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ADVANTAGES OF STUDY ABROAD FROM THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Abstract:

Purpose-the aim of this paper is to compare the perceptions of future and former international students on the advantages of study abroad and to investigate the correlation between them, as well as to find out empirical evidence for the patterns identified in the literature review.

Design/methodology/approach-the study is using quantitative methods: 213 questionnaires from students participating at a university fair and 19 in-deep interviews with former international students; SPSS was used to analyze the correlation and the cluster method to classify the advantages of study abroad.

Findings-a strong correlation between the two sets of advantages was found; the perception of future and former international students on advantages of study abroad support the patterns identified in the literature review. Valuable advice provided by former international students regarding the difficulties and challenges of study abroad and how to face them were found.

Practical implications-based on former international students' experience, a guide including coping the challenges of study abroad will be provided.

Originality/value-this study contributes to a better understanding of advantages and disadvantages of study abroad, providing a Romanian insight of the issue.

Limitations-the small ratio between the number of interviews and the number of questionnaires.

Keywords:

advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad, international students' perception

JEL Classification: I23

Introduction
Studying abroad is a major decision that can change the life of a student and might shape his/hers future, therefore to get to that decision one must carefully analyze the advantages and disadvantages of being an international student. Any advice from people sharing the same experience is valuable and should be taken into account.

Literature review
All famous universities during the history had international students, for instance, we may consider the Greek mathematicians as international students at the University of Alexandria. Yet the literature regarding the international students is more recent, because the number of international students became significant since last decades. A critical literature review will reveal some patterns in the problems and challenges related to study abroad issue.

One of the patterns is sensitivity to culture, mainly to host country culture. As Kelly noticed back in 1963, study abroad is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one, for achieving and/or improving sensitivity to cultures. Is sensitivity to cultures influenced by the duration of the exchange program? A simple question with multiple answers: There is a direct positive link between the duration of the exchange program and the development of intercultural sensitivity found out Medina-Lopez-Portillo as well as Engle in 2004. While Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen and Hubbard found out in 2006 that there is an impact of short-term study abroad programs on intercultural sensitivity.

How are international students dealing with the academic and socio-cultural stress related to adjustment to host country culture, norms and values is another pattern. Some interesting finds proved themselves true were discovered:

- Students who believe on themselves high regarding to their command on English are doing better in dealing with academic stress in US universities (Wan, Chapman, and Biggs,1992).
- The frequency of positive contacts on the international students with native students as well as with other international students as an active strategy for dealing with acculturation(Ward and Kennedy, 1994).
- Collectivist coping strategies of Asian international students compared with individualist coping strategies of western students for the initial stress(Bailey and Dua,1999).
- A positive attitude towards the host country means a faster identification with the host country than a strong ethnic involvement(Nesdale and Mak, 2000).
- The academic and social needs of the international students are influenced by language abilities, cultural differences and students expectations(Mori, 2000).
- Social initiative and flexibility of international students as coping strategies for cultural shock(Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001).
- Homesick enhances the adjustment problems of international students(Stroebe, Van Vliet, Hewstone and Willis, 2002).
- Extracurricular activities and the active use of leisure time, meeting the Japanese students in USA needs for social support(Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002).
- Study abroad students are faced with acculturative stress(Berry, 2005).

- Correlation between communicative competence in the language of the host country and cross-cultural adaption for international students mainly from collectivist cultural orientation in Canada(Yang, Noels and Saumure, 2006).
- The study related stress, specially academic requirements and the differences between academic conventions from country of origin and host country for international students in UK(Brown, 2007).
- Assessing the study abroad effects on language skills, intercultural competence, disciplinary knowledge, social growth(Meyer and Evans, 2007).
- The adjustment to emotional display norms in USA of the international students originate from collectivist cultures(Gullekson and Vancouver, 2010).
- Doctoral experience related to adjustment to American culture of Asian international students in STEM fields(Le, Gardner, 2010).
- Measures of social support, improving psychological well-being of the international students in Ireland(O'Reilly, Ryan and Hickey, 2010).
- The development of social ties and the enhance of cultural orientation for international students in Australia(Sakurai, McCall-Wolf and Kashima, 2010).
- Promoting intercultural contacts between international students and native students in campus(Campbell, 2011).
- Academic and social isolation among international students in traditional as well as online education(Erichsen and Bolliger, 2011).
- The role of the university structure in socio-cultural adjustment of the Malaysian students in UK(Coles and Swami, 2014).

