

Why Study in Ireland? The Experiences of Third-Level International Students

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Abstract

With the rapid growth of international students in Ireland from 2008 to 2020 observed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the departure of Britain from the EU following the Brexit referendum in 2016, it is important to understand how international students make decisions regarding third-level education. This study, the first to focus on Ireland as a destination country in the international education market, examines the factors that influenced the foreign-study decisions of 24 international students attending University College Cork in 2015/2016. Using convenience sampling to recruit participants, the interview data were analysed in terms of a range of “push” and “pull” factors, not always mutually exclusive, identified in the literature on decisions relating to overseas study. The main pull factors that influenced the study participants to pursue third-level education abroad and in Ireland are: opportunities to experience a foreign culture, the natural environment of the destination country, financial considerations (the cost of living and studying abroad and scholarship availability), the quality and reputation of a university, the qualifications offered and the duration of courses. The main push factors that had encouraged the students to leave their home countries are the non-availability of preferred third-level courses and the shorter duration of comparable preferred courses in destination countries. The study findings have implications, discussed in the conclusions, for destination countries and third-level providers focussed on continuing to attract overseas students to consider in the context of a competitive international education market.

Keywords: Third-Level Education, Push and Pull Factors, International Students, Qualitative Analysis

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Between 1998 and 2018, the annual average growth rate of the number of internationally mobile students in the tertiary education sector reached 4.8% according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020). In 2015, 3.3 million international students enrolled in third-level education in OECD countries (OECD, 2017). The numbers of international students choosing Ireland as their destination country have been growing substantially over several years. Based on a report issued in 2016 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016), between 2010 and 2014, non-EU student numbers increased by 85% while the numbers of EU students increased by 25 percent. In the two-year period from 2014/2015 to 2016/2017, the numbers of international students in Ireland increased from 19,679 to 23,127 (HEA, 2017) but surged immediately after the Brexit referendum. For example, in the year following the referendum, non-EU student numbers rose by 40% in University College Cork (UCC) and by 25% in University College Dublin (UCD) (O'Brien, 2017).

In the United Kingdom (UK), growth in the number of international students from the EU dropped from 6% in 2016 to 0.8% in 2019 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). However, the rate of growth in the non-EU student population still climbed during the same period (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). These opposing trends suggest that the decline in the number of EU students may be due to Brexit and related issues, including the withdrawal of the UK from the Erasmus+ Programme (European Commission, 2021) and the introduction of additional procedures for visa/EU Settlement Scheme applications (Department for Education, 2020). Such changes may have resulted in EU students diverting their intentions to study abroad from the UK towards Ireland, another English-speaking country in the EU and a member state committed to the Erasmus+ programme. Moreover, a change in the fee status for EU students (from September 2021) may further reduce the number of EU students enrolled in UK third-level colleges as this change will put extra weight on the financial cost of studying in the UK (British Council, 2022).

Notable changes were seen during 2020/2021 in third-level enrolment figures in Ireland, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In UCC, for example, annual growth rates increased from 6% to 16% between the academic years 2008/2009 and 2018/2019, but slowed to 2% in 2019/2020 and decreased by 23% in the following year (HEA, 2021). The slowdown is reflected in a significant decrease in the enrolment of non-EU students whose numbers dropped from 2,492 in 2018/2019 to 1,815 in 2020/2021, while the numbers of EU students and of UK students increased.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a huge challenge to the international education market. The students who participated in the research described in this paper had made their foreign-study decisions prior to COVID-19. It is, however, worth considering that Ireland also will not be immune to the impact of the pandemic on the decisions of the next cohorts of international students. The pandemic has not only influenced the delivery format of programmes, but has also had a bearing on students' opinions

of the value of qualifications and on the destination countries' actions during the pandemic (OECD, 2020). The impact of the pandemic could result in severe challenges to international education in the coming years (OECD, 2020). In a post-pandemic and post-Brexit world, it has become more important to understand how international students make their foreign-study decisions and prepare for future challenges.

