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Harvard Referencing shall apply.

How Can Small Third-Level Education Colleges Better Serve International Students

Compiled by:
Idania Moreno 51737957

This project is submitted in part fulfilment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Marketing

Independent College Dublin

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To my friends and family for their love and support through these three years in college.

Abstract

This research study navigates motivation, expectations, and overall international student experience enrolled at a small third-level education colleges in Ireland. A clear definition of what defines a small college is outlined. The research involved implementing a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data collection and qualitative in-depth interview. This research project highlights key drivers influencing students desired to move to Ireland to study higher education, factors such as career aspirations, improved quality of life, and the opportunity to gain international recognized qualifications.

The findings in this dissertation reveal a very significant gap between students' expectations and the reality of what they experience. It is particularly pertinent concerning institutional responsiveness, administrative staff and post-graduate career pathways.

This study offers relevant recommendations based on the primary research response across the five themes to better align and triangulate the institutional strategies based on the international students' needs and calls for transparency, student-centered support and curriculum-industry market alignment. This research contributes to the growing success of small third-level education colleges while providing better quality of service to international students according to their needs.

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Chapter I- Background of the Study

1. Introduction

This research explores how small third level education institutions in Dublin can better understand the international student population to improve and provide a better service.

Dublin's academic reputation has made it a popular destination for students from all over the world and smaller third level education colleges play a significant role by hosting and supporting international students. (Irish Independent, 2023)

The aim of this research is to bridge the gap between the international students' needs and the individual institution's capabilities. Primary mixed research has been implemented to gather in-depth insights into the current educational situation and to provide accurate recommendations for improvement to better serve international students.

1.1. Definition of Small Private College in Dublin

A small private college is an integrated and distinct part of Irelands third-level education system, and example of these are institutions such as IBAT College Dublin, Dublin Business School (DBS), Independent College, Dorset College, among others. These colleges are privately owned, operate independently from the public state-funded university system in Ireland. (Irish Independent, 2023)

These private colleges service offering are professionally oriented programs in fields like business, law, computing and are accredited by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and follow the organization standards, ensuring some certain level of regulations. (Quality and Qualifications Ireland [QQI], 2022); (Higher Education Authority [HEA],2020).

Another Characteristic of these institutions is their small class size, compared to large universities. Small colleges generally offer a more intimate learning environment; class size range from 15-30 or more students. The small size of the classes allows lecturers to have a closer relationship with the students as well as enabling them to foster deeper academic engagement and to provide personalized support (Borodina and Adrián Estrela Pereira, 2023). Which can be a very attractive feature for international students specifically when adapting to studying in a foreign country.

Additionally small private higher education colleges often offer flexible timetables to allow students to work part time, which makes them more appealing to international students by providing convenience and flexibility. (Soutar & Tuner, 20020.

1.2. Rationale for Study

This research was driven by professional and personal motivation, as an international student of third-level education in Ireland with a long-term goal of becoming a professor. The research has first handed experience of the gaps and challenges in the service quality provided by small private third-level education colleges. (Higher Education Authority [HEA],2020).

The noticeable increase of international students entering Ireland makes it important to assess how well these institutions are addressing the needs of their customers/students. (Irish Independent, 2023).

This research provides insights into students' current levels of satisfaction, institutions' reputation and service-oriented education delivery in the competitive international market. To upscale the quality of service in this niche will benefit both students' success and institutional growth.

1.3. Statement of Research Objectives

This research aims to achieve the following key objectives:

1. To understand what factors, motivate international students to choose Ireland and specifically to understand the motivation of enrolling to study higher education.
2. To explore the students' expectations regarding the quality of education, support services and in campus experience.
3. To assess the current levels of satisfaction of international students and highlight key factors influencing their perceptions.
4. To understand how these colleges address international students' needs from an administrative, quality of teaching and marketing perspectives.
5. To identify the current challenges faced by these colleges and provide recommendations and innovative strategies for the colleges to improve their service offering, differentiated from competitors and brand themselves.

