et al., 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Maringe, 2006; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Price et al., 2003; Shanka et al., 2005; Simões & Soares, 2010), a qualitative methodology has been selected, as the decision process of an international student has been considered as a more complex process than a decision process within a country's boundaries.

Research was conducted in a public university in the North of Portugal. In the academic year of 2013/2014, there were 829 international students enrolled in 2nd and 3rd cycle programmes of the university where the research was carried out, from which 298 enrolled in Engineering programmes. A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students enrolled in 2nd and 3rd cycle education engineering projects (Master and PhD programmes) during the academic year of 2013/2014 (15 students were formally enrolled; the 16th student was dealing with the enrolment process at the time of interview).These students (1 student of the 2nd cycle and 14 students of the 3rd cycle) represented 5% of the total international students enrolled in these cycles of studies in 2013/2014 (8% of the total international students enrolled in PhD programmes).

Verbatim transcriptions of the recorded interviews were prepared and the data collected analysed through Content Analysis with the aid of the NVivo V9 Software (QSR

International). The written transcriptions were coded according to the coding grid previously prepared. Following an initial superficial reading (Bardin, 2013, p. 44), the content analysis grid was revised to include new categories and merge previously defined ones. A combination of qualitative content analysis and quantitative content analysis was adopted. The qualitative approach allowed researchers to identify emerging themes and to consider new insights; the quantitative approach was used to verify the frequency of themes. Procedures suggested by Wolcott (1994) were used for the description, analysis and interpretation of collected data, as well as techniques suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) as far as the processing and analysis of data are concerned: emerging theme, frequencies, and matrixes.

5. Findings

Respondents are mostly male (10), aged from 23 to 41. Students come from seven different countries (Algeria, Brazil, India, Iran, Italy, Slovakia and Syria). For 10 of the students, the destination university was their first choice when considering studying abroad.

5.1. Motivations to study abroad

As far as **conditions of the country of origin** are concerned, these can be either favourable or unfavourable. Respondents have referred to scholarships provided by governments at their countries of origin or other local institutions as a favourable condition motivating them to leave their home countries. Favourable conditions suggested confirm the findings of Chen (2007), considering that push factors may also be positive.

Respondents referred mostly to unfavourable conditions influencing them to leave their home countries, namely: fierce competition and lack of opportunities at local universities; access restrictions and censorship on scientific information; students from underdeveloped countries looking for academic and professional training in developed countries in order to return to their home countries holding a degree from a reputable international institution; lack of educational offer or research opportunities in the student's field of interest; lack of pedagogical and laboratory conditions; or even political and social turmoil in the country of origin.

> *"In home university there isn't enough equipment, for example, in the case of Civil Engineering, some universities don't have enough facilities to work very well. And I think it is necessary that students go abroad to another country to continue their studies.* (P11, Iran)

These are clearly negative factors which push students out of their home countries (Chen, 2007).

All respondents referred that the **outcome of the international experience** and the learning experience from a period abroad are strong motivations to leave the origin country. Students mentioned that this experience would contribute to their individual development, strengthen their respect for other ways of thinking, knowing other cultures, allowing them to learn and/or practice a foreign language (apart from learning the destination country's official language, they would also have the opportunity to practice English with other international students). The overall experience would not only influence their personality but also value them as professionals and researchers, creating an opportunity to acquire new perspectives on research and work competences, valued by future employers. These findings are comparable to other researches which identify international academic experiences as source of personal development and as relevant for future professional careers (Eder et al., 2010; Lam et al., 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008).

Respondents have not referred to the **availability of information on the destination country** as a strong motivation to leave the country of origin. They have rather referred to the available information on the institution, which will be mentioned in the decision factors.

As far as the **environment of the destination country** is concerned, students have referred that the opportunity to have a scholarship granted by Portuguese institutions is a strong motivation to come to Portugal, as well as the quality and research reputation of Portuguese HE.