Existing literature has focused mainly on popular international education destination countries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2006). There is a paucity of research on Ireland, however, notwithstanding its rapid growth in the international education market. Addressing this lack of research, the study described in this paper explores influencing factors for international students who chose Ireland as their destination country, using qualitative data to shed a light on their motivations and experiences. In addition, it examines the experiences of students from across continents to provide a broader understanding of overseas-study decisions and to inform policy and provision within Irish higher education institutions. This is in contrast to previous research that has focused on international students from a single home country or from a single continent (Bodycott, 2009; Kusumawati, 2013; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; O'Brien et al., 2007; Pimpa, 2003; Zeeshan et al., 2013).

Push Factors of International Education Choice

Why students choose a particular destination country over another is not always clear. One common theory is that the decision-making process may be explained in terms of push and pull factors. Push factors are those influences emanating from students' home countries that encourage students to study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Wilkins et al., 2012; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). Some commonly identified ones include the low quality of programmes in a student's home country, difficulty enrolling in programmes due to lack of capacity and choices on courses/subjects, and long-term migration or emigration plans (Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001; Wilkins et al., 2012). Wilkins and Huisman (2011) also mentioned lack of recognition of qualifications by employers and scarcity of employment opportunities for students who complete their study in their home country.

Pull Factors of International Education Choice

A pull factor is one that can attract students to destination countries (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003). Such factors may include an abundance of diverse courses available to attract students, opportunities to improve foreign-language fluency and/or learn about foreign cultures, the experience of living in a foreign country and the possibility of getting a qualification that is highly regarded by employers in destination countries and in home countries (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

Other notable pull factors are the reputation of overseas education agencies, the ranking of higher-level education institutions and familiarity with the culture (Wilkins et al., 2012). According to the published literature (Wilkins et al., 2012), high rankings of education institutions are often seen as a pull factor not only influencing decisions to study abroad but also the choice of education institution. Moreover, students may be attracted to studying abroad by opportunities to learn foreign languages and gain experience of foreign cultures. The extent to which foreign qualifications are recognised in their home country and worldwide may also be a consideration (Davey, 2005).

Method

International students attending UCC provided the sample population for the research reported in this paper. The percentage of international students in full-time study in UCC is broadly representative of the percentage in Ireland as a whole. In Ireland, 16% of full-time students in 2015/2016 were international students. EU students comprised 4% while 12% were non-EU students. In UCC, in the same year, 14% of full-time students were international students, 2% were from the EU and 12% were non-EU students (HEA, 2018).

As the target population was all international students studying in UCC in 2015/2016, and access to the student register was not possible, a convenience sampling method was used to select participants. Interview recruitment was conducted throughout the UCC campus during August and September 2015 to access a diverse range of students. All the interviews took place in a private area within the UCC campus and were completed in approximately 30 minutes. Before being interviewed, a signed information sheet and a consent form were returned by each participant. Virtual interviews were facilitated on request.

In the interviews, which were conducted with the aid of a topic guide, participants gave details of their age, gender and nationality, the area of study they had chosen and the qualifications they were pursuing. The participants were also asked about their prior expectations of their destination country, how and why they had chosen to study in Ireland, and their parents' attitude to foreign study. Finally, they were invited to reflect on their current experiences and any additional issues relating to their decision to study abroad they wished to share.

All interviews were transcribed within 48 hours of being conducted to allow for iterative adjustment of the topic guide so that new ideas or information emerging from the interviews could be included in subsequent interviews. The interview recruitment process was concluded when no further new ideas or information were forthcoming (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Previous experience of this research method indicates that the

typical number of interviews required ranges from 10 to 30 (Li & Bray, 2007; Townsend & Jun Poh, 2008). All interview transcripts were analysed using NVIVO® (version 11) and archived on completion of data analysis.

Participants

A total of 45 international students attending UCC in 2015/2016, from a pool of 2,290 international students in UCC that year according to figures from the HEA (2018), were approached with an invitation to take part in the study. Of these, 26 agreed to be interviewed. International students from further afield tend to arrive on campus earlier than domestic students or those from neighbouring European countries (to arrange accommodation and to deal with visa and academic registration requirements) and so were relatively easy to identify in August and September when the interviews were conducted. Identification was also facilitated by a presentation hosted by UCC specifically for international students. Students from Ireland were excluded from participation.