1.4. Information Gathering and Data Collection

The use of mixed-methods approach was used to answer the research questions, combining quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structure interviews. The interview provided in-depth understanding and personal perspectives from lecturers, students and college staff while the survey was designed to gather broader insights from international students to understand motivation, expectations, and current levels of satisfaction. The survey was distributed online, and participants were selected through convenience sampling. The interviews were conducted with judgmental sampling to ensure relevance and amplitude data. Manual thematic coding approach was employed to analyze qualitative answers.

1.5. Expected Outcomes of the Study

The expected outcome of the study was to develop best framework practice that would benefit both international students and small third level education colleges in Ireland, by improving their international students service based on the students needs, motivation, expectation and therefore increase positively the levels of satisfaction of international students.

Chapter II- Literature Review

2. Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant existing literature to international higher education, international students' motivation, service expectation, and institutional challenges. The following chapter contains key themes such as push-pull factors influencing international students' decisions, the students' expectations versus the reality, as well as how important the role of the academic staff and communication is. By unifying current knowledge and primary research, this chapter put in place a conceptual framework and points out gaps that the current research study aims to address.

2.1. Theme 1- Students' Motivation

With the increase of international students entering Ireland to enroll in higher education courses, many questions are raised about what motivates students to move to a foreign country and enroll to small private colleges.

According to (Mazzarol & Soutar. 2002) there are various factors influencing international students' motivation to seek overseas education. They highlight that factors such as economic and social issues affecting their home countries push the students to choose a more developed country that offers them a better quality of life is the first motivation and then the students choose the institution where they want to study. (Wilkins & Huisman 2011) says that the low quality of programs in their home countries is another reason why international students are pushed to move to a host country and study abroad later. (Wilkins, S., Balakrishnan, M. S., & Huisman, J. 2012) points out that the lack of recognition of the students' qualifications and the lack of employment opportunities in their home countries after they have culminated in their courses is a big reason why the students move abroad and start over in a country that offers them more opportunities and a better quality of life.

(Xion Wen. 2022) makes an observation and points out that the main factor influencing students to pursue a third level education abroad and in Ireland is that the international students want to experience new culture, a more natural environment and again financial factors such as the cost of living of the host country, also the quality of the service offering by the colleges and their reputation and qualification that the country and the college can offer to them. (Davey. 2005) debates the pull factors for international students to move abroad because they are motivated to learn a foreign language and gain experience. He also says that by holding a foreign qualification they are highly likely to be more recognized in their home countries, and this will help them to open doors worldwide.

2.2. Theme 2- Students' Expectations

(The University of Salford Manchester, 2022) has recently examined how expectations impact the education experience of international students in "Expectations vs Reality" they highlight factors including "Living on Campus, making friends, Language barriers, Academic challenges, feeling home sick, and getting around the city as having a significant impact on students' expectation."

Further criteria were identified by (Fara Azmat. 2016) in the article understanding the aspirations and expectations of international students highlighting push and pull factors that impact

students' expectations. Push factor included the perception that a "foreign degree" will be "better than a local one" and allow students to gain a "better understanding of western culture". Pull factors center around the country of destination "Reputation, geographical proximity and the cost of higher education". Push and pull expectations factors were also identified by (Xiong W.2022) qualitative analysis of "the experiences of "the experiences of third level international students". Xiong noted that "when students choose a foreign university, they are not only choosing a university but also a country in which to live". This highlights the importance and reputation of the Irish cultural and academic context informing international students' expectations. (Tomlinson, et al,2023) points out that "student expectations are complex constructs that can influence adaptability, engagement, achievement satisfaction and retention".

This issue will be investigated later as part of this dissertation's audience research project.

Irelands positive international reputation as a friendly open safe country to international students has a direct impact on their expectations for a positive educational experience. For example, Ireland's academic and literary reputation is globally recognized from novel prize-winning writers' poets and playwrights including George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett and WB Yeats and James Joyce.

