

**INSIGHTS INTO THE CHOICE  
AND DECISION MAKING TO STUDY AT A SELECTED  
BRITISH UNIVERSITY IN THE EXAMPLE OF POLISH  
STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY GLOBAL FAIR  
IN POLAND**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In the modern world, phenomena of internationalisation and globalisation are taking place in all sectors, including Higher Education (HE). Global technologies have caused the world to start shrinking. The Internet is easily accessible and innovations in transport make it much easier to travel. Economic and political changes in the world in the last few years have had a considerable impact on people's lifestyles and decisions they have taken in their private and professional lives. Poland's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 opened previously closed borders to its citizens and gave students the possibilities to make free choice to study abroad. Currently one of the most popular destinations of overseas study for Polish students is the UK. This is because British universities are perceived as good and noble, both in Poland and throughout the world. Studying in the UK also enables students to master their English language, and experience life in a multicultural environment.

According to the literature two main types of factors influence students' decision-making process: push and pull factors. Push factors are created by students' country of origin, and are the ones that persuade them to move abroad. Pull factors, in turn, are those which operate within the host country and encourage students to consider it as their new residence [Mazzarol and Soutar 2002]. Of course, there can also be other factors at

work, ones which cannot be classified as pull or push, but are instead attributable to an individual's psychological make-up.

Though the UK is one of the main destinations to study for Polish students, who account for a fair share of the EU students studying there, very little research has been dedicated to this particular group. A group of prospective students attending the University Global Fair in Warsaw in 2015, who selected a particular British university from north-west England, were interviewed. They were encouraged to explain their motivation to study abroad, the reasons they chose the UK, and in this particular case the motives which prompted them to select this particular British university. They were given a chance to explain their decision-making process.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate what motivates Polish students to study abroad, in particular in the UK, looking very close at students selecting a particular British university. The paper examines these students' choices and their decision-making process while selecting their university studies.

## **POLISH COMMUNITY IN THE UK**

The Polish community living in the UK is one of the largest, accounting for 14% of all foreign citizens in Britain. It amounts to around 700 thousand people, which constitute more than a quarter of 5 million foreigners in the UK from Eastern Europe ([www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk)). The Polish migrant community consists of "old migrants" (pre-war ones) and those who arrived in significant numbers in 2004 onwards, when Poland joined the European Union.

A number of push and pull factors encouraged these migrants to move there. For the "old migrants", it was mainly the war and the difficult political situation they found themselves in when it ended. For the "new migrants", it was better job prospects, a better economy, a desire to gain international experience, to learn or improve their English, or to have an adventure. Migrants were people of various ages, some quite mature, and others very young and inexperienced, so the majority of them did physical labour there.

However, by opening their borders to Polish immigrants, Britain gained not only labourers but also a lot of students, who were now treated by British universities as European students, rather than as the "international" ones they had been classified as in the past [Rembielak et al. 2009].

## **POLISH STUDENTS IN THE UK**

Poland's joining the EU in 2004 made a considerable difference to Polish students, as it gave them an opportunity to study abroad. As Polish qualifications were recognised by British institutions, a visa was no longer required, and there was a huge difference in terms of fees. Pre-accession, Polish students had been classified as international, meaning they paid considerable fees to study in the UK. For many Polish students, the international fees were too expensive and, after joining the EU, the ability to study abroad was no longer just a dream.

In 2004, the maximum level of tuition for undergraduate students (UG) was up to 3,000 GBP a year (except for in Scotland, where the fee was abolished). By 2010–2011, the maximum UG fees had increased to 3,290 GBP. In 2012 a new fee was introduced, the minimum of which was 6,000 GBP and the maximum up to 9,000 GBP a year for the annual tuition costs of EU UG students, including ones from the UK. Universities had a choice in terms of the amount they wished to charge their students to study in the UG programmes. This became challenged for prospective students as 64 universities announced straight away their plans to charge the full amount allowed by the government, while only 59 decided they would charge at least the minimum fee.

### POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM AND STUDENT NUMBERS

The Polish education system has in recent years undergone a few reforms which helped it adjust to the standards of unified European education. This came as a result of the Bologna Declaration, which was signed in 1999 by the education ministers of 29 countries, and came into force in Poland in 2003. It was designed to increase collaboration among European universities, by forming a system of easily comparable academic degrees and titles. In terms of the system of Higher Education, the biggest change was dividing upper education into three cycles of qualifications: the first cycle spanned 3–4 years and leads to the bachelor of honours degree (licencjat or engineer); the second cycle covering two years and leading to the Masters degree (magister); and the third cycle another four years and culminating in the PhD (doctor). However, some master's degrees are excluded from this system and are granted after a unique long-cycle programme, lasting between four and six years.