Data from 24 interviews were available for analysis. One participant withdrew their information and another was considered not eligible to be included in the study as their involvement in UCC was limited to a summer camp. Twice as many females (16) as males (eight) took part in the study. Two thirds of the respondents (16) were from Asia with most of the rest coming from Africa (four) and the Americas (three) as shown in Figure 1. The respondents were enrolled in four different colleges at UCC (Figure 2): the College of Medicine and Health (nine); the College of Business and Law (six); the College of Science, Engineering and Food Science (five); and the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences (four). Nearly half (11) of those interviewed were undergraduates, more than one third (nine) were students pursuing a master's degree and the remainder were PhD students (four), as shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 1

Geographical Distribution of Respondents

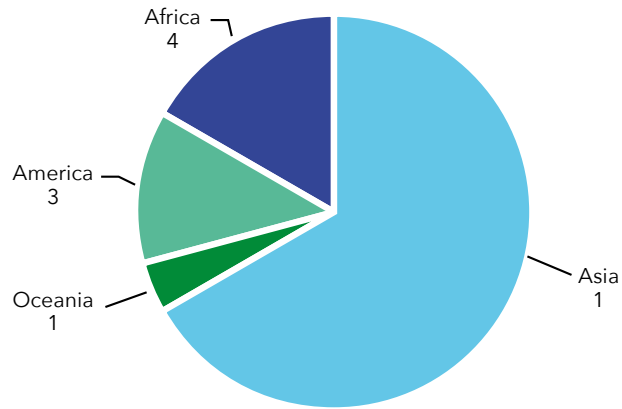


FIGURE 2

College Distribution of Respondents

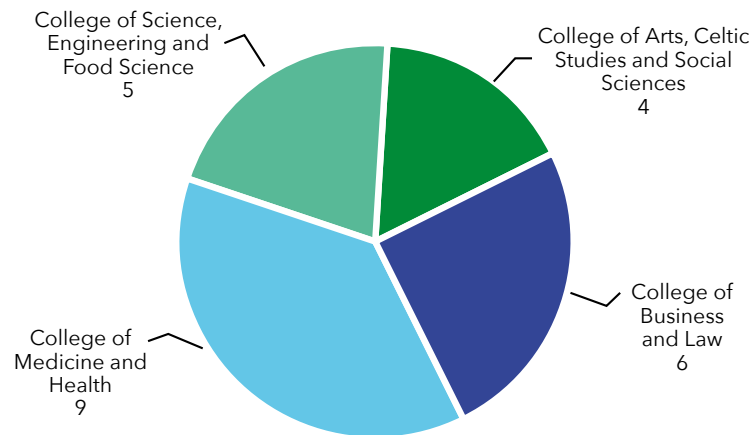
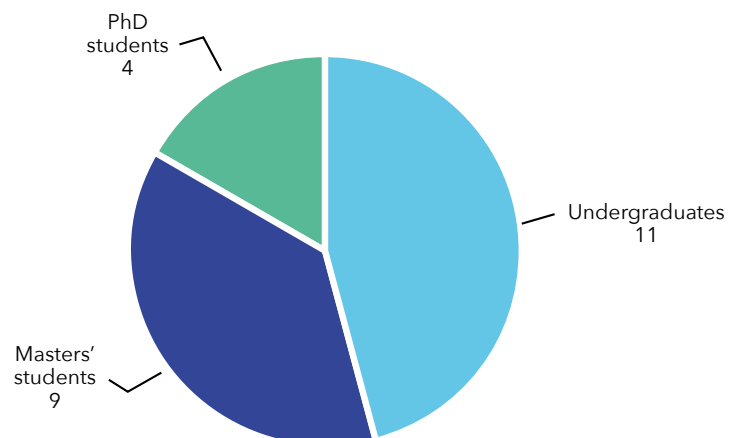


FIGURE 3

Qualification Level Distribution of Respondents



Results

Push Factors

The lack of a specific course/subject/programme in the home country was the most frequently mentioned push factor in the interviews. Six respondents from different nationalities and continents explained that the module or topic they wanted to study was not available in their home countries' education institutions (Table 1). This finding suggests that lack of course availability is a push factor experienced by students regardless of country of origin. The availability factor also explains the choice of some tertiary education institutions over others, as respondents confirmed it is the reason they did not select particular universities in other destination countries.