The cultural shock is the next pattern. This term was used in the '60s, a state of distress experienced by an individual who is suddenly exposed to a new, strange, or foreign social and cultural environment.[1] The cultural shock is just one side of the coin, the other side is the reverse cultural shock, meaning the shock suffered by some people when they return home after a number of years overseas. This can result in unexpected difficulty in readjusting to the culture and values of the home country, now that the previously familiar has become unfamiliar.[2]

And as Nelson, Bhamarapravati, Koomsup and Myers found out in 1991, if a returning international student does not find a job in the field he/she was has been trained within three years there is a high probability in changing this field for good.

- The effects of reverse culture shock experienced by international students returning in their country of origin(Gaw, 2000).
- Cultural experiences for Chinese business students in UK, the impact of the second culture contact(Sliwa and Grandy, 2006).
- Study abroad and national identity(Barbour, 2006).
- The influence of different cultural dimensions of the host country on patterns of the acculturation of the international students (Jang and Kim, 2010).

The pattern of the international students, what are his/hers features, gains, expectations.

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[1] www.dictionary.com
[2] www.investopedia.com

- International students are gaining a transnational competence meaning language, cultural and technical skills(Hawkins and Cummings, 2000).
- Study abroad students are more adventurous and non study abroad students are more cautions(Van der Meid, 2003).
- Independence and open-mindness are powered by the experience of studying abroad
  (Hadis, 2005).
- International students are developing valuable personal attributes such are self-direction or self-authorship(King and Baxter Magolda, 2005).
- Longitudinal study for factors that characterized the study abroad students in US (Goldstein and Kim, 2006).
- The push-pull model for international students(Li and Bray, 2007).
- Studying abroad tends to have more impact on personal development rather than on career choice(Orahood, Woolf, Kruze, 2007).
- The more emotionally stable and flexible the international students are the less cultural distance they perceive(Fons and De Vijver, 2009).
- Exploring the development of cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal processes of international students(Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill, 2009).
- Study abroad provides educational benefits regardless the background(Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen and Pascarella, 2009).
- International students have greater self-perceptions on their global skills than other students (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright and McMillen, 2009).

Study abroad impact on career and how important is an overseas experience for employers is a more recent pattern. Being a corporate leader demands an international background?(Schoeff Jr., 2006).

Is it vital for business students to have overseas experience? What are the most desirable values the employer are seeking for? Employer admit that they do not specifically seek out candidates with study abroad experience unless they are hiring for a job which actually requires cross-cultural skills. (Trooboff, Berg, Rayman, 2007).

There are of course more general patterns such are internationalization, family, university and nation role in being an international student:

- Going beyond, international students means internationalizing the curriculum(Schechter, 1993).
- Promoting strategies for improving the retention and the satisfaction of the international students(Tompson and Tompson,1996).
- If it is true that the international education enhances national competitiveness and provides strategic advantages, Mestenhauser(1998) questioned the role played by US.
- Friends and families are higher determinants in students' decision to study abroad (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2003).
- Gender differences in study abroad impact and into an international career(Gerner and Perry, 2000).
- To create an international reputation and name brand it's a must for any university and placing the institution in a network leads to a competitive advantage(Knight, 2004).

- A sizable number of students abroad did not learn significantly more than control students(Van de Berg, Connor-Linton, Paige, 2009).

Methodology: I used quantitative methods-questionnaires and qualitative methods-interviews.