2.3. Theme 3- Students' Satisfaction

Students' satisfaction is impacted by multiple variables alongside the core education, service, and curriculum. Students' satisfaction will be influenced by social relationships, extracurricular engagements in the college experience. Writing in the journal of further education (Appleton-Knapp, S. L., & Krentler, K. A.2006) have suggested using a "Expectancy Disconfirmation Model" to examine the relationship between "students' expectations, performance (reality) and satisfaction". "The model suggests that dissatisfaction will occur when there are discrepancies between expectations and reality which negatively impact student engagement, achievement, and retention. (Byrne, et al, 2012). and (Lowe, H., & Cook, A. 2003).

Writing for the Irish Journal of Academic Practice Lorraine Sweeney (Sweeney, 2016) outlines a Predictive Model of Students Satisfaction highlighting the critical impacts of satisfaction on retention and performance. Her literature review points out "satisfaction with the students'

college, teaching quality, teaching staff, facilities, finances, accommodation and friends, feeling interested, calm and in good spirits and the extent to which students exercise physically" were found to be the most significant predictors of student's satisfaction. An interesting finding also emerged which contrasted with previous literature reviews was the result that "social status and income" were not "represented predictors of students satisfaction".

(Thomson and Prieto 2013) have further highlighted "factors external to the institution such as serious illness, financial problems, or family issues" as other causes of student's dissatisfaction".

The factors highlighted in this literature review provide an instructive avenue of enquiry for the audience research project of this dissertation in terms of students' satisfaction, specifically in terms of the sample colleges selected.

Given that the students in these colleges are international and have to juggle working with college commitments, financial anxiety and the high cost of living in Dublin, these external factors need to be investigated in terms of their impacts on students' satisfaction and while it may be instructive to examine the educational service being provided to students from a business perspective it must always be taken into account that the satisfaction impact of the education experience for students cannot be measured with crude quantitative research and requires a far more rigorous research methodology. (David Morley 1992 explains that "to understand the potential meanings of a given message, we need a cultural map of the audience to whom the message is addressed-A map showing the various cultural repertoires and symbolic resources available to differently placed sub-groups within that audience. The meaning of a text or message must be understood as being produced through the interaction of the codes embedded in the text with the codes inhabited by the different sections of the audience. This will be especially significant given that most of the students attending to private small colleges are coming from different countries like Brazil, China and Central America.

The audience research project for this dissertation will focus on these complex ethnographic and sociological considerations in maxi fold detail.

2.4. Theme 4- The Role of Academic Staff and Quality of Service

According to Sweeney (2016) there are several factors within the control of the academic institution that can impact satisfaction. “According to Alzmal this includes quality of education, facilities and staff, design, assessment and delivery of service, cost of education, nature of learning environment, reputation and recognition of their programs”. Furthermore (Kuh, et al, 2005). have highlighted that “the relationship between students and the academic staff is vital to students’ success” This core reciprocal relationship plays a central part in the research hypothesis of this dissertation and understanding of the pivotal role of the lecturer as the educational service provider is a crucial element to the quality of the student’s experience.

Almost everyone will remember a teacher who impacted their learning from kinder garden through to college. Therefore, the recruitment of top-quality lecturing staff by independent colleges is a critical success factor.

It is highly instructive to consider the communication of education from the lecturer to the student from the perspective of communication theory and semiotics. As CS Peirce states “We think only in signs”. Umberto Eco Professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna states “The communication chain assumes a Source that, through a Transmitter, emits a Signal via a Channel. At the end of the channel the Signal, through a Receiver, is transformed into a message for the Addressee. It seems to me very important to bear in mind the various links in this chain, because when they are overlooked, there are misunderstandings.” This semiotic standpoint has profound implications in terms of how the education service is being communicated to students and their understanding of that education. Clearly the lecturer’s role is critical in the process of education and must be correlative.

Furthermore, the colleges lecturers set the tone for the students’ experience and so have a massive potential impact on their levels of satisfaction with their courses. This in turn has knock on effects in terms of word-of-mouth recommendations about the college amongst other students. This further leads to considering how best the colleges can better market their courses to meet the needs of potential students.