"The fact that you can have a scholarship or something is more common in foreign countries, so
this was kind of a motivation for me." (P2, Iran)

In other studies, issues related to the environment of the country of destination also relate to tourism and cultural attraction factors as well as general life style (Lam et al., 2011; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, none of the respondents have mentioned these as a clear motivation to leave their home countries.

Students coming from outside Europe have referred that coming to Portugal would allow them to attend several international conferences held in European countries, as it is a good starting point to travel across Europe. Nonetheless, respondents also mentioned the current unfavourable situation of Portuguese economy, considering that it would now be more difficult to find a job or proceed with research activities, due to lack of funding.

A common language and similarity of cultures were also referred to as very relevant by Brazilian students. They even referred to have chosen Portugal as a destination country so that they would be able to use the same language at work and daily life.

Geographical location of the destination country, specifically a short distance between home and destination countries, was also mentioned by some of the respondents as a strong motivation to leave their origin countries. This would allow them to be closer to their families or even find similar cultural habits, which is in accordance with the findings of Lam et al. (2011) and of Mazzarol & Soutar (2002).

"In the beginning (…) I had the choice between Portugal and Lithuania and I searched for the
nearest one…" (P9, Algeria)

Students confirmed that former international experiences of family members and friends are highly motivational, which leads to conclude that **social references and personal recommendations** are a very relevant motivation in the decision to leave the origin country. International experience is even considered as prestigious in some cultures as far as academic and professional paths are concerned.

"The other thing is a cultural thing, from the past, in your culture, when you hear someone has
gone abroad for study, something prestigious, it is kind of motivational." (P2, Iran)

"Especially the opinion from your professors from your university, they count a lot because they
are the ones who guide you and everything. Then parents and friends not as much… it's just their
support that matters, but it's people who have gone out and done something or your seniors who
studied and your professors… I think that counts more." (P6, India)

"Because my father also studied in Germany and yes… (…) he was one of the guys that really
talked to me and my brother that it is good if you can have a choice also outside the country, if you
can experience the life outside and how it is … (…). So it was one of the people that really
encouraged me to go outside." (P13, Iran)

These results corroborate the findings of Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), determining that the reputation of the institution is directly correlated to the number of students which refer it to other people. This suggests that word-of-mouth is the most influent form of promotion of a HEI internationally.

Cost of living is mainly referred to in comparison with other European countries. By bearing the costs themselves or even relying on a scholarship, students refer that the cost of living in Portugal is relatively lower than, for example, other European countries.

Findings confirm that the most frequently mentioned motivations are "Outcome of the international experience", "Social references and Personal recommendations", "Environment of the destination country" and "Conditions of the country of origin". Concluding, these can

be proposed as the main motivations for the respondent students to leave their home countries, according to the aforementioned order of relevance. Therefore, as far as motivations to study abroad are concerned, these findings confirm previous studies. It is also possible to conclude that the promotion of the country and of the destination HEI made by those reference groups are the most influential of the student's decision process. In this regard, Murray (1991) states that interpersonal communication, used as a means of promotion and communication, is used mostly by service consumers due to its higher trust degree in comparison with other sources of information.

5.2. Information Sources

Respondents accessed different sources of information during their choice process. The mentioned **external sources** are mainly university rankings, which students access for two different reasons: i) students consult the rankings after having selected the destination university to confirm the reputation and quality of the chosen institution; ii) students refer to the rankings as a means to reduce their options pool and compare institutions. Nonetheless, some respondents refer that rankings are not feasible and consider this information as irrelevant.

Students have also searched information through local Portuguese Embassies at their home countries or even through scientific databases, looking for names of authors in their fields of interest.

As far as **internal sources** are concerned, students referred mainly to the institution's official website, considered as more important and reliable than printed information sources.