I gave 500 questionnaires during a week on university fairs in Bucharest, the most developed region of Romania and in Vaslui, the least developed region of Romania. Out of 500 questionnaires, 213 were fully completed, therefore used in analysis. The profile of the respondents is presented below:

	Count	Percent
Gender		
Female	121	56,80%
male	92	43,20%
Age		
< 18	82	38,49%
18	56	26,29%
>18	75	35,22%
Family income		
Below average	20	9,38%
average	151	70,89%
Over average	42	19,73%
English level		
A1	29	13,61%
A2	31	14,55%
B1	54	25,36%
B2	59	27,69%
C1	33	15,49%
C2	7	3,28%

In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to give five comparative advantages to study aboard. I used the cluster method and the rank order method to arrange the resulting 1065 advantages into categories.

Advantages	Level	Categories	Answers	No of answers	Ranks
		Educational system 0.46	Higher quality of education	12	0.63
			Better educational system	4	0.21
			Top universities	3	0.15
			The quality of people	3	0.13
			Strong financial country Financial stability	2	0.09
			Security in cities	2	0.09
			More opportunities	1	0.045
			Higher interest for people	2	0.09
		Country	High living standards	4	0.18

Advantages clusters	Country level	Image 0.13	Economic advantages	3	0.13
			Country reputation Better country reputation	4	0.18
			A better world	1	0.045
		Culture & Civilization 0.12	Much civilized population	2	0.2
			Attractive social life	1	0.1
			Different people	1	0.1
			Different culture	1	0.1
			Greater respect for citizens	1	0.1
			More security and civilization	1	0.1
			Things are easier compare to Romania	1	0.1
			There is more discipline compare to Romania	1	0.1
			German discipline	1	0.1
		Potential Jobs After graduation 0.23	Bigger income	13	0.41
			Well paid jobs	5	0.16
			Better jobs	5	0.16
			Sure jobs	2	0.06
			Better opportunities to get a job	1	0.03
			Opportunity to get a job after internship	1	0.03
			It is easier to get a job in the same country you study	1	0.03
			Attractive jobs	1	0.03
			Getting a job in the area you studied	1	0.03
			The opportunity to work part-time for good money	1	0.03
		Internship 0.22	Internship provided More serious internship The quality of internship The opportunity for internship in a specific office The opportunity for internship in your area	5	0.35
			The companies select students from universities The job fairs are for real	3 1	0.21 0.07
			Internship opportunities	2	0.14
			The opportunity to graduate with a professional portfolio Professional experience	2	0.14
			The opportunity to work with a famous mentor	1	0.07

University level		International students experience 0.21	Exchange experience	7	0.43
			Different opinions from international students	3	0.18
			High quality student life True student life	3	0.18
			There are many international students	2	0.12
			Opportunity to study in a multinational and multicultural team	1	0.06
			Social status	1	0.06
		Facilities 0.19	A different working environment Better condition for study	4	0.2
			Facilities Access to better facilities The quality of facilities	3	0.15
			Material conditions Better conditions Better accommodation	3	0.15
			Top facilities Moral conditions	2	0.1
			Using high-tech	2	0.1
			Opportunity to get scholarships Opportunity to study for free The costs are affordable	6	0.3
		The quality of the university 0.14	International acknowledgement Acknowledgement at global level Diploma is recognized everywhere Diploma is recognized in EU It matters where you take the diploma from	6	0.28
			Education quality Top university Higher quality Higher quality of studies	5	0.23
			Higher reputation Better international reputation	4	0.19
			Admission process Admission is neither easy nor impossible as long as you	2	0.09

			have a good command of the language		
			The opportunity to learn only the disciplines you are interested in The opportunity to learn only the disciplines you need	2	0.09
			New vision Open to new	2	0.09
		Teaching strategies 0.13	Modern teaching strategies Teaching methods to meet students' needs Interactive teaching strategies Modern interactive teaching strategies	4	0.18
			The level of knowledge The enrichment of knowledge More knowledge	4	0.18
			Different teaching strategies Other teaching strategies Other teaching methods	3	0.13
			Specialized educational offer Narrowed specialization The opportunity of specialized training	3	0.13
			A better organized study program comparing to Romanian on Intense study organization	3	0.13
			The quality of teaching	2	0.09
			Different study options A greater variety of studies	2	0.09
			Focus on practical issues	1	0.04
		Transnational competences 0.31	Various experiences Unforgettable experience New experience	10	0.50
			Freedom	3	0.15
			Different environment	3	0.15
			To get a different vision A wider vision on future	2	0.10
			Multilevel independency: financial, personal, responsibility	1	0.05
			A new perspective	1	0.05
			Discovering a new culture	4	0.4

