



HOW TO MEASURE THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS? AN EXPLORATIVE CASE STUDY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The international education market is as highly competitive as it is quite big, dynamic, and responsive and even many countries around the world compete for it. Attracting international students in such a market largely depends on the level of their satisfaction and internationalization of university, one of the most important indicators of which is the number of students that it succeeds to recruit from the international education market. Hence, it is important to measure and know about how satisfied international students are and what factors affect their satisfaction for decision makers in universities. This study is an attempt to measure the satisfaction level of international students based on a conceptual model depended on literature review, which is then applied to measure the satisfaction level of internationals in Niğde University, which endeavors to get more international students. The model included a six group of variables, namely education quality, social life, economic conditions, facilities and services offered, students' expectations, and empathy for students, as the influential factors. The data was collected from the international students in Niğde University with face-to-face questionnaire method and some exploratory data analyses were performed on it. The paper presented the findings from the analyses of data and its relevant implications.

Keywords: Education market, customer satisfaction, student satisfaction, international students' satisfaction, satisfaction level, higher education

Jel Classification: M31, M16, M10, L80, I23

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ULUSLARARASI ÖĞRENCİLERİN MÜŞTERİ MEMNUNİYETİ ÖLÇÜMÜ: ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİ ÜZERİNE KEŞİFSEL BİR OLAY ÇALIŞMASI

Özet

Uluslararası eğitim pazarı; büyük, dinamik ve duyarlı olduğu kadar aynı zamanda son derece rekabetçi bir yapıya sahiptir ve dünyada birçok büyük devletin rekabete dahil olduğu bir pazardır. Böyle bir pazarda öğrenci çekmek, büyük oranda üniversitenin uluslararasılaşmasına –ki bunun en önemli göstergelerinden biri, üniversitenin uluslararası pazarlardan çekebildiği öğrenci sayısıdır- ve öğrenci memnuniyetine bağlıdır. Bu nedenle, öğrencilerin memnuniyet düzeyinin ölçülmesi ve bunu etkileyen faktörlerin bilinmesi, üniversite karar vericileri için önemlidir. Bu çalışma, literature incelemesine dayalı olarak geliştirilen kavramsal bir modele bağlı olarak uluslararası öğrencilerin memnuniyetini ölçmeye yönelik bir girişim olup, geliştirilen model ile (daha fazla uluslararası öğrenci çekmeye çalışan) Niğde Üniversitesi’ndeki uluslararası öğrencilerin memnuniyeti ölçme yönünde bir çabayı içermektedir. Model, (eğitim kalitesi, sosyal yaşam, ekonomik şartlar, üniversitenin imkanları ve sunduğu hizmetler, öğrencilerin beklentileri ve öğrencilere yönelik empati’yi içeren altı grup değişkeni (ve bunlara ilişkin alt değişkenleri) içermektedir. Çalışmanın verileri, modele dayalı olarak geliştirilen bir anket uygulamasının Niğde Üniversitesi’ndeki uluslararası öğrencilere uygulanması ile toplanmış ve temel keşifsel veri analizi ile analiz edilmiştir. Çalışma, ilgili keşifsel analizin bulgularını ve elde edilen sonuçları içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eğitim pazarı, müşteri memnuniyeti, öğrenci memnuniyeti, uluslararası öğrenci memnuniyeti, memnuniyet düzeyi, yüksek öğrenim

Jel Sınıflandırması: M31, M16, M10, L80, I23

INTRODUCTION

The international higher education market is getting more and more competitive. Many universities are trying hard to obtain more shares from it but it is not always easy in such a competitive market. How much share a university can have is largely depend on the level of its being internationalized. That is why; it is a major concern for many universities that have a claim in international student market.

In fact, the term ‘university’ refers to meanings such as being universal, global, international, and worldwide. As an institution, every university is supposed to be universal in definition but the degree of being internationalized differs from one to the other. The level of internationalization could be measured with different indicators, one of which is the number of international students that a university recruits from the international education market.

According to Drucker (1997), ‘traditional universities’ in comparison with open and online universities are about to come to an end. International education has further expanded the scope of cross-border education by increasing the academic mobility as well as the mobility of students, programs and institutions, following the fast growth in the market, which is getting larger and larger. Nearly five million international students are estimated to be studying for degrees outside their own countries in 2014. Since 2000 to 2011, the number of international students increased from about 2,1 million to 4,5 million, corresponding to % 140, an average of 10% every year, and is likely to have reached about 5 million in 2014. According to the OECD Reports in 2011, the United States attracts the most foreign students with 16,5% of the total enrollments, followed by the United Kingdom (13%), Germany (6,3%), France (6,2%), and Australia (6,1%). These five countries hosted about half of all international higher education students in 2011 (Guhr and Furtado, 2014; Maslen, 2014; ICEF Monitor, 2014) and more than 83.4% of the total of foreign students enrolled worldwide concentrated in OECD countries, according to the OECD 2010 statistics (see Beine et al., 2013: 10).

Likewise in many markets, there is also an increasing competition in the international mobil student market, too. Many not-for-profit or government institutions follow the developments closely in the market, prepare reports, and make policy suggestions (even on the student visa issues) to the relevant (e.g. government) bodies in how to attract more international students (Guhr and Furtado, 2014; IIE, 2013; HM Government, 2013; RKA Inc., 2012; NAFSA, 2003).

One of the basic drives for competing for international mobile students is economic. International mobile students make considerable economic contributions to the recruiting economies (HM Government, 2013; Hawaii Global Links, 2013; RKA Inc., 2012). However, this is not the only drive. The issue is more complex and extends beyond the realm of education (UNESCO, 2013; iii; ACE, 2009). According to some reports, different countries have different priorities in recruiting international mobile students. For instance; Germany and Canada seek international students to counterbalance their declining and aging populations; The UK and Australia treat higher education as an export service and mainly recruit international students for receiving high tuition fees; the US and France see international student recruitment primarily as a public diplomacy tool (Hawaii Global Links, 2013: 5; ACE, 2009; NAFSA, 2003). In short, the global marketplace leads nations to compete with one another by developing a variety of policies and strategies to attract those internationally mobile students (ACE, 2009).