2.5. Theme 5- Challenges and Opportunities for Colleges Service

As Stukalina, 2014, notes “an understanding of the factors behind students’ satisfaction may provide colleges with the tools needed to improve the quality of their service and could give a college a competitive advantage”.

Mazzarol,1998, has also highlighted the nature of education as a marketable service. Mazzarol has identified critical successes strategies for marketing international education based on 1) Quality and Reputation; 2) Possession of International Strategic Alliances; 3) Quality and Expertise of Staff; 4) Organizational Culture; 5) Innovation. These factors confirm the general hypothesis for this thesis. Essentially that the more the college focuses on students’ motivation, needs and expectations and creates students’ satisfaction the greater the mutual benefits that accrue through retention, reputation enhancement and word of mouth recommendation. Therefore, we are investigating a particular niche in the Irish context.

Key marketing challenges also relate to how the institutions can reposition themselves and gain competitive advantages. (Ortiz Granero, 2020). (Courtois, 2017).

The goal of the audience qualitative research project in this thesis is to identify how colleges can find new better ways to attract international students and satisfy their expectations based on the findings of this project. By better understanding and communication with students we anticipate a win-win scenario for both sides of the educational service triangle.

From the marketing perspective this thesis will recontextualize the Shannon and Weaver (Sender-Message-Receiver) Communication Model to a (Lecturer-Education-Student) communication perspective.

By expanding into a marketing communication theory model context will illuminate new potential areas for colleges to better understand how to engage students and understand their needs.

This will also offer new feedback mechanism channels, marketing opportunities and overall better interactions.

Chapter III- Methodology

3. Introduction

This chapter describes the research design and methodological approach utilized in this dissertation. A mixed-methods strategy was used for this research, combining quantitative survey data and qualitative in-depth interviews. This chapter outlines the rationale behind the methods employed, and describes sampling strategies, ethical considerations and details of the data collection procedure.

3.1. Philosophy Employed

Given the complex requirements of the research objective in this dissertation, the appropriate methodology will require multiple advanced levels of research to understand students' motivations, expectations, and satisfactions as well as the college's perspectives of service provision. The most appropriate methodology to address these complex questions is qualitative In-Depth Interviews as it is abundantly clear that quantitative methods like a simplex questionnaire would be completely inappropriate to address the complexity of this dissertation's objectives and goals.

Methodology:

The research project objectives already outlined in section 2 of this dissertation require an empirical investigation of both student and college elements in the educational process to address the various pertinent themes we have already outlined above.

A conspectus of audience research methods has pointed out that the most appropriate methodology for this project will be based on ethnographic and sociological frameworks previously proposed by Parkin 1971, Eco 1972, and Morely 1992 . These pioneering theoretical frameworks are the key academic methodological frameworks in the research context relevant to this dissertation. (It must be noted that these frameworks are highly theoretical and view the audience research project from a postmodern post-modernized/post-structural context dealing with complex themes of interpretation and semiotics.

3.2. Method

This dissertation's methodology will simplify complex issues to a formulation designed to best address the research objectives this will involve:

1. Theoretical clarification and definition of concept and research methods based on previous models evolved from the original communication model of Shannon and Weaver 1948 to more recent models by Morley 1992.

2. Field research by way of In-Depth Interviews with sample students of third level education.

3. Interviews with the college/ lecturer sample.

4. Design and comparison Analysis framework to interpret the results.

5. Construct a research procedure framework.

3.3. Sample

The target audience will consist of two groups:

1. The quantitative sample population will include 46 international students enrolled at third level education colleges including colleges like Independent College (IC), IBAT, Dublin Business School (DBS), The students will provide key critical information related to their experience and will help us analyze their current levels of satisfaction and expectations.
2. Qualitative interview instruments will include relevant administration staff and lecturers. This target audience will provide the key insight required for the research project for this dissertation by providing perspective on the educational/business model they are currently implementing to meet the students' needs.

The purpose of targeting/interviewing both sides of the educational service model (college/students in a business/customer model) will be used to examine where the service is failing and to identify opportunities to improve the quality of the student's educational experience and the quality of the service being provided.