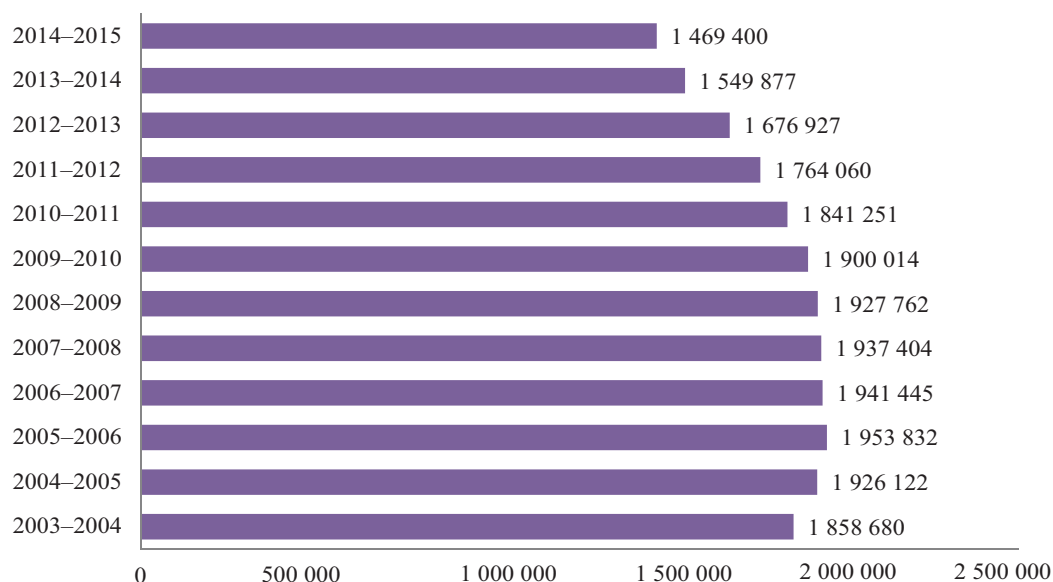


FIG. Polish student numbers in HE institutions in years 2003–2015

Source: own elaboration based on Poland in Figures 2015, Central Statistical Office (GUS), Warszawa 2015.

TABLE. Polish student numbers by level of education at schools in years 2010–2015

Education	2010–2011	2013–2014	2014–2015
Pupils and students by educational level at schools in thousands			
Primary (podstawowe)	2 191.7	2 152.6	2 306.1
Lower secondary (gimnazja)	1 261.4	1 124.0	1 105.9
Upper secondary (szkoły ponadgimnazjalne) <sup>a</sup>	1 464.9	1 277.7	1 247.6
Post-secondary (policealne)	298.8	279.0	264.6
Tertiary (wyższe)	1841.3	1 549.9	1 469.4
Students of schools and for adults in thousands (szkoły dla dorosłych)	289.2	240.3	208.1
Pupils and students <sup>b</sup> by age groups in % of population of a given age group			
7–12	95.7	94.5	94.1
13–15	96.5	95.3	95.0
16–18	94.9	94.2	94.2
19–24	57.3	54.6	47.8
25–29	9.8	8.2	6.6
30 and more	1.2	1.0	0.7

<sup>a</sup> excluding students in art schools leading to professional certification; <sup>b</sup> excluding foreigners

Source: own elaboration based on Poland in Figures 2015, Central Statistical Office (GUS), Warszawa 2015.

There are state (public) and private (non-public) institutions of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Poland. According to the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS), in 2014–2015 academic year the total enrolment at Polish Higher Education Institutions was 1.47 million Polish students. In comparison to the last few years a decrease in enrolment can now be observed, especially in private Polish HE institutions, where students are obliged to pay fees. It has been said that many of these institutions will be eliminated from the market by higher quality providers and public universities, where education is free. Public HE institutions enjoy stable enrolment for their programmes. Polish student numbers at public institutions are presented in Figure.

Table presents Polish student numbers by level of education in schools at the various levels of education.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS TO STUDY OVERSEAS

The majority of customers prefer to purchase products about which they have some knowledge. The decision to purchase a “good” may be a bit easier than one to buy a service as goods are tangible and can be easily seen, touched and felt.