The length of time to complete programmes emerged as a push factor for four of the respondents. Courses or programmes in a home country or university or in other destination country/university were of longer duration than in the destination countries/universities chosen by the respondents. Additionally, for some programmes, there was a requirement to take an extra module even when students had previously covered the coursework. The students who were interviewed in this study preferred courses of shorter duration or without additional requirements, a preference that was expressed by most of the Asian respondents. Completion of a master's degree or PhD, in particular, would have taken longer in home countries than in Ireland.

TABLE 1*Push Factors Associated With Foreign-Study Decisions*

Respondent	Continent	Non-availability of course/ programme	Programme duration	Extent of competition	Perception of home-country qualifications
101	Americas	✓			
102	Asia		✓		
103	Asia				
104	Asia	✓			
105	Asia				
107	Asia	✓		✓	
108	Africa				✓
109	Asia				
110	Oceania		✓	✓	
111	Asia				✓
112	Africa				
113	Africa				
114	Asia	✓			
115	Asia				
116	Americas	✓			
117	Americas	✓			
118	Asia				
119	Asia		✓		
121	Asia				
122	Asia		✓		
123	Asia				
124	Asia				
125	Africa				
126	Asia			✓	
Total		6	4	3	2

An influence on foreign-study decisions, mentioned by three respondents, that may be identified as both a push and a pull factor, is the extent of competition for places at home universities and other potential destinations. Competition for access to certain courses in home countries can be a motivation to study abroad and it was clear that students thought strategically to maximise their opportunities. One respondent who was studying Medicine explained that their home country had only one undergraduate Medicine course. Another, also studying Medicine, stated that 3,000 candidates competed for 150 places (an acceptance rate of only 5 percent). They described the competition as “very difficult”, and “very tough”. Avoiding competition may also be regarded as a pull factor (discussed further below) for international students when selecting destination education institutions.

The perception of qualifications from home countries as having a different value in domestic labour markets compared with international qualifications also emerged as a push factor identified by two respondents. According to one, a foreign qualification is considered preferable or advantageous in their home country's labour market; domestic qualifications are not considered to be as "genuine" as those obtained in other countries where courses were characterised as having "more exposure", technology was considered to be "more advanced" and assessment was described as "fair". The second respondent agreed that domestic and foreign qualifications are viewed differently in the domestic labour market, such that foreign qualifications are considered better than domestic ones because foreign universities tend to have better equipment to provide better training, ultimately leading to "producing better doctors". This aligns with Hedges et al.'s (2014) theory of extrinsic motivation: that students choose to study abroad because of an expectation of benefits for their employment prospects.

Destination University Pull Factors

An important pull factor that emerged from the interview data is the destination university's quality and reputation (Table 2). Eight respondents, across different continents, referenced this factor when explaining their decision to study abroad. The reputation and status of a university were considered very important. Respondents were keenly aware that, if the destination university was not well recognised, the value of both the years of study and the qualifications obtained could be negatively affected as well as their future education and career.

The status of a destination university's qualification is a related pull factor, mentioned by eight respondents from Asia, Africa and Oceania. If the value of a qualification from a destination university is considered high in academia and the international labour market, this perception/status may be transferred and accepted by the home country and ultimately attract, or "pull", students toward study abroad.

Another related pull factor that influenced respondents in this study is a destination university's ranking (overall or in a specific academic area). Five respondents indicated that they had checked university rankings before making their decision. However, not every international student preferred a very high ranking. As one respondent explained, the chances of being one of the top ten students (and gaining further subsequent advantage) might be better in a well-regarded university of slightly lower ranking than in a top-ranking university. Based on this account, avoiding intense competition was considered when choosing a destination education institution and can therefore be regarded as a pull factor.

In the existing literature, avoiding competition tends to be identified as a push factor (international students leave their home countries because of it) but has been overlooked as a pull factor (an explanation for why international students choose some institutions over others in their destination country). When considering their third-level options, it is clear that international students in this study made the decision to maximise their benefits by avoiding intense competition not only in their home country but also in their destination university.