Stakeholder table

Code	Position	Setting	Experience	Interview format
INT1	Senior Lecture in IBAT College	Currently working at Trinity College and lecturer of master programs at IBAT	16 years + of teaching experience	Contacted via Zoom- duration 25 min
INT2	Program Leader	Working as Program Leader at IBAT, at time and used to work for Independent College as a Program Leader as well.	8 years working in the third-level education sector for international students.	Contacted in person- duration 20 min
INT3	Class Rep and International Student	Independent College	3 years as class representative and final year student currently enrolled to third level education.	Contacted in person and via email- interview duration 20min.

3.4. Thematic Coding

The thematic analysis carried out on the qualitative collected data through in-depth interviews follow the process highlighted by Braun and Clark's (2006) with the six-phase model, 1) "familiarization with data"; 2) "generating initial codes"; 3) "research for themes"; 4) "reviewing themes"; 5) "defining and naming themes"; 6) "producing the report".

NVIVO software was not used for this dissertation, this transcript was manually coded. The codes were collected into groups under key themes such as Students Motivation and Push-Pull Factors, Expectation vs. Reality, Student satisfaction, and Lecturer Impact.

Example of Thematic Coding Table

Participant	Quote	Code	Theme
INT1	"A Lecturer can excite the student's imagination or bored them to death"	Engagement	The Role of Academic Staff and Quality of Service. New theme "The Role of the Lecturer"
INT2	"Visa tourists" "99% of students on level 9 are there for the right reasons to genuinely progress in a career in areas like business management, marketing and accounting".	Visas implication	Students' Motivation New Them- Career Pathways vs. Visa Tourist
INT3	"Even if we don't stay in Ireland, we can certainly have more opportunity and recognition in our home countries with a foreigner degree".	Recognition of Degree Push Factors	Student Motivation

3.5. Ethical Section

Ethical approval was given prior data collection by Independent College and all procedures employed for this research followed ethical guidelines.

Participants were provided with informed consent forms, outlining the purpose of the study and how the data would be used only for academic purposes and would be kept secure. All data was anonymized and stored securely to protect participants' identity.

Interviewees and survey participants were informed they could withdraw at any stage without any consequences. All participants were treated with confidentiality.

CHAPTER IV- Findings and Discussion

4. Introduction

This chapter presents a conspectus of the audience sample research project for this dissertation. It discusses the themes that emerged through triangulation, comparing primary research results with existing literature, and identifying new insights.

4.1 Theme 1 Students Motivation

Pull and Push Factors Influencing Students Motivation to Study Abroad

- **Secondary research**

Pull factors that influence students' motivation to study abroad; Cultural, learning a new language, experiencing a new culture, and experience recognition. The authors say that these are some of the pull factors that influence students' motivation. (Davey, G. (2005).

Push factors influencing students' motivation Economic problems in their home countries, and social factors influence international students' motivation to pursue better quality of life in a foreigner country. (Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002)

- **Qualitative Primary Research**

The findings of this research show that the majority of students are genuinely motivated to study abroad in this case Ireland because they believe that the quality of educational service will be better than the local education in their home countries. INT 3 from the qualitative instrument said, *"Ireland is one of the best places to get a degree and even if you don't find a job here, it opens many doors in other countries"*. Furthermore, INT3 stated that an Irish degree in higher education *"has more value and recognition in our home countries, and even if we don't stay in*

Ireland, we can certainly have more opportunity and recognition in our home countries with a foreigner degree".

- **Quantitative Primary Research**

Visas opportunities and considerations did not form a significant part of the student's motivation to move abroad according to the survey sample conducted for this research, see figure 1. The three key factors influencing students' motivation to study third-level education in Ireland were 44.2% seeking better quality of life, following 27.9% Career opportunities and the third one was by 23.3% Job opportunities.

A clear distinction must be noted in the difference between Job Opportunities and Career Opportunities; international student's job opportunities relate to short-term employment opportunities, like part-time jobs while they are studying or finding a job right after graduating. Career opportunities reference to a long-term professional pathway in a specific field of business such as Accounting, Marketing among others. (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, (2005)