Higher Education demonstrates the key service features, as identified by Zeithaml et al. [1985]. It is primarily intangible, which means that potential consumers cannot see the service in advance. That is why to make the right decision they usually rely on other cues, including word-of-mouth recommendation (either from family and friends, or online discussions), the reputation of a country or institution, and the price [Bourke 2000], various university rankings, student satisfaction surveys, meetings with alumni who graduated from the institution, and many other factors.

The increasingly competitive global market offers customers more choice, which leads to different motivation and consumer behaviour. With the development of the Internet, customers have more information on offers available to them. However, being overloaded with information can potentially make choices more complicated. From the customer's point of view, a brand simplifies product choice. Similarly, a strong and reliable university brand, meaning a strong reputation, can have a positive effect on prospective students and definitely can reduce the risk of making a wrong choice.

Antonides and Van Raaij [1998] distinguish four types of risk when making purchase decisions: physical, financial, social, and time risk. With education, the physical risk may involve selecting a university that is located in a dangerous area without proper security. Financial risk comes from university fees, cost of living and transport expenses, especially if students go abroad to study, and any other unforeseen expenses. Social risk can result from choices made concerning social relations and the prestige of the consumer, for example if selecting a university of a doubtful reputation. Time risk can result from choices made about the future time expenditure of the consumer and of possibly lost time if a student makes a wrong choice regarding the location, the university, or the programme of study.

To reduce the risk of making a wrong choice, customers of higher education seek information from various sources: family, friends, alumni, internet, university websites, various rankings, open days, fairs, university promotional materials.

There are a number of reasons for why students decide to study overseas. McMahon [1992], Mazzarol and Soutar [2002], and Li and Bray [2007] all discuss global patterns of international student flows by identifying push-pull factors that encourage students to leave their homeland and study overseas.

Push factors are the ones that exist within the students' home country and influence their decision to undertake study abroad. An example would be a lack of reputable HE institutions in poorer countries. Mazzarol and Soutar [2002] look specifically at perceptions of the quality of the tertiary education system available in one's home country: if they are negative, then they will be a strong push factor to encourage students to study overseas. An unsatisfactory GNP growth rate in their home country can discourage some from studying in their homeland [Lee and Tan 1984, Agarwal and Winkler 1985, McMahon 1992], as they do not see promising career prospects for themselves there.

Pull factors, on the other hand, operate within the host country and host institution to make them attractive to international students. Examples include the availability of part-time work [Mazzarol et al. 1997] and work after the course [Lin 1997]. Binsardi and Ekwulugo [2003] stress the importance of international recognition of the host country, while others emphasize the reputation for quality [Lin 1997, Mazzarol et al. 1997, Mazzarol 1998, Soutar and Turner 2002]. Mazzarol et al. [1997] discuss the impact of the overall level of knowledge and awareness of the host country, and Mazzarol et al. [1997], Mazzarol [1998], and Cubillo et al. [2006] all focus on the importance of recognition of host's qualifications in the home country.

Another pull factor is the host nation's support of international students via scholarships [McMahon 1992], and ease of university entrance and immigration procedures [Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003, Maringe and Carter 2007]. According to Mazzarol [1998] and Soutar and Turner [2002], the range of courses can be also a very important factor

attracting international students to study abroad, if the range of programmes to study in their home country is limited.

Customer focused organisational culture can also draw students [Mazzarol 1998], as can the presence of students from their home country [Lin 1997, Mazzarol et al. 1997] as well as recommendations from parents, relatives, and friends [Mazzarol et al. 1997, Maringe and Carter 2007]. In addition to these factors, students may have their own more personal motivations.

The decision to study internationally and the choice of which country and institution to study at, are all clearly part of a very complex problem-solving situation. The first stage in this process is the initial decision to study internationally, and is often influenced by push factors. The second stage – selecting the host country – is where pull factors become important. When it comes to selecting the institution, it would seem that there are additional pull factors that make one more attractive than others [Mazzarol 1998, Rembielak et al. 2009].

## **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the research was to examine what motivates Polish students to study abroad, in particular in the UK, at one university in north-west England. The research was undertaken in 2015 on Polish students who participated at a the University Global Fair in Warsaw, Poland. The paper examines these students' choices and their decision-making process while selecting their university studies.

Following Creswell's [2007] premise that qualitative research is conducted when a problem or issue needs to be explored, I applied qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that motivated the students. I conducted a personal semi-structured interview with each of the 28 students: 12 of the respondents were female and 16 were male, all between the ages of 17 and 30; 11 of these students wanted to study postgraduate programmes and the rest would be pursuing undergraduate ones. They were very enthusiastic and eager to share their thoughts and observations.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

All of the interviewed students viewed Poland's 2004 entrance to the EU as a very positive step, one which was enabling them to undertake studies abroad now. They perceived it as a great opportunity and said this made a considerable difference as the doors to European adventure had been thrown open for them. So, in line with Binsardi and Ekwulogo's [2003] study, and Maringe and Carter [2007], the ease of university entrance and immigration procedures was one of the pull factors influencing these students to study overseas.