TABLE 2

Destination University Pull Factors Associated With Foreign-Study Decisions

Respondent	Continent	Quality/ reputation	Qualification	Ranking	Competition avoidance by student	Course/ programme duration	Partnership agreement	Staff qualities	Academic/ language requirement
101	Americas	✓		✓					
102	Asia			✓		✓			
103	Asia		✓	✓			✓		✓
104	Asia	✓		✓		✓		✓	
105	Asia		✓			✓	✓		
107	Asia	✓			✓				✓
108	Africa	✓	✓						
109	Asia						✓	✓	✓
110	Oceania		✓			✓			
111	Asia		✓				✓		✓
112	Africa	✓				✓			
113	Africa		✓						
114	Asia	✓					✓		
115	Asia						✓		
116	Americas								
117	Americas								
118	Asia								
119	Asia		✓			✓			
121	Asia							✓	
122	Asia					✓			
123	Asia				✓				✓
124	Asia	✓	✓						
125	Africa	✓							✓
126	Asia			✓	✓			✓	
Total		8	8	5	3	7	6	4	6

Another pull factor, also identified as a push factor in the discussion above, is a destination university's comparative course/programme length. Seven respondents referred to choosing to study in Ireland because the programmes were of a shorter duration. In so doing, they wanted to avoid taking a course they had previously covered or which they considered to be "non-essential" and to reduce the time and financial costs of study. One respondent noted that, with a shorter-length master's degree programme, they could begin to work earlier.

Partnership agreements with established co-operation programmes between home universities and foreign universities were also a factor in the decision to study abroad and in choosing where to study. Some of the respondents could choose from a list of countries/universities provided by their home university. This pull factor was more important to Asian students, six of whom mentioned that their home university had a partnership arrangement with UCC.

Engagement with a co-operation programme in a home university has advantages for students. As respondents explained, it saves students time and effort on paperwork as the home university co-ordinates liaison with foreign institutions. There is also the possibility of a scholarship, set up by the home university, as part of the co-operation programme. Moreover, not all years of a third-level course may be available in a home university, which must then co-operate with a foreign university to provide a complete course in Medicine, for example. Once students apply for a place on such a course, they will have to study abroad to complete the course.

Additional important considerations for respondents when they were considering where to pursue their university education relate to the academic and language requirements of the destination university. Five of the six respondents who mentioned this factor were of Asian background. Most had learned English in their home countries, so when given the choice, they opted for study in an English-speaking country rather than having to "spend a long time to study" a new foreign language. Two respondents, one from Africa and one from Asia, mentioned that they had to meet the academic requirements for subjects/modules to be accepted. Examination requirements for entry to destination universities were also a consideration. One Asian respondent implied that his study choice was influenced by his dislike of Graduate Record Examinations (GREs) while another (also Asian) indicated his preference for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) that is used in Ireland as a language proficiency examination.

The reputation of university staff was mentioned by four respondents as an influence on their foreign-study decisions. Firstly, the importance of supervisors was recognised. It was felt that supervisors and students tend to work better together when they share similar research interests and/or academic backgrounds. This suggests intrinsic motivation on the part of some respondents who based their decisions, in part at

least, on their research interests and enthusiasm (Hedges et al., 2014). Secondly, respondents placed a high value on feedback from friends and/or family about a destination university's administration staff. These staff, it was said, can play a very important role in supporting international students as they try to adapt to their new environment and become familiar with a foreign country and university.

Finally, the influence of social media on third-level course applications was mentioned; one respondent confirmed that the destination university's advertisements on a social-media channel swayed her decision to apply for a place on a course in that university.

Destination Country Pull Factors

When students choose a foreign university, they are not only choosing a university but also a country in which to live for the duration of their studies. Several country pull factors were mentioned in the interviews, some of which apply to destination countries in general and others of which apply particularly to Ireland.

Considering the more general ones first, the country pull factor mentioned most frequently in interviews was the opportunity to experience a different culture among foreign students (Table 3). Thirteen of the 24 respondents across all continents confirmed this as one of the reasons that they studied abroad. The different culture of a destination country, along with the opportunity to travel and meet foreign students, motivated these respondents to study abroad. Experiencing foreign cultures and studying with foreign students were regarded not only as opportunities for enjoyment, but also as a means to better cooperate with foreigners and compete globally. In previous studies that have tracked students' decisions to study abroad (Davey, 2005; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011), foreign study was valued because of the different life experiences it offers. Studying abroad with foreign students to gain a competitive advantage does not feature in the existing literature on pull factors associated with overseas-study decisions.