Although the international student market is mainly dominated by several countries, most of which are English speaking, but the pattern is changing with a sharp increase in the flow and exchange of students in Asia and the Pacific (UNESCO, 2013; iii). For instance, although the size of the market has risen considerably, the market share of the US has decreased from about 23% (475,000 students) in 2000 to 16.5% (710,000) in 2011, indicating a shift in the destination country. According to some reports, the market is going to get more competitive in the very next decade. The governments of many countries are making international recruitment a top priority. For instance; among many, the Chinese government aims to have 500.000 international students enrolled in Chinese higher education by 2020, twice the number it now hosts and well above the number of students it sends abroad. Singapore and Malaysia aimed at attracting 150.000

international students by 2015, thus doubling their current numbers. Similarly, the South Korean government has made recruitment of international students and scholars a high priority due to the estimates that the share of the college-aged population will shrink in the coming decade. It had the plan to achieve its goal of receiving 100.000 international students in 2012, thus quadrupling its 2005 number. The Taiwanese government sets a target to attract 95.000 international students by 2014. India, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, Thailand, Mexico, and Columbia are formulating government policies to attract more international students to their countries (Hawaii Global Links, 2013: 5).

Although governments' approaches to the issue are very central, equally important are the universities' policies and approaches to the issue. Besides governments, universities are the main players in achieving the predefined government goals, which, in turn, are based on the satisfaction level of the international students enrolled in universities in a country. Therefore, measuring the level of international students' satisfaction is central, essential and of interest for both university administrations and researchers. For any university, attracting sufficient number of international students depends on variety of factors including, but not limited to, the quality of programs, education medium (language), infrastructure, reputation, etc. All these also affect the satisfaction level of international students, too.

The purpose of this paper is to measure the satisfaction level of international students. Measuring satisfaction level (of international students) requires a conceptual model that includes all the relevant factors. Measurement process includes an application of a face-to-face survey questionnaire to the international students in Niğde University and the paper presents the results of some basic analysis of the data collected. For the purpose, the paper is organized in four main parts. The second part includes the conceptual framework based on a literature review. The third part presents the results of analysis and findings. And the final part is the summary and conclusion.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student satisfaction is one of the main objectives of all universities. It could lead to positive word of mouth (WOM) communication, student retention and loyalty. Giving consideration to the highly competitive international education market, the necessity of creating and delivering higher customer value become significant in keeping a continued advantage (Kotler and Fox, 2002).

The issue of student satisfaction in higher education has been a condensely studied topic but mostly from the educational point of view. Hence the current literature on the subject is dominantly educational. However, as a report claims that education sector is currently the second largest global market after healthcare (HM Government, 2013), there is sound reason to approach it from the marketing point of view.

Customer satisfaction is a basic marketing term. Although the terms 'customer satisfaction' and 'service quality' are sometimes used interchangeably, they are quite different from each other. Parasuraman et al. (1988) considers satisfaction as a criterion for measuring and evaluation while the service quality is regarded as an achievement based on the assessments. In this sense, satisfaction is seen an antecedent to service quality but Cronin and Taylor (1992) argues in contrast that it is the service quality that determines satisfaction.

In education market, the term 'student satisfaction' is is also used commonly because students are the main customers in that market. Having affected by many factors, the student satisfaction represents one of the basic issues in this context. The literature makes great emphasis on determining what factors affect and how to measure the level of student satisfaction. There is a great deal of academic work on the subject. Băcilă et al. (2014), Kashan (2012), Arambewela and Hall (2008), Aldemir and Gülcan (2004) are only some to mention.

Customer satisfaction is related to the size and direction of disconfirmation, which is defined as the difference between an individual's pre-purchase expectations (or some other comparative standard) and the post-purchase performance of the product or service as perceived by the customer. If expectations are met or exceeded, the customer is satisfied; however,

dissatisfaction results when perceived performance falls below expectations (Oliver, 1980; Anderson, 1973).

Customer satisfaction is mostly the product of several influencing factors and their interactions. This is also valid for international students' satisfaction. The discussions in the literature point out to some influential factors having more effect on the level of satisfaction among international students, which are discussed below:

Education quality: As stated in the literature, a very significant contributor to the student satisfaction is the education quality that students experience and how their educational procedures overall move forward (Arkoudis, 2005). The term education quality is quite comprehensive in meaning that it includes variety of factors from how qualified professors are and how they teach to the accessibility of academic staff, and from the academic curriculum and its contents to the teaching methods used. It even comprehends the academic readiness (background) of students. In that sense Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2011) points out to the influence of quality of lecturers, quality and availability of resources, and effective use of technology on the student satisfaction. Avram (2009) points out to teachers' ability to transmit innovative information, their capability to communicate with students, their involvement in teaching process, and their being voluntere to provide useful study materials. Beine et al. (2013) finds that the prestige of the university (ranking) as a proxy for the quality of university to be an important determinant of international students.

Social life: Another determinant of the satisfaction level of international student is the social life (Kegel, 2009). The term 'social life' is also comprehensive in meaning in that it covers the factors such as the relationship with other people, social environment, social connections, homesickness, etc. Kegel examines the social life, as an important element of homesickness, being one of the most frequent concerns of internationally mobile students, in two dimensions: Intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. Intrapersonal factors include age, gender, language proficiency, and emotional intelligence. Interpersonal factors refer to social connections, social environment, and relationship with other people. Interpersonal factors imply that the quality of such connections and relationships are more important for international students than their quantity. According to Kegel, the homesickness, having five determinants including missing family, missing friends, feeling lonely, adjustment problems, and home ruminations, is seen more among international students who had adjustment problems, not satisfactory social network, and gap between their expectations and experiences. It can have negative impacts on students' well-being such as eating and sleeping problems, their academic performances, and consequently their satisfaction level. Social networking such as social life, connections with other students and staff, sharing knowledge with them etc. also play a main role in making students more satisfied. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) refer to the effect of familiarity with, the level of awareness, and knowledge of the host country. In the same frame, the counselling services, social activities, close working relationships with other students, and orientation programs are considered the most important variables within the social issues that influence the level of international students' satisfaction. Furthermore, safety is a major concern for international students and their families (Arambewela and Hall, 2008).