Interestingly, half of the students did not feel that their homeland had much less to offer than the host country in a long-term perspective. In their opinion, Poland was moving in the right direction and they felt they should be proud of their country. At the same time, they felt that they would have a great adventure in living and studying in a differ-

ent multicultural environment of worldwide renown, an opportunity in line with what Binsardi and Ekwulogo described in their work [2003]. The other half of the students felt less optimistic about Poland's future but felt that no matter what happens there, it is worth investing in their own career as one day they would benefit from it.

The majority of the interviewed students stressed the importance of British education, which they took to be a guarantee of very high quality and which, once completed, would be appreciated by future employers in Poland or, if they decided not to return home, elsewhere in the world. This is in line with the reputation for quality discussed by Lin [1997], Mazzarol et al. [1997], Mazzarol [1998], and Soutar and Turner [2002]. As one student said:

"I know studying in the UK is expensive but you can get a loan, I heard, or work a bit. But, you know, one day, when I graduate I know that my diploma will have value. I will be more competitive in the market as I would have studied in a reputable University and my employer would have a proof I am really good at English, so my job opportunities will be unlimited. I heard that employers prefer people with English qualifications".

The students also mentioned the opportunity to work while studying, which is in line with Lin [1997] and Mazzarol et al. [1997], as well as the availability of part time work and work after the course, a benefit described by Mazzarol et al. [1997]. The students said:

"I have two sisters and my parents work very hard so I don't want them to worry about me. I know from friends who study in England that it isn't easy but if you are well-organised you can study and work at the same time as the timetable allows you this. If I studied in Poland I couldn't do it. They have more classes here and the classes are spread throughout the whole week".

"I read that the majority of graduates find work straight after studies. This is what I need. My cousin graduated from a Polish University last year, studied IT, everyone was saying he would easily find a good job and guess what (...), nobody wants to hire him because he has no experience. British Universities offer internships when you study, so in fact you get experience. That's what I want. They told me about the 'sandwich year', which has a funny name but is a great idea, and this convinced me to go there".

Many of the interviewed students value the recognition of the host country's qualifications, which was pointed by Cubillo et al. [2006]. The overall level of knowledge and awareness of the people in the host country, Mazzarol [1998], Mazzarol et al. [1997] both described this factor was also considered essential by students when selecting where to study.

Prospective students stressed the fact that since 2004, when Poland joined the EU, many Poles emigrated to the UK, so almost everyone now has either a family or friends living there. There are also many TV programmes about the UK in Poland and all Polish students study English at school. Thanks to this, the UK does not feel like an unknown and hostile place, and although it is not a Slavic country, Polish people have high awareness of it and find it familiar.

The fact that so many Polish students already study in the UK was another factor which encouraged the "newcomers". This tendency is corroborated by research done by Lin [1997] and Mazzarol et al. [1997] all of whom pointed at the presence of students from the home country as an important point of encouragement. As one student said:

“I think it’s great to have so many Polish students studying in England. At least they will understand your culture and will guide you in the ‘new territory’ so you don’t feel lost and lonely there, especially at the beginning. I also read there are many Polish organisations and societies, so you can meet really nice people. Don’t get me wrong, I want to mix with others but sometimes it is good to have a soul mate from your country”.

There was a considerable difference regarding perceived educational experience between the students, who have not started their university adventure yet, and were planning to start their first year of undergraduate study, and those who actually currently or previously studied in Poland, and decided to study postgraduate programmes in the UK now. The latter ones felt the service offered by Polish universities to their students was in many cases not customer focused and was in need of improvement. Comparing their experience with that of their friends, who studied in the UK, they felt they could get much better service in the UK. This is in agreement with Mazzarol [1998], who stressed the importance of customer focused organisational culture in attracting students by universities. Major points of criticism of Polish universities included: lack of guidance from lecturers, some impolite individuals working at universities, timetable spread throughout the week and starting classes very early in the morning, and a lack of parking spaces.

According to Mazzarol [1998] and Soutar and Turner [2002], the range of courses can also be a very important factor attracting international students to study abroad. The students I interviewed did not complain about the range of courses available to them in Polish Universities but they felt British universities offered more flexibility and elective modules, so the students could tailor themselves the programme to customise it according to their interests.

When asked why they would want to study in this particular British university, students indicated the great location, which was easily accessible by public transport, and had both airports and a railway station nearby. One of the students said:

“I know I will miss my family back home but thanks to the closeness of the airport, and cheap flights to Poland it offers, I feel I can visit them very often and they can visit me”.

Students also liked the actual region of the UK the university was located in. They felt that as it was not based in London, life would be less hectic and less expensive. As summarised by one of the students:

“I feel London is overadvertised. I was there a few times and couldn’t relax. Everyone is running. I much prefer Manchester. It is a lovely city, it has the beautiful Salford Quays, where you feel like in Las Vegas at night, and has the best night life you can imagine. People are so friendly. I just love it. I cannot imagine any other place to study in”.

The majority of the students saw the university website prior to the Fair, and were attracted by the University buildings. They felt they looked really modern and student-friendly. They appreciated the fact that the University offered coffee shops and cafes with a good selection of food. One student said:

“I am happy to have a chance to try real British food. I have never been to the UK before but at my English classes at school I read about mincemeat pies and I really want to try them. But seriously speaking, I don’t fancy preparing sandwiches every day when I go for classes, and I would prefer to have a solid lunch and concentrate just on my studies”.

Another pull factor is the host nation’s support of international students via scholarships [McMahon 1992], though many of those interviewed suggested this area could



stand to be improved. According to the students, British universities did not offer enough scholarships and bursaries to Polish students and this could definitely encourage more young Polish people to study there.

Some of prospective postgraduate students were very disappointed that not only had they not been offered any scholarships, but also could not count on loans, as these were solely reserved for undergraduate students. What attracted them, though, was the length of duration of the postgraduate programmes offered by British universities in comparison to Polish ones. One student summarised it very briefly:

“I really hoped to get a loan to study a PG Programme and was very disappointed when the University representative told me there was no option to do that, but when I found out that the Programme lasts only a year and I get a Masters, I couldn’t believe it! In fact, when you calculate, it isn’t that bad”.

The decision to study abroad and to select a particular institution is definitely a difficult task. The majority of the prospective students admitted they spent many hours searching for information online, asking family and friends for advice, which accords with what Mazzarol et al. [1997] and Maringe and Carter’s [2007] research suggests. The majority of them found the Fair very helpful as they could speak directly to the university representative and clarify certain issues they were unsure about. They said they were positive they would join the university community in the next academic year. The majority of the students, though, planned to get experience in the UK and return home. Only six students considered staying in the UK or moving somewhere else later on.

## CONCLUSIONS

For Polish students the opportunity to study in the UK is perceived as very attractive. In their opinion, British universities provide high quality education recognised the world over. The research results indicate that prospective students appreciate the university’s offer to do an internship while studying, as it would enable them to obtain the solid practical experience so required by the market today. This was an extra value they could not get from a Polish university. They also liked the idea of working part-time during their study period.

Recognition of their British qualifications worldwide together with the favourable light in which a British diploma is seen by prospective employers in Poland encouraged a lot of students to invest in their education in the UK. The overall knowledge of Polish people about the UK and its culture made it feel like almost a home country. The attractiveness of Manchester as perceived by the majority of the prospective students definitely made this location a first choice. A well-designed university website and positive word-of-mouth from family, friends and alumni, encouraged students to select this particular university.

The students saw the British education system as customer focused. In terms of improvements, they suggested considering more financial support for Polish students: scholarships and bursaries, and loans for postgraduate programmes. All Polish students leaving the Fair were convinced that studying in the UK would give them top-class qualifications and be a valuable investment for their future.

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**Summary.** The paper investigates what motivates Polish students to study in the UK. The research is based on Polish students who attended the University Global Fair in Warsaw, Poland in 2015, and were inclined to study at one British university in north-west England. The paper examines these students' motivation for their choice and investigates their decision-making process in this case. According to the literature, two main types of factors influence students' decision-making process: push and pull factors. Push factors are created by the students' country of origin, and are the ones that persuade them to move abroad. Pull factors, in turn, are those which operate within the host country and encourage students to consider it as their new residence. Though the UK is one of the main destinations to study for Polish students, little research has been done on this particular group. That gap created the opportunity for the present investigation, for which I interviewed a group of students. Their answers indicate that, contrary to what a number of other studies have suggested, pull factors could be more important in influencing Polish students to study at British universities.

**Key words:** Polish students, UK Higher Education, study motivation, push factors, pull factors

**JEL:** M30, M31, D1, D81, Y10

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