> *"The first is the website, (…) generally, as a matter of applying, I think it is the website which is*
> *important, you google and find it, we are students, we want to see the professors, research*
> *interests, to contact them. I think it is the website they prefer more."* (P2, Iran)

Concerning **interpersonal sources**, results show that personal recommendations are an extremely relevant influencing factor in the choice of a destination HEI; advice and opinion from family members, friends or professors/tutors are highly considered. In fact, several students mentioned that they met someone with former international experience or even other students which were enrolled at the time in the destination institution and that they relied on their opinions and information provided. Findings show that this kind of personal reference constitutes a highly relevant and extremely motivational factor during the student's decision process.

> *"I also talked to another guy that did the research post-doc period here. So he told me that he had*
> *a good opinion about the university and the professor with whom I am studying here. So the*
> *personal point of view is always the best."* (P3, Italy)

According to the respondents, the content of the information sources of the HEI has been positively evolving. The official website has been improved in the past few years, with more information in English language and a new user-friendly structure. The students which contacted other services (for example, International Relations office or general secretariats) were quite pleased with the quality of the information provided.

> *"On that time actually the language of the website was Portuguese... It had also English but a very*
> *limited page. But now I think they changed it and now it's better."* (P13, Iran)

Interpersonal sources of information are mentioned more frequently, meaning that they have a very decisive role in the student's decision process. In fact, consumers of this type of service (education) seem to prefer interpersonal sources of information (Murray, 1991), as they allow to reduce the risk associated with this choice as well as prompt feedback and clarification of any possible doubt (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Moogan et al., 1999). Findings also show that, although the institutional website has a very relevant role, the direct interaction with different contact points of the HEI (professors, secretariats, International

Office) and word-of-mouth potentiate a more trustable connection and thus exert greater influence in the student's decision.

5.3. Decision factors

In what concerns **academic reputation and quality** of the destination institution, findings show that students refer not only to the overall reputation of the destination institution but also, more often than not, to the reputation of a particular scientific area or researcher, irrespective of the global reputation of the HEI. Students most frequently sought to confirm the overall reputation of the destination HEI through academic rankings. In fact, the university in which these students were enrolled had recently (from 2012 to 2014) obtained a very good classification in international rankings, which may have influenced the decision of some of the respondents. However, several students stated that their choice was mostly influenced by the reputation of a certain researcher or a specific scientific area, regardless of the overall position of the HEI in international rankings.

"Professor A. So of course if you google Professor A, you will have a huge reputation. So also that one is in the balance and then you can choose." (P3, Italy)

"It (the research institute) *has quite a big name on this field and I... at that moment I already knew that I wanted to do this. But what made me choose Institute X was just the group, the research group... It was the reputation of the Institute."* (P10, Slovakia)

As far as **educational offer** and availability of research areas is concerned, students have essentially referred that they have looked for an area related to their academic interest. It is worth mentioning that the exact correspondence of areas of interest and available research areas in the destination HEI played a very important role in the final decision of some of the interviewees.

"Yes, my field is electronic, electronic engineering, but I really love to go to the mechanical, mechanical engineering, so I choose here mechatronic, the field between electronic and mechanic and I really love my professors and my fields... I think is very good and is very interesting for me." (P14, Iran)

Cost was formerly defined as tuition fees and all other costs related to the education experience as a whole. Several students mentioned the opportunity to have a scholarship as highly motivational, because it would help them subsist in a foreign country.

Concerning the **available information on the destination institution**, respondents referred mainly to how easily they could contact the HEI's services and how fast they would get a reply, which positively influenced their decision and motivated them to select the destination institution.

Students did not positively or negatively mention the particular **location** of the HEI within the country. Notwithstanding, some interviewees made reference to the location of the HEI in an European country, which would allow them to be closer to a reputable European HEI network and thus enable them to participate in several European or international conferences.