The natural environment of a destination country or city was also a frequently mentioned pull factor. Respondents across all continents expressed appreciation for beautiful scenery, and quiet, calm places to live and study. Thirteen respondents mentioned this factor when asked about their choice of destination country or city. For others, however, it was a minor consideration.

TABLE 3*Destination Country Pull Factors Associated With Foreign-Study Decisions*

Respondent	Continent	Different culture experience	Different natural environment	Lower living/study costs	Student language competence	Perceived friendliness/safety/ social tolerance	Immigration policies	Family/peer recommendation
101	Americas	✓		✓	✓	✓		
102	Asia		✓					
103	Asia			✓				✓
104	Asia							
105	Asia	✓		✓	✓			✓
107	Asia		✓					
108	Africa			✓				✓
109	Asia	✓				✓		✓
110	Oceania		✓	✓		✓		
111	Asia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
112	Africa							✓
113	Africa							✓
114	Asia		✓	✓		✓		
115	Asia		✓	✓				✓
116	Americas	✓						✓
117	Americas	✓			✓	✓		
118	Asia	✓	✓					✓
119	Asia	✓			✓	✓		
121	Asia	✓	✓					✓
122	Asia	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
123	Asia		✓		✓			✓
124	Asia	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
125	Africa	✓	✓					
126	Asia	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Total		13	13	11	7	9	2	12

Cost considerations featured strongly in deciding where to study. Eleven respondents reported a relatively low cost of living and studying in Ireland compared to some other countries. The anticipated expenditure included tuition fees, living costs, and exchange rates between the currencies in a respondent's home country and in the destination country. According to one respondent, even though the UK provided "better" Medicine courses, the respondent selected Ireland because of a currency-related cost advantage.

Friendliness of the people and safety issues (including whether or not a country is perceived as “peaceful”) were cited as reasons for respondents’ choice of destination country in nine cases. A destination country/society that is regarded as friendly towards a student from a different country, culture and background, in the words of one respondent, helps to foster a “sense of belonging to this place”. Feelings associated with being made welcome were also important in convincing respondents to remain in a destination country to pursue further study. Based on this feedback, it would seem that endorsements and recommendations count when students weigh up the pros and cons of studying in particular countries:

“Because I have friends in... Ireland, and he said Ireland is a very peaceful country... you can enjoy the life” (Respondent 109).

“And then, well I suppose this country [Ireland] is just a peaceful country compared to the other countries which might have some problems, especially with me, you know, being Muslim... in this country... people accept you as who you are” (Respondent 111).

Proficiency in language also influenced respondents’ choice of location for foreign study. Seven respondents chose to study in Ireland because Ireland is an English-speaking country. There were two aspects to this decision. Firstly, respondents had already learned English in their home countries and therefore did not need to invest time and energy learning a new language. Secondly, by choosing Ireland, they were also choosing an opportunity to improve their English language skills.

Six respondents had consulted their family/peers or people they knew who had visited Ireland before deciding to study in Ireland (six others also got family recommendations that did not relate specifically to Ireland). The opinions of family and peers who share the same culture as the respondents and who know them personally mattered and were considered more trustworthy than information obtained in the media.

Immigration policy features in the literature on push and pull factors regarding immigration but not in the literature on foreign-study decisions. International students could be regarded as a special group of immigrants, their single motive for immigration being education accumulation (Dustmann & Glitz, 2011); however their final destination, which could be their home country, the current destination country, or another destination country, is unknown when they set out to study abroad (Mahroum, 2000). Two respondents in this study clearly identified immigration policy as an influence on their choice of location for foreign study. As students in Ireland, they could fund their study and living expenses with part-time work during term time and full-time work during college holiday periods (Citizens Information Board, 2021). Also, the visa policy in Ireland in 2015, unlike that of the UK, which had scrapped the post-study work visa in 2012 (Paudel, 2014), permitted international graduates to work

for two years after graduation. This allowed them to gain work experience and gave them competitive advantages in the labour market when they returned to their home countries or moved to other destination countries.

Other Pull Factors

Some of the influences on decisions to study abroad mentioned by respondents are not readily classified as country- or university-level pull factors. Such influences have to do with the role of private and public agencies in facilitating students who wish to study abroad, the awarding of scholarships, and sources of information regarding foreign-study options, all of which tend to involve some level of international co-operation.