Economic factors: Having education in another country always includes some extra costs and it is an expensive service in general. Hence, the affordability of these services is important for international students and is likely to affect the demand for them. In their study Beine et al. (2013) examine the determinants of international mobile students and find that the variables such as living expenses including housing costs, host capacity, and wages are important factors in the migration and enrollment of foreign students. The authors conclude that an attractiveness policy therefore should pay special attention to reducing the costs at destination, and is all the more effective when it reduces the living costs rather than the fees. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also point out to the cost issues including the cost of tuition fees, travel costs, living costs, and social costs such as crime and safety are the influential elements in choosing university. Arambewela and Hall (2008) also claim that within the economic considerations, migration opportunities, casual jobs and cost of living, are

considered the most important variables; however, securing a part time/casual job is not easy for many students, particularly for newly arrived ones.

Facilities and services offered by university: Every international student would have some expectations from the service provider he/she chooses, which is the university in this case, being supposed to offer whatever it has as a product package to the international students. The product that a university offers comes in form of a package that includes sub-products, facilities, services, opportunities etc. such as the infrastructures for sports and recreational activities, social activities, library facilities, online-database services, accommodation facilities, in-campus shutter services, counseling and guidance services etc. All those facilities and services are the complementary part of the main product package of higher education. Therefore, the satisfaction of international students are not only related to the main education services but also related to the whole product package, despite the fact that some parts of it may be more important than the others. For instance, accommodation is always a problem and international students expect student accommodation be made available by universities or private agencies in compliance with the minimum standards of comfort and at reasonable cost. It is also expected that such accommodation is made available when required. Furthermore, most postgraduate courses require constant use of computers. Some subjects require computer applications and analysis, and the presence of modern and adequate computer facilities enhances the attractiveness of universities among students. International students expect reasonably modern computer equipment to be made available in adequate quantities for their use when required. (Arambewela and Hall, 2008).

Students' expectations: If the satisfaction is concerned, the very basic concept that goes together with it is the word 'expectation'. The value of it comes from its definition, being the difference between expectations (what is expected to be obtained) and experiences (what has been obtained).

Students' expectations might be borne from variety of factors such as personal reasons (e.g. character, life style, age, life expectations), incomplete or false information, etc. The level of expectation that one holds makes a major impact on his/her satisfaction. If there is created some gap beyond a threshold between what is expected and what is acquired, this would lead to dissatisfaction. To prevent such an occurrence, university should provide true and sufficient information with prospective students.

Expectations also differ based on the (national) culture, which shapes or determines what a consumer could think or hope to have something or to what extent he/she would think or hope it. Expectations also shape consumer perceptions and vice-versa. Hence, achieving customer satisfaction in a global market is difficult because national culture could affect directly the customer's perceptions and expectations (Donthu and Yoo, 1998). Thus, cultural diversities, varied learning styles, the changing demands of students, educational programs and study environments are the challenges that universities need to deal with rather than before (LeBlanc and Nha, 1997). University decision-makers are required to follow and be aware of the effects of cultural diversities on the international students' expectations. In a study on the cross-cultural comparisons of consumer satisfaction ratings, Duque and Lado (2010) modeled the perceived service quality, service outcomes and student coproduction as determinants of student satisfaction. They found that both the perceived quality and the outcomes directly influenced student satisfaction but the effects of the student coproduction on service outcomes and the student coproduction on satisfaction varied between universities and within each cultural context. Hence regarding the international students, more cultural differences between home and host countries can be observed and those differences play major roles in student satisfaction or dissatisfaction, e.g. creating more homesickness and acculturative stress (Kegel, 2009).

Empathy for students: Empathy can be defined as a word which means to listen, or can be fully involvement in understanding the inner world of the person that one relates. Trying to understand the inner world of another person means putting away something from one's own

person, from one's own personal values and attitudes, to try assuming another's person attitude (Perino and Andreolli, 2003).

In the students' satisfaction context, empathy can be linked to the behaviour of the employees in the departments that internationals get contact with, among which are secretariats, information offices, international relations departments, student offices, etc. Employees' (including teaching staff's) collaborative relationships with internationals, their willingness to offer advice, help, and explanations support and encourage them to bring about a sense of self confidence, embracement and belonging (Avram, 2009), which contributes to a higher level of satisfaction. The opposite approaches harm the students' sense of belonging and cause them to have the feeling of exclusion.

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

II.1. THE RESEARCH MODEL

First, it has been developed a conceptual model for this research based on the literature review. In the model it has been taken the level of satisfaction as the dependent variable, whose value is affected by some other six main independent variables including the education quality at the university, social life in the university's whereabouts, economic conditions where the university is located, facilities and services offered by the university, students' expectations, and students' empathy, almost all of which have some sub-variables. The conceptual model developed is shown in Figure 1 below.