Regarding **employability**, it is relevant to state that it is not only related to professional careers (as would be for 1st cycle degrees), but related also, in 2nd and 3rd cycle degrees, to academic reputation and evolution in a research career. Thus, both references to professional careers and expectations on academic careers were considered. Students claimed that a degree from this university in particular would improve their evolution expectations and value their CV. However, they referred to the fact that being supervised by a certain professor or researcher would be more valued than the reputation of the institution itself.

As far as **influence of others** is concerned, students have largely referred the importance of personal recommendations and motivation of their reference group in their decision process. The experience of former and current international students as well as recommendations from faculty both from the origin and destination universities were of great

influence. These findings relate to the aforementioned relevance of interpersonal sources of information.

> *"Yes, my professor encouraged me to go to this university."* (P9, Algeria)
> *"I found also another Iranian professor here. So I was contact with him ... and he really encouraged me to come here."* (P13, Iran)

The most frequently mentioned decision factors are academic reputation and quality of the destination institution and the impact of the student's international experience in his/her career prospects, either professional or academic. These findings are similar to those of other studies which identify academic reputation as one of the main decision factors in choosing a destination HEI (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Lam et al., 2011; Maringe, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka et al., 2005; Simões & Soares, 2010). Findings also show the importance of recommendations and the influence of others, such as advice from professors or experiences from former or current students, which is comparable to the findings of Lam (2011), Maringe & Carter (2007), Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Pimpa (2003) and Simões & Soares (2010) as far as the influence of the reference group is concerned. A positive perception of the experience of others with the chosen HEI is highly motivational and works as an attraction factor. The adequacy of educational programmes and research themes to the interests of the candidate, as well as cost and available information, despite being considered, are less relevant factors.

6. Conclusion and Managerial Implications

Results show that international students' main motivation for leaving their country of origin is the goal of seeking an international experience for personal, academic and professional development. The student's reference group also has a strong influence and acts as a support and sharing of experiences network. In what concerns information sources, in addition to consulting the official website of the HEI, students mainly refer to professors and current or former international students as very relevant information sources during the information search stage, which confirms the importance of interpersonal information sources and of word-of-mouth in this process. As far as decision factors are concerned, we found that academic reputation and quality, not only of the institution in general, but also of the scientific area or of certain researchers, are the most important attraction factors for international students. The valorisation of the student's CV and the influence of professors and current or former students are also very relevant attraction factors.

These results suggest important implications for HEIs in designing programmes to attract international students. HEIs should be able to capitalize on the most attractive pull factors, promoting their capabilities abroad (for instance, through establishing joint degree agreements or cooperation programmes with foreign governments or private companies to subsidize their citizens' education (Becker & Kolster, 2012, p. 15). Results show that a better international student's overall experience is deemed to influence positive word-of-mouth and therefore HEIs should improve their welcoming and foreign student support services. For example, international students have widely referred to the importance of organised welcoming programmes and the increase of educational offer in English language as means to ease their integration and as a way to improve their experience at the incoming university. Given that word of mouth is referred as one of the most relevant forms of promotion and communication, HEIs must strategically consider opportunities to promote their image via this method. HEIs can also capitalise on their faculty's participation in foreign activities, acting as information sources and promotional elements for their home institutions. Former international Alumni may also play a relevant role at their former home institutions as well as act as Ambassadors for current students wishing to collect experiences and advice. Support and administrative services should also be focused on providing the best customer experience

possible; it is thus necessary that staff is fully capable of communicating in foreign languages and is aware of the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds.

The proposed conceptual model may be further explored and assist HEIs in designing and implementing marketing strategies to respond to their public's needs.

Given the chosen method and research sample, it is not possible to generalize the results of the present qualitative study. Nevertheless, they bring several issues to attention which may be further explored in a wider quantitative research, counting on a broader representation of foreign 2nd and 3rd cycle students (in terms of nationalities and scientific areas). In fact, a mixed approach based on triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative research designs, concept development, data collection and interpretation would certainly provide a more thorough insight on the theme (Flick, 2005, 270; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 41).

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