Foreign-study agencies assist students with choosing study destinations and provide a bridge between students and destination universities. They offer advice on courses and/or countries which may be of interest or suitable for international students. They can also help with preparation for academic applications and for visa applications. Most of the foreign-study agencies operating in the home countries of the respondents were private, but some were government-sponsored. Only a few respondents mentioned the influence of foreign-study agencies on their decision to study abroad (Table 4). Two of these highlighted the role of the agencies they had liaised with in promoting Ireland as a destination country:

"We have [an] agency in Singapore which promotes Ireland"
(Respondent 107).

"To be honest, it wasn't my choice really, I had agents and they chose Ireland" (Respondent 125).

Scholarship or funding availability can determine whether or not a student can consider applying for a place in a foreign university. Eleven of the respondents in this study had received scholarships, funding or sponsorships that, either partly or fully, covered the cost of their study (Table 4). Of these, eight were from Asia, two were from Africa and one was from the Americas. The recipients were spread across undergraduate (four), master's degree (three) and PhD (four) programmes and the different colleges in UCC but were mostly enrolled in the College of Medicine and Health (four) and in the College of Science, Engineering and Food Science (four). Two were enrolled in the College of Business and Law while only one was enrolled in the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences. The scholarships had been awarded by universities, government departments, and Science Foundation Ireland. Five respondents confirmed that their scholarship was provided by Ireland or UCC, while a further five had scholarships from their home country/university. One respondent did not identify their scholarship source but emphasised that its availability was central to their decision to study in Ireland.

TABLE 4*Other Pull Factors Associated With Foreign-Study Decisions*

Respondent	Continent	Foreign-study agency	Scholarship/funding	Internet/social-media influence
101	Americas		✓	✓
102	Asia		✓	✓
103	Asia			
104	Asia		✓	✓
105	Asia			
107	Asia	✓		✓
108	Africa			✓
109	Asia			✓
110	Oceania		✓	✓
111	Asia	✓		✓
112	Africa		✓	✓
113	Africa		✓	✓
114	Asia			✓
115	Asia			✓
116	Americas			✓
117	Americas			✓
118	Asia		✓	
119	Asia		✓	
121	Asia		✓	✓
122	Asia			✓
123	Asia		✓	✓
124	Asia			
125	Africa	✓		
126	Asia		✓	✓
Total		3	11	18

Respondents consulted a variety of sources of information on destination universities/countries. However, three quarters of those interviewed, 18 in all, reported that they had searched for information via social-media channels, online clubs, and online message boards (Table 4). Respondents also learned about their destination university and destination country from family and peers, from the Irish embassy in their home country, and from presentations by the destination university's staff. A few respondents, who reported difficulty in fully understanding the presentations, availed of additional reading content in handouts and brochures to inform themselves and to share with their parents.

Conclusions and Implications for Third-Level Providers

The research described in this paper explored the reasons international students chose to study in Ireland and the factors that influenced their decisions. This is the first study to focus on Ireland as a destination country. Using convenience sampling to recruit participants, 24 interviews were conducted with international students attending UCC in 2015/2016. The research drew on existing literature on push and pull factors to conceptualise the reasons for foreign-study decisions.

The two most frequently mentioned push factors that influenced respondents' decisions to study abroad are the non-availability of preferred third-level courses in their home countries and the shorter duration of comparable preferred courses in destination countries. Though important to the respondents concerned, avoiding competition for places in home universities was less frequently mentioned, as were concerns about the (lower) status of home university qualifications. All of the push factors identified in this study have featured in the existing literature on this topic (Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001). Two additional push factors in the literature that did not feature in this study relate to the scarcity of employment opportunities for students who complete their study in their home country (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011) and to perceptions of low-quality third-level education in students' home countries (Wilkins et al., 2012).

Several destination university pull factors were identified: the quality and reputation of a university, the qualifications offered and the duration of courses. The existence of partnership agreements to support students in their transition to a foreign university, university rankings and the academic and language requirements of a university were also mentioned but to a lesser extent. Very few respondents mentioned selecting a university because of good reports about its staff or because of a strategic approach they had used to avoid competition in their home country or in their destination country.