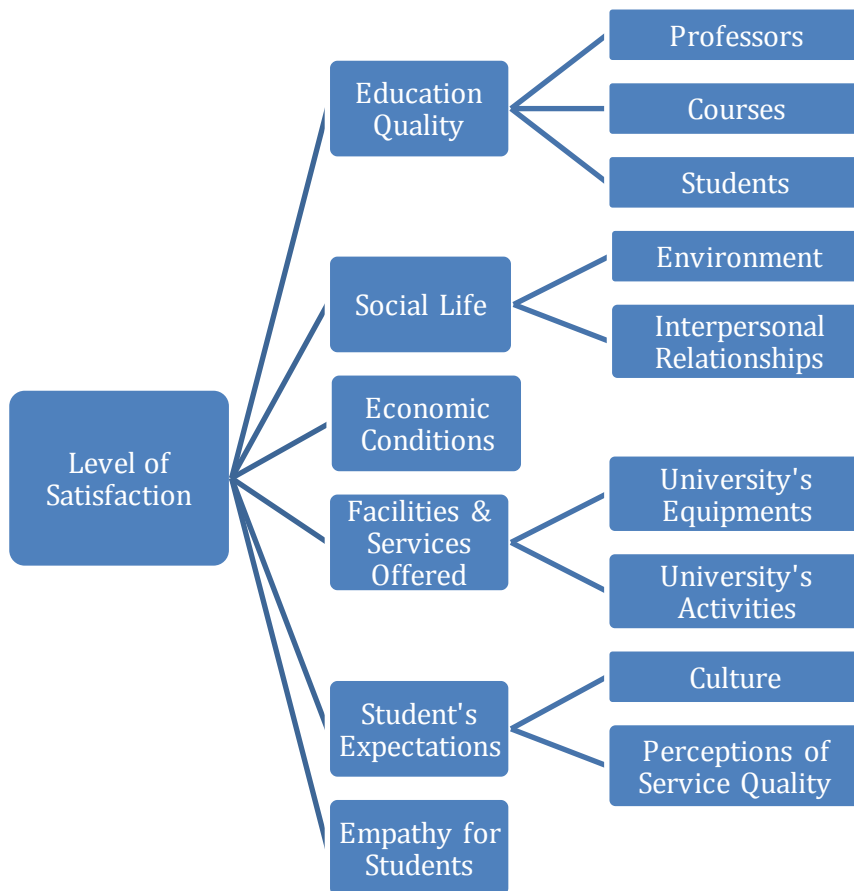


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model for Determining the Level of International Students' Satisfaction

II.II. THE POPULATION, SAMPLING AND DATA ISSUES

To measure the satisfaction level, the international students in Niğde University have been chosen as the population. Therefore, the research has been designed as a case study on a university in Turkey, there are about 193 (state and foundation) universities in total[†], recruiting about 5,5 million students as of March 2014. However, the number of international students is not comparable with the total student population in higher education, which is too low compared to expectations. There were about 54 thousands international students as of March 2014 in Turkish universities, according to the Higher Education Council (YÖK) (Hürriyet Daily, 2014), but with an increasing trend.

Niğde University, located in the city of Niğde, a small city with the population of approximately 125 thousands in the central region of Turkey, has a student population of about 18 thousands in its five faculties, nine high schools, and three graduate schools. The official teaching medium is Turkish. It had only 90 full-time international students in total at the time of research, who were mostly exchange and Erasmus students. Therefore the size of total population of international students included those 90 students.

Niğde University is located in Niğde, a small city with the population of 110,000 at the central region of Turkey. It has 5 faculties and the official language of university is Turkish.

In collecting data, it was intended to access all of the population elements but was not obtained full success in spite of the attempts to reach all one by one because some students had gone back to their home countries as some were not interested in participating in the research. Besides this, 53 of the internationals were accessed to have them participate in the survey, which still corresponded to %58,9 representation of the whole population, which was considered quite adequate.

The data were collected by applying a survey questionnaire developed for this study based on the conceptual model explained above to the population elements. It included various forms of questions such as multi-choice, likert type, and multi response based on what were intended to measure. The questionnaire form was tested on a (small) group of three international students as a pilot study before full application in order to check if the form included any difficult to comprehend items. It was also revised by two professors of business as experts for the validity. After making necessary revisions, the questionnaire forms were distributed to the population elements and applied to all the respondents within about two weeks time, during which it was accessed to all the available and volunteered international students. Then the data were coded and input into computer to be analyzed.

In data analyses, it was used some descriptive, tabulative and graphical methods since it is an explorative study, whose main purpose is to determine and explain the underlying factors that affect of the level of satisfaction, and to measure the level of international students' satisfaction.

II. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the data gathered from the survey questionnaires, some of main characteristics of the sample are as follows: About 64% of the respondents are male and 36% are female; 98% are single; the majority (64%) are from three countries including Turkmenistan (29%), Azerbaijan (25%), and Kazakhstan (%10) as the remaining are from other 10 countries varying from China to Poland. About 83% is seeking the bachelor's degree as 11% the master's and 6% the doctoral degrees.

As 30% of the respondents spent less than one year in Turkey, 6% between 1 and 2 years, 32% between two and three years, 25% between three and four years, and the remaining 8% four or more years. According to those figures, 70% of the respondents spent at least one year in Turkey.

[†] The number of universities is true as of 25 April 2015, taken from the Higher Education Council's (YÖK) website (www.yok.gov.tr).

Additionally, 26% of the respondents also attended to another education institution before in Turkey. Therefore, the majority of the respondents had adequate time and experience to evaluate the state of their level of satisfaction.

To have a closer look at the back ground that the international students came from, it was addressed the educational and economic status of the students' parents in the questionnaire form.

Table 1. The Highest Level of Education Completed by International Students' Parents

	Father (%)	Mother (%)
Illiterate	1,9	14,6
Primary school	0,0	0,0
High school	20,8	29,2
Undergraduate	66,0	50,0
Master	11,3	6,2
Doctorate	0,0	0,0
Total	100,0	100,0

According to the statistics in Table 1 at least 98% of fathers and 85% of mothers have at least high school education; where 66% (father) and 50% (mother) have at least undergraduate education as 11% (father) and 6% (mother) at least masters' degree education, meaning that the parents' of international students are mostly highly educated people. Similarly, about 27% of the students described their families' economic status as 'good' and 64% as 'average' as only %9 described it 'poor', indicating that at least 90% of the students' families are in good economic conditions.

Table 2. The Factors that Influence International Students' Decision to Choose Niğde University

	Percent of Responses	Percent of Cases ^{1,2}
Quality of education	25	47.2
Coincidence or chance	18	34.0
Cost of study	13	24.5
Erasmus or exchange project	13	24.5
Suggestions and/or advices	9	17.0
Programs offered in English	7	13.2
Someone lived or studied in Turkey	7	13.2
Availability of a desired program	6	11.3
Availability of scholarship	2	3.8
Total	100	188.7

¹ The number of respondents = 53

² Multiple answers made available to the respondents

Regarding the factors affecting the international students' decision to choose Niğde University (see Table 2), it seems that the quality of education is the most important decision criteria, a finding also supported by the literature. However 1/3rd of the respondents came to Niğde University by coincidence or chance, who were probably those who wanted to experience different countries and cultures. Similarly, 1/4th of the students indicated that the cost of study was an important factor in deciding to chose Niğde University, also a finding supported by the literature (Beine et al., 2013), and another 1/4th stated that their study program (availability of Erasmus or

exchange program) was the influencing factor. Beyond these, there were decision factors such as suggestions and/or advices, availability of programs offered in English, someone lived or studied in Turkey, etc. In general, the international students' decision factors in Niğde University are on the same line with the findings in the literature.

In university selection decisions, the information sources made available to international candidates and used are also relevant because the information source can be very influential in decision-making. That is why the survey also questioned the information sources used by international students in Niğde University (Table 3). Based on the statistics in the table, it appears that the university's website were the most useable source for the respondents for obtaining information in their university choice decision. The other information sources including someone in respondents' home country, people in Niğde University and other online sources were also the considerable options for the recognition of the university.

Table 3. The Information Sources Used by International Students

	Percent of Responses	Percent of Cases ¹
University's website	42.3	56.6
Someone in my home country	18.3	24.5
A professor, student or someone in this university	18.3	24.5
Other online sources	14.1	18.9
A government department in my country	7.0	9.4
Total	100.0	134.0

¹ Multiple answers made available to the respondents

According to the literature, teaching faculty is an important factor to motivate, satisfy, and to increase students' impartiality both inside and outside the class (Kashan, 2012) because teaching faculty plays a central role in campus life (Pozo-Munoz et al., 2000). Therefore, as highly qualified teaching faculty can be considered as very effective in students' satisfaction, the opposite can also be said to have negative impact on it. Besides, it is worth to mention that the quality of teaching staff is not only related to academic quality. It also includes the factors such as interaction with students, accessibility, etc. Therefore, the perception of the quality of teaching faculty is highly relevant to and influential on the subject.

Table 4. The International Students' Ranking of Professors by Various Criteria

	N	Mean ¹	Std. Deviation
Fair assessment	52	6.67	1.93
Offering suitable course materials and information	53	6.43	1.93
Proficiency and experiences	53	6.23	2.09
How you have been treated	53	6.08	2.65
Teaching method	53	6.04	2.16
Accessibility of them out of class time	53	6.00	2.58
The overall rate for professors	46	6.65	2.20

¹ Respondents' rate is based on a 10 points scale, where 1 - Very poor and 10 - Excellent

The respondents rated the professors in Niğde University for each of the six criteria (shown in Table 4). According to the statistics, professors were rated above the average (five) on a scale of

10, where they received the highest score on the fair assessment and the lowest score on the accessibility out of class times. The overall rate is closer to seven.

Education quality is not unidimensional. It has probably several more elements that affect it besides teaching staff but some may be more influential than the others while some may be difficult to measure directly. This research considered the courses in Niğde University as another effective element of education quality, and thus the respondents were demanded to rate the courses in a similar way to they ranked professors. It was developed several criteria to evaluate the courses based on the literature (shown in Table 5).

Table 5. The International Students' Ranking of Courses by Various Criteria

	N	Mean ¹	Std. Deviation
Suitability and major-relatedness of the curriculum	53	6,49	1,88
Practicality and usefulness for field of study	53	6,38	2,06
Understandibility of courses	53	6,36	2,48
Up-to-datedness of contents	53	6,28	2,22

¹ Respondents' rate is based on a 10 points scale, where 1 - Very poor and 10 – Excellent

According to the statistics in the table, the international students' rated the courses in Niğde University above average (five) on a scale of 10. The scores varied between 6 and 6,5, where 'the suitability and major relatedness of the curriculum' were rated the highest while 'the up-to-datedness of content' the lowest but all the criteria rated over six in any case, higher than average.

The quality perception of education is also related to several factors such as students' own academic background (readiness), expectations, level of success from those courses, level of determination, etc. Their language proficiency can also be a major barrier to the perception of courses and university, and in turn his/her satisfaction from the university, if the concern is international students.

Table 6. The International Students' Ranking for Courses by Various Criteria

	N	Mean ¹	Std. Deviation
Proficiency in the language of current study	51	7,22	2,28
The level of academic readiness (academic background)	51	6,92	2,25
Being determined about current study of program	51	6,57	2,52

¹ Respondents' rate is based on a 10 points scale, where 1 - Very poor and 10 – Excellent

According to the statistics in Table 6, which are based on the self evaluation of the respondents, the international students evaluate themselves quite proficient in the language of current study, higher than the scores on the professors and courses. They also assess that their academic readiness and determinantness about the academic program are above average. These three items can be said to affect at least the perception of the academic quality and academic satisfaction (in possibly a positive or negative way), which needs further analyses.

The respondents were also addressed for if they ever changed their intended subject of study since they arrived to Turkey. This question evaluated to be important for understanding how much the (academic) expectations are met, at least partially. It was found that 21% of the respondents changed their intended programs of study as 79% never changed it, meaning that almost four out of five students are pleased with their study programs at some level.

Table 7. Ranking for Niğde as a Place to Live

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Safety	50	8,14	1,51
Peace of mind	50	7,72	1,58
Level of adaptation for living here	50	6,98	2,20
Attractiveness	49	5,78	2,16

¹ Respondents' rate is based on a 10 points scale, where 1 - Very poor and 10 – Excellent

The literature states that one of the influential factors that affect international students' satisfaction level is their perception of living place, which includes both physical and social environment at the same time. According to the statistics reflecting the respondents' perception and assessment of Niğde as a place to live presented in Table 7, the respondents' assessments are quite positive. In their evaluation, they find it as a quite safe place and with peace of mind to live, both criteria rated comparably higher, but this is not valid for attractiveness, rated the lowest of all four criteria although the assessment rate was above the average. The respondents' level of adaptation for living is also considerably well.

Those figures should be evaluated together with the accommodation preferences of the respondents in Niğde. Figure 2 shows that while almost half of the respondents prefer renting with roommates, another 30% prefer university/college residence; having the preference of additional 15% private dorms. In short, more than 90% prefer commune type of accommodation, a factor that eases the level of adaptation.

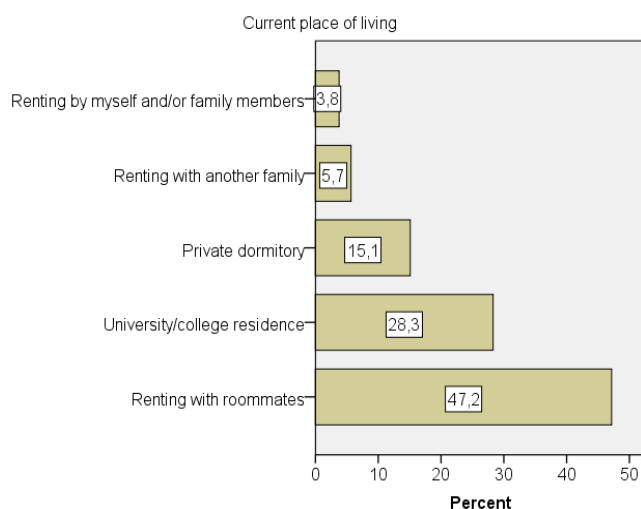


Figure 2. The Accomodation Types that the International Students Using in Niğde

Host country is mostly a new environment for international students physically, socially, culturally, emotionally, etc. International students' satisfaction level depends on how they adapt to and embrace such an environment. They need new social relations, interactions, and sharings with other people such as friends, advisors, and teaching staff around them in order to easily adapt to living. However, having good social relations is not a one-sided issue; it also requires international students be sociable and active in establishing social and emotional bridges with the others. In this regard, more sociable students are expected to get satisfied easier compared to the less sociable ones.

One of the basic indicators of being sociable is one's relations with the people around. The local students and other internationals at the university form the international students' closest potential social environment, given that they are willing to start social relations and interact with their environment, which is closely related to the level of their being sociable. The questionnaire

addressed the issue of how the internationals in Niğde Univesity describe themselves in terms of being sociable (Figure 3) and how close they are to local students (Figure 4).

According to Figure 3, almost 40% of the respondents describe themselves considerably or greatly sociable whereas more than half do it averagely sociable. Those who describe themselves ‘little sociable’ are less than 10%. The statistics about sociability show that the respondents in general are at least averagely or more sociable, a factor that eases level of their adaptation to new environments.

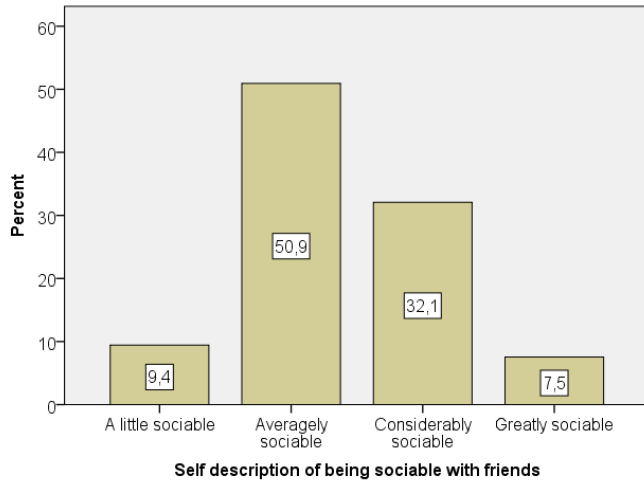


Figure 3. The Respondents’ Self-description of Being Sociable with Friends

On the other face of the ‘social relations’ are the local students and the internationals’ interactions with them. In other words, the issue is how close the internationals to the local students are. The figure 4 representing the distribution of the degree of internationals’ being close to local students depicts that almost half of the respondents are averagely close while about 40% are much close or completely close, which state that in general the tendency of friendship and social relations between local and foreign students are more than average. Being in a social network and having connections with other students, sharing knowledge and experiences with them etc. make students more satisfied.

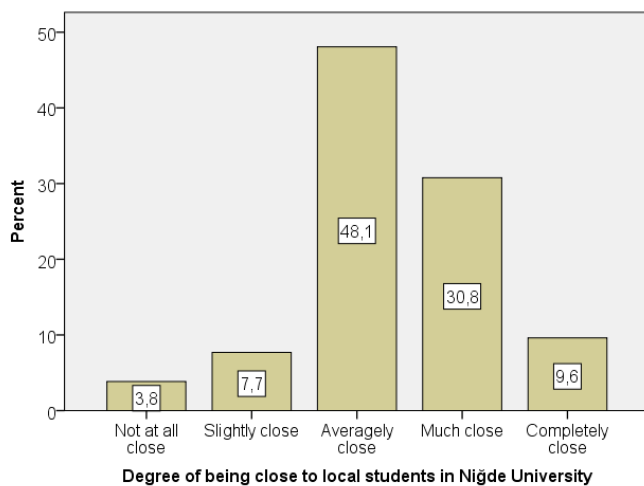


Figure 4. The Degree of International Students’ Being Close to Local Students in Niğde University

Similarly, the interatction between the local people and the international students is equally important because it affects how easy they embrace and to what degree they adapt to the

living environment. The questionnaire addressed this issue within the frame of social relations and interactions of the international students with their environment. Figure 5 shows that about 50% of the respondents rated the degree of treatment they received from the local people ‘good’ or ‘very good’ while 34% rated it ‘usual’. The remaining 15% rated it ‘bad’ or worse.

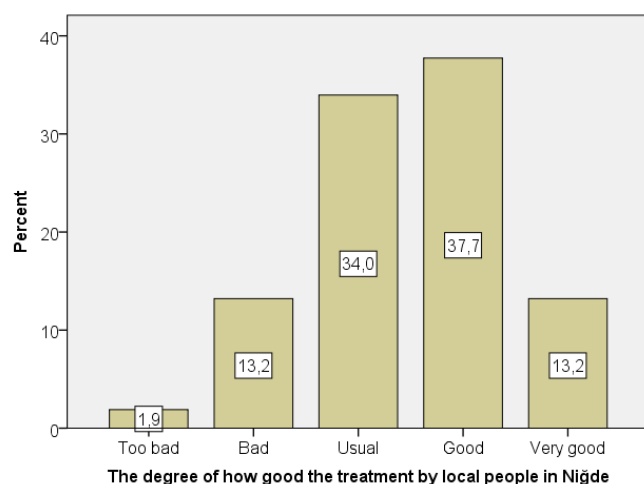


Figure 5. The Degree of How Good the Treatment by Local People

Surely, one of the main determinants affecting the level of international students’ satisfaction is the economic factors (Beine et al. 2013). The literature makes distinction between school expenses and living expenses. This paper used the same approach and attempted to measure the respondents’ evaluations separately for these two criteria. As Table 8 presents the relevant statistics, the respondents valued the costs of living below average (3), meaning that the international students did not see both studying and living in Niğde ‘expensive’, where 83% of the respondents valued the school expenses in Niğde ‘normal’ as about 15% rated them ‘slightly cheaper’ or ‘very cheap’. Those who valued them ‘above average’ is very ignorable. In the same sense, those who valued the living expenses ‘normal’ are about 60% and ‘cheaper’ are about 15%. Those who rated ‘above average’ and ‘very expensive’ are only 5,5%, which is also ignorable in total (Graphs not shown for the lack of space). Overall, the economic conditions in Niğde look very satisfying for the international students.

Table 8. The Respondents Evaluations about the Economic Conditions of Living

How cheap are...	N	Mean ¹	Std. Deviation
...the school expenses in Niğde?	53	2,75	,68
...the living expenses in Niğde?	53	2,70	,70

¹ Respondents’ rate is based on a 5 points scale, where 1-Very cheap and 5-Above Average

Besides the others, probably one of the most important factors that affect the internationals’ satisfaction is the facilities of and the services offered by the university. Facilities and services make students experience and feel the university atmosphere. In fact, those are the most tangible aspects of the university that international students can observe. In the frame of this research, the questionnaire included eleven items regarding the Niğde University’s facilities and services, as the relevant statistics presented in Table 9.

From the statistics, it can be understood that most of the international students are quite satisfied with ‘the ease in application and registration process’, ‘library resources’, ‘level of informativeness and usefulness of university’s website’, and ‘university’s welcoming when arrived first’. The other relevant items were also rated above average between 6 and 7 over the scale of 10. Among all the facilities and services, the recreational facilities had the lowest rating although

above the average and satisfactory enough compared to the other services. Generally, the ratings of satisfaction of those who reported having used these services or facilities show above average satisfaction level.

Table 9. The Level of Satisfaction among Participants about University's Features

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ease in the application and registration process in Niğde University	53	7,68	1,88
Library resources	53	7,21	2,21
The level of informativeness and usefulness of university's website	53	7,17	1,96
Niğde University's welcoming when arrived first	53	7,04	2,47
Availability of help by the university when demanded	52	6,96	2,53
University campus	53	6,77	2,45
Computer and internet facilities	52	6,71	2,30
University's approach and/or interest to international students	53	6,70	2,52
Classrooms, labs, equipment, etc	53	6,68	2,55
Turkish language courses for international students	47	6,45	2,42
Recreational facilities, sport center, and others	53	5,94	2,41

¹ Respondents' rate is based on a 5 points scale, where 1-Very cheap and 5-Above Average

Students' expectations are also the very major determinants of the level of satisfaction. In fact, the satisfaction is the product of comparison between what is expected and what is experienced. It is also defined as the exact similarity between customers' expectations and experiences (Arambewela and Hall, 2009). In definition, an international student is the one who have some expectations and who seek to meet those beyond the borders of his/her own country for any reason. Therefore, it is likely that international students have many expectations regarding the host country, host university, education quality, living environment, atmosphere, culture, etc. (Băcilă et al., 2014; Aldemir and Gülcan, 2004). They are satisfied when their expectations are met and have experiences beyond their expectations (Kashan, 2012; Aldemir and Gülcan, 2004).

Education quality, facilities and services, and some other aspects of the expectations are already discussed above and the respondents' evaluations of those are represented and measured by various individual variables. Besides these, expectations may also include some dimensions of culture and service quality perceptions, as well as achievements (successes). In this regard, the questionnaire addressed to these two dimensions of expectations with questions such as how similar the respondents found the culture in Turkey and their home country and the overall success (GPA - Grade Point Average) of the students. It can be expected in general that the higher the students' GPA get, the more satisfied they become. Additionally, although not representative alone but it can still be an indicator of service quality received, it was asked how how interested, helpful and volunteer the academic and non-academic staff were to the respondents.

Regarding the first issue of similarity between the cultures (Figure 6), about 23% of the respondents found it much or very much similar while about 36% found it averagely similar, adding up to 58%. The remaining 42% found it slightly similar or not similar at all. The cultural similarity is important in the sense that the more differences between the cultures exist, the more homesickness and culturative stress can occur (Kegel, 2009), a factor that erodes the level of satisfaction. As a general statement, majority of the international students found Turkish culture similar to their own, which was an expected finding due to the fact that the majority of the internationals in the university came from the Central Asian countries.

In tems of expectations regarding achievements, the majority of the international students seem to reach their expected level of success in general. The respondents reported GPA of A's (19%), B's (33%), C's (31%) and D's (only about 17%), which is still a 'pass grade', given that the students' overall GPA is over 2.00. Overall, 83% of the respondents seem to have succeeded in their courses without any condition.

Next, with respect to the service quality, it was pointed out to the level of academic and non-academic staff's being interested, helpfulness and volunteerism to the international students. The respondents rated both academic and non-academic staff just the average (3), where the non-academic staff were rated slightly but unimportantly higher. Compared to the ratings of many items by the internationals, the university staff in general is required to pay more attention to the foreigners in today's competitive education market. However, it should be pointed out that the respondents rated the professors much higher in the context of education quality, indicating that the international students expect more help and care from the university staff. Avram (2009) stated that this factor can be supportive especially for foreign students and can enhance their self-confidence.

Table 10. The Problems Experienced by the Students since Applied to the University

	Percent of		Percent of Cases
	N	Responses	
Economic problems	37	14.2	72.5
Problems related to health insurance	32	12.3	62.7
Communicating and receiving sufficient information about the institution	27	10.4	52.9
Obtaining health services	27	10.4	52.9
Handbook or guidance for being adapted to live and study in here	25	9.6	49.0
Having difficulties in obtaining education visa	24	9.2	47.1
Arranging for a place	22	8.5	43.1
Language inadequacy in the courses offered	18	6.9	35.3
Receiving enough support from the university	18	6.9	35.3
Counseling services for international students	16	6.2	31.4
Getting letter of acceptance from the university	14	5.4	27.5
Total	260	100.0	509.8

Further, the international students' satisfaction level is also affected by the condensity of the problems they experience during study. The university administrators and decision-makers should determine what type of problems they face with. In this regard, the survey questionnaire included various problems that students could face with from the beginning of the current program to the point. The relevant statistics are presented in Table 7, according to which the international students problems, as expected, appear to be related to economic (37 in 53 students), health insurance (32 in 53 students), and health services (27 in 53 students). The other problems reported are mostly related to communication and gathering sufficient information about the university and living. The least problem is experienced in obtaining the letter of acceptance from the university, which can be one of the most important factors in choosing university (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

If it is concerned with determining the satisfaction level, item based analyses are very helpful in understanding the detailed picture, which is required especially for detecting the possible problem areas that could affect the overall satisfaction. Of course, the overall satisfaction level is the product of specific variables discussed up to this point but the international students are likely to make decisions based on their general perceptions and experiences rather than their specific items-based satisfaction level. Therefore, besides variable-based satisfaction, the overall satisfaction level (as a dependent variable) should also be measured because it is difficult to measure the weight of specific variables in the students' decision-making process and act accordingly. For this reason, the survey attempted to capture the general satisfaction level of international students in Niğde University. The distribution of respondents' rates is shown in Figure 9.

As the respondents's overall rating clearly indicate that the international students' satisfaction level (7,02 in a 10 points scale) from Niğde University is much above the average. The majority of the respondents rated the university between 5 and 9 points, which the percent of lower and upper grades are ignorable. The respondents' rates are gathered around seven points; of the

total 66,6 percent' rate are on the scale of 7 or higher while another 30% rate 5 and 6. In sum, the international students in Niğde University rate that their satisfaction level with the university is above the average.

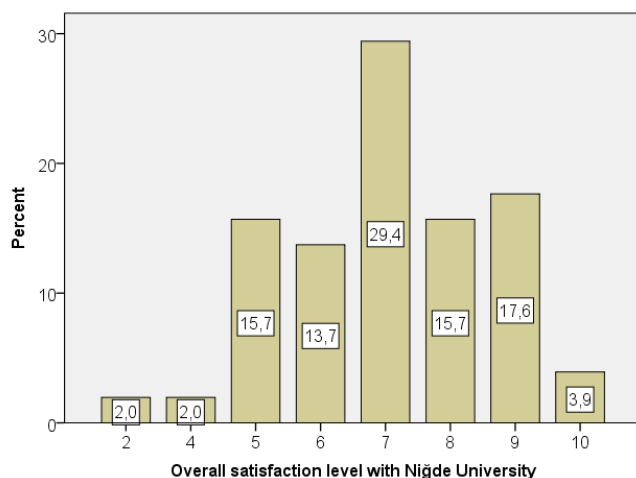


Figure 6. The Overall Satisfaction Level of the Participants

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors influencing the international students' choice in selecting university to study and determine the level of their satisfaction. It was carried out an explorative case study on the international students in Niğde University, Niğde, Turkey in order to identify the relevant variables first and then was built up a conceptual model based on the literature review. Later, it was measured the satisfaction level by using the model developed. The data were collected with a survey questionnaire developed and applied to the international students at the university for the purpose. The data were analyzed in order to identify the mechanism that shape the level of satisfaction among the international students, the determine the current state of university from the internationals' view points, to determine the dynamics that would increase their pleasure, and to detect the problem areas that could lead to dissatisfaction among the service recipients.

The results of the data analysis showed that among all the international students in Niğde University, those who came from the Central Asian countries including Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan made more than half of the international student population. The research findings also revealed that the internationals mostly chose the university because of quality of education, by chance, lower costs, and the partnership programs such as Erasmus and exchange programs. The university's website appears to be the major source of information about the university, programs, facilities and services, however some other sources also play roles in providing information.

The international students felt that they had adequate proficiency to carry on their studies both in terms of language and academic background, and were also adequately determined. Most of the internationals stayed in Turkey more than one year, being capable of assessing their state of satisfaction with the city, university, and their environment. Regarding the satisfaction from different elements, the international students were satisfied with their professors and courses above the average, having similar feelings to and ratings about the facilities and services offered by the university. The internationals found that Niğde was quite a safe and peace of mind place to live, suitable for social relations and interactions due to the locals' embracing capability for foreigners, reasonable economic conditions both in terms of schooling and living expenses, etc. However, the survey exposed that the internationals expect more attractive services programs and recreational facilities. Furthermore, economic problems were mentioned as the main difficulty for most of the

participants, followed by the communication problems and receiving enough information on and about the university, environment, and living in Niğde.

In sum, the findings revealed that the international students are satisfied with the overall service quality slightly over the average; however, the university must consider new strategies to boost the potentials and eliminate the weak points mentioned in the study. To be able to compete with the rivals in the long term, it has to strengthen its capabilities and approach the issue with the marketing perspective in such an intensive competitive environment; otherwise, non-marketing strategies could not be adequately successful in this market.

Implications for Future Research

This is an exploratory research based on a limited data set. Although the study is based on a literature review and a real data set (that represents the whole population at large), the application area is limited to only a relatively small population in only one university. Therefore, the study should rather be repeated on larger populations, preferably on several universities in order to increase the generability of the results. Additionally, due to the small size of the population, some respondents might have hesitated to answer the questions properly and according to the reality, so the findings might have been affected by those answers. Therefore, repeating the study on a similar or larger domain can be very beneficial in determining and testing the factors that affect the level of international students. Furthermore, the data collected should be modeled so as to explain the relevant weights of the variables in the model and to identify the role of dynamics on the students' decisions of university choice.

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