		Cultural sensitivity 0.3	Culture immersion	3	0.3
Personal level			Knowing a new culture	2	0.2
			Cultural exchange	1	0.1
		Language skills 0.3	Development of language competences	5	0.19
			Opportunity to study in a foreign language Opportunity to study in a foreign language in its own country	4	0.15
			Exposure to language	3	0.11
			Development of language skills	13	0.5
			Opportunity to learn foreign languages easier	1	0.03
		Career 0.16	It matters where you take the diploma from	1	0.03
			Scheme for advancing in career	5	0.16
			Finding a job	7	0.22
			Fashion houses might noticed me	1	0.03
			Recognized diploma	7	0.22
			Better resume	9	0.29
			Better paid	1	0.03
		Intrapersonal competences 0.16	What one can do matters not just what you know but know-how matters	2	0.18
			Opportunity to travel	1	0.8
			Flexibility	1	0.8
			Increasing personal responsibility	1	0.8
			Personal and professional development	3	0.27
			The opportunity to know the country not just in theory	1	0.8
			Becoming independent	2	0.18
		Interpersonal competences 0.15	Opportunity to make new friends	4	0.28
			The opportunity of international friendship	3	0.21
			Knowing new people	7	0.5
			Opportunity to find a job in a multinational company Opportunity to find a job Opportunity to find a job	16	0.25

			easier Opportunity to find a permanent job Opportunity to find a job faster		
			Opportunity to settle in the country of studies	9	0.14
			Opportunity to visit the country of studies	6	0.09
			Different people get to know new people	5	0.08
		Opportunities 0.11	More opportunities/more opportunities for a better life New opportunities	4	0.06
			You don't have to confirm studies in the eventuality to work abroad	3	0.04
			Part-time jobs for students	3	0.04
			Opportunity to study in a different environment	3	0.04
			Better financial conditions for my family and myself	3	0.04
			Opportunity to be accepted by the respective society	2	0.02
			The studies are recognized	2	0.02
			Better chances for the future	1	0.01
			Easier to get citizenship	1	0.01
			A different environment	1	0.01
			La vie en rose	1	0.01
			Financial independence	1	0.01
			You can get the citizenship	1	0.01

Table 1:Categories of advantages from questionnaires

The patterns identified in the literature review are supported by the respondents' answers in table 1. The pattern of sensitivity to culture-included in the personal level, the culture sensitivity is in second place, ranking 0.3 and goes from discovering a new culture to immersion the culture, followed by knowing the culture and afterwards cultural exchange. The pattern of the international students, what are his/hers features, gains, expectations. The respondents are expected to gain most of all transnational competencies-ranked 0.31, such are: international experience, a new perspective, a wider vision of the future, a multilevel independence. The intrapersonal and interpersonal competences have lower ranks comparing to transnational ones. The patterns of dealing with the academic and socio-cultural stress related to adjustment to host country culture, norms and values and the cultural shock will be found mostly in the interview analysis part. What else is the table reveal? At country level, the most important is the educational system, the higher quality of education, the chance to study in top universities. Country image, as well as host country culture and civilization, are viewed as significant advantages too. At university level, the most important advantages perceived are the potential jobs one can

get after graduation, the internships and the international experience, followed by university facilities, the quality of the university and the teaching strategies. At personal level, beside the culture sensitivity and different kind of competences, we can find language skills, career and opportunities.

To conclude, the respondents see the international student experience as a way to maximize their chance to a better job(meaning a sure and well paid one) and to a future career.

Apart from questionnaires, I have made 19 interviews with persons that were or even are international students. The profile of the 19 persons is presented in the next table:

	Count	Percent
Gender		
Female	13	68.42%
Male	6	31.58%
Age		
Under 25	11	57.89%
From 25 to 30	6	31.57%
Over 30	2	10.52%
Study level		
Bachelor	6	31,57%
Master	8	42,10%
Doctorate	3	15.78%
Post doctorate	1	5.26%
Bachelor and master	1	5.26%
Country of study		
Switzerland	2	10.52%
Romania	1	5.26%
Spain	2	10.52%
Germany	3	15,78%
USA	1	5.26%
France	1	5.26%
Belgium	1	5.26%
Poland	1	5.26%
Italy	1	5.26%
Norway	3	15.78%
Sweden	1	5.26%
UK	2	10.52%

In the interviews, I wanted to find out the advantages of study abroad, as well as the disadvantages and I asked them to provide advices for the potential international students.

I used the rank order method to put the advantages in a decreasing order

Resources and facilities	0.14
Knowing a different culture	0.10
Affordable taxes	0.09
Flexibility and adaptation	0.07

Relationship professor-student	0.07
Language fluency	0.07
Learning opportunities	0.05
Better study program	0.05
Study focused on practice	0.05
Country image	0.05
Becoming independent	0.04
Personal and educational development	0.03
Better educational system	0.03
Cultural diversity and sensitivity	0.03
Top university	0.03
Evaluation system	0.03

Table 2: Advantages from interviews

Some of the disadvantages appeared in the interviews are as follows:

- Cultural shock
- Financial difficulties
- Study in another language than yours
- Finding an accommodation
- Finding an internship
- The evaluation system is different
- People prejudice toward international students, especially the Romanian ones
- Language difficulties due to the local accent
- Interactions with locals
- Distance from family and friends
- Homesick
- Speaking a foreign language with the natives in its own country is a huge challenge due to administrative issues, polite formula, accent
- A low curricula in Poland
- A poor level of English in University in Poland
- Adaptation to a project based learning
- More time for study on your own
- Exams based on essays
- Language barrier
- Administrative issues
- Impossibility to help your parents when they need it
- Speaking no Norwegian at all life outside university was quite difficult
- Poor image of our country
- Bad perceptions on Romanians
- Expensive life
- Many Romanian beggars
- Low temperatures in Norway
- Long darkness in Norway
- Difficult to socialize outside the university
- Huge quantity of work
- German language is difficult

- Too many projects
- Difficulties in adapting to a new way of study
- Bureaucracy, administrative approaches for obtaining the scholarship, problems with accommodation and with the bank account
- High costs of living(London, Paris, Oslo, Stockholm etc. are through the most expensive cities in the world)
- Colleagues with different mentalities regarding team work
- New ways of teaching
- Prejudices of teachers and citizens

In order to analyze the correlation between the advantages of study abroad as seen before going to study, the ones found in the questionnaires and the advantages after or during study abroad as seen in the interviews, I used SPSS. The outputs are bellow:

Correlations

		Advantages interviews	Advantages questionnaires
Advantages interviews	Pearson Correlation	1	,974**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	144,438	428,250
	Covariance	9,629	28,550
	N	16	16
Advantages questionnaires	Pearson Correlation	,974**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	428,250	1339,000
	Covariance	28,550	89,267
	N	16	16

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlations

			Advantages interviews	Advantages questionnaires
Kendall's tau_b	Advantages interviews	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,920**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	16	16
	Advantages questionnaires	Correlation Coefficient	,920**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	16	16

Spearman's rho	Advantages interviews	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,974[**]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	16	16
	Advantages questionnaires	Correlation Coefficient	,974[**]	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	16	16

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

We can see that Pearson correlation coefficient is 0,974, while Spearman correlation coefficient is 0,974 and Kendall correlation coefficient is 0,920 at 0,01 significance level, meaning there is a strong correlation between the two sets of advantages and the agreement between the sets is almost perfect. That means the advantages foreseen before going to study abroad are sustained by actual or former international students.

During the interviews, I asked for some advice for the next generation of international students. These are the advices, for the author I will use f for female, m for male, B for bachelor, M for master, D for doctorate or post doctorate, therefore f-M means female, master.

- Do try something else!
- Do not hesitate to accept the study abroad offers
- Accept to be apart from others

(m-D)

- Do not be afraid to study in a foreign language, it is a very valuable experience in your life

(f-B&M)

- Follow your goal and study abroad
- Enjoy every chance you get
- Work hard to make your dreams come true

(f-M)

- In UK all universities have students' unions that support students and help them especially with extracurricular activities
- The University resources are available 24/7, for free and in any area

(f-B)

- Don't go abroad immediately after finishing the high-school if you are not sure this is what you want and if you don't feel yourself 100% prepared for this. The Bachelor studies should be made in Romania and you can try an Erasmus scholarship of one or two semesters. If you like this experience, you can go for the Master degree or Doctorate abroad
- If you are not sure on which university to choose, try to contact the Romanian students associations abroad for guidance and support
- To have first-hand experience on how to respect values as tolerance, non-discrimination

(f-D)

- Do not go by yourself, any friend or colleague out there counts

- Choose a country whose universities are specialized in the domains you are interested in and, perhaps, they have a comparative advantage with other countries(ex: Switzerland: tourism; UK: finance; France: beauty and luxury industry; Germany: engineering and technical skills etc.). You will have access at more specialized courses and better prepared teachers and an advantage when you will want to work in the respective domain
- Choose a country whose language you know or with a language easy to learn. It's essentially in the interaction with the colleagues in team working and with the firms if after studies you want to remain and work there
- Do not study just to get a diploma; diploma is important, but not that important

(m-B)

- Get any information regarding the host country and find out how to be socially integrated
- Find any available scholarship in the host country
- Use any opportunity to study abroad for personal and professional development

(m-M)

- Before choosing a study area find out the dynamic of the area
- Get any information concerning the living costs
- Apply for scholarships in the country of origin as well in the host country
- Study the host country language to help you to adapt

(f-M)

- Take advantage of any opportunity, including exchange programs
- Consider just a top university(for instance a top100 University)
- Take advantage of any internship offered by the university

(f-M)

- Get involved in extracurricular activities as much as possible
- Try to be part of as many students groups or associations as possible

(f-B)

- Know as much as possible about the host country and the educational system

(f-B)

- For bachelor and master studies go to Romanian universities, they will provide the same quality as abroad
- You must keep in mind that many universities abroad apart from the top ones are just like any business
- For doctorate it pays to study abroad

(f-D)

- The university facilities to have study rooms included for small groups
- Involve in as many projects as possible
- Choose a developed host country

(f-M)

- Don't miss any chance to study abroad, to know a new culture and a different educational system

(f-B)

- University quality is more important than the host country
- Choose a country with not so high costs of living. If you want to study in a country with high costs of living, like France, Norway, Sweden etc. try to obtain a

scholarship there. The tuition fees money should be spent on study materials, socializing, trips, fun etc
- Choose an open society

(m-M)

- The host country must be a developed one
- Choose a country with a language you know
- Choose a country you can fit in(for instance if you are an organised person go to Germany, if not, Greece might suit you)

(m-B)

- Don't go in a country if you can't speak the language, you might face isolation
- Find any detail on the admission
- Make sure the family support you

(f-D)

- Make sure you are aware of how much compromise you can do
- Accept critics
- Work hard and don't complain

(f-M)

Conclusion:
The advantages found in the questionnaires and in the interviews are strongly correlated and support the results identified in the literature review.

Originality: the study offers an inside view of the former, actual and future Romanian international students, provide interesting first hand advice.

Limitation: the respondents of the questionnaires were only from the most developed and the least developed county from Romania; the number of interviews is rather small comparing to the number of questionnaires.

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