The opportunity to experience another culture and to enjoy a different natural environment, along with considerations relating to the cost of living and studying, were the most popular destination country pull factors. Immigration policy, though mentioned, was not widely discussed.

Two factors, competition for third-level places and the desire to experience another culture, suggest new angles for analysing international students' foreign-study decisions. First, whereas competition is identified only as a push factor in the existing literature, in this study it emerged as both a push and a pull factor, albeit rarely mentioned. In two cases, the respondents moved to their destination country to avoid the intensity of competition in their home country (push factor); in another, the respondent's wish to avoid intense competition was reflected in their choice of a lower-

ranking university within their destination country (pull factor). All three cases illustrate strategic thinking on the part of the students involved. The second factor, the desire to experience a foreign culture, tends to be associated with personal development gains (Davey, 2005; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins et al., 2012). In this study, however, respondents also recognised foreign culture experience as a competitive advantage that might enhance their future career prospects.

Considering the results of the study from the perspective of the destination country/universities, it is possible to identify a number of strategies to encourage and facilitate the foreign-study choices of international students. First, a visa policy that is friendly to students and graduates should be retained, and enhanced if possible, taking into account the visa requirements and restrictions in “rival” destination countries. Ideally, this policy would allow international students to work and contribute to the cost of their education in the destination country. It would also help them to access valuable work experience to support their entry to further study and/or to the labour markets both in their home countries and abroad.

Second, more partnership agreements/co-operation programmes at country and university level could be encouraged with the aim of promoting foreign-study options to students and increasing inter-university co-operation across academic disciplines. There also needs to be greater recognition of the potentially important role both private and government-sponsored agencies, involved in bi-lateral third-level education arrangements, can have in promoting a particular destination country, such as Ireland, to international students.

Third, the results of this study underline the important contribution of scholarships to enabling students to consider and take up third-level education opportunities in other countries. Increasing the availability of scholarships for international students will attract greater numbers of exceptional students, promote inter-country co-operation, and yield long-term benefits for destination and home countries. Destination universities have an important role to play in looking at ways of increasing funding for scholarships and promoting greater awareness of financial support.

Fourth, the respondents who participated in this study highlighted the potential influence of social-media channels and forum websites on foreign-study choices. Social media were identified as an effective means of promoting destination universities, the use of which could be strengthened in future promotions to prospective students by recommendations from alumni from different continents/countries. Destination education institutions could also choose to upload videos online, introducing, for example, a university, its departments, and perhaps some of the coursework for selected modules. Compared to traditional brochures and booklets, videos might be more realistic and interesting for today’s screen-savvy students and their parents. A comments feature in the video could be a useful platform for interaction between students and a destination university’s staff.

More generally, it may be noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual meetings became much more common across all types of learning, work and business environments. This development could serve as a catalyst for Irish education institutions to reconsider ways of communicating with prospective international students that are convenient for all concerned: students, academics and administration staff.

Fifth, greater use could be made of targeted advertising by destination universities working with home universities to attract students who have plans to study abroad but have not yet made a final decision about their destination country or university. According to respondents in this study, students interested in studying abroad may be invited to presentations hosted by their home universities, given by staff of destination universities. There is considerable scope, however, to tailor the content of such presentations more to the needs of students in this situation, for example, by including a question and answer session so that presenters and students might get to know each other's interests and concerns. Essential information about the application process and the academic and language requirements of a particular institution should also be provided in these presentations as well as a brief description of courses offered in the main disciplines of interest.

Sixth, where brochures are distributed at presentations, consideration should be given to providing versions in English and the local language with illustrations or infographics if possible. The sharing of such information with parents is not uncommon, as suggested from the feedback obtained in this study, and while they may not attend university presentations, parents are often directly involved in their children's foreign-study decisions, and equally stand to gain from user-friendly documentation to guide and support those decisions.

In conclusion, nearly all of the factors associated with foreign-study decisions in the literature on the motivations of international students also featured in the findings of the present study, which are based on the responses of a small number of international students who attended one university in Ireland. Despite the sample limitations, the findings point to a range of strategies that destination countries and universities could adopt in the interests of attracting greater numbers of international students and facilitating their transition. Further on-going research is required to explore the perspectives and study choices of international students over time and across continents, countries, educational institutions and fields of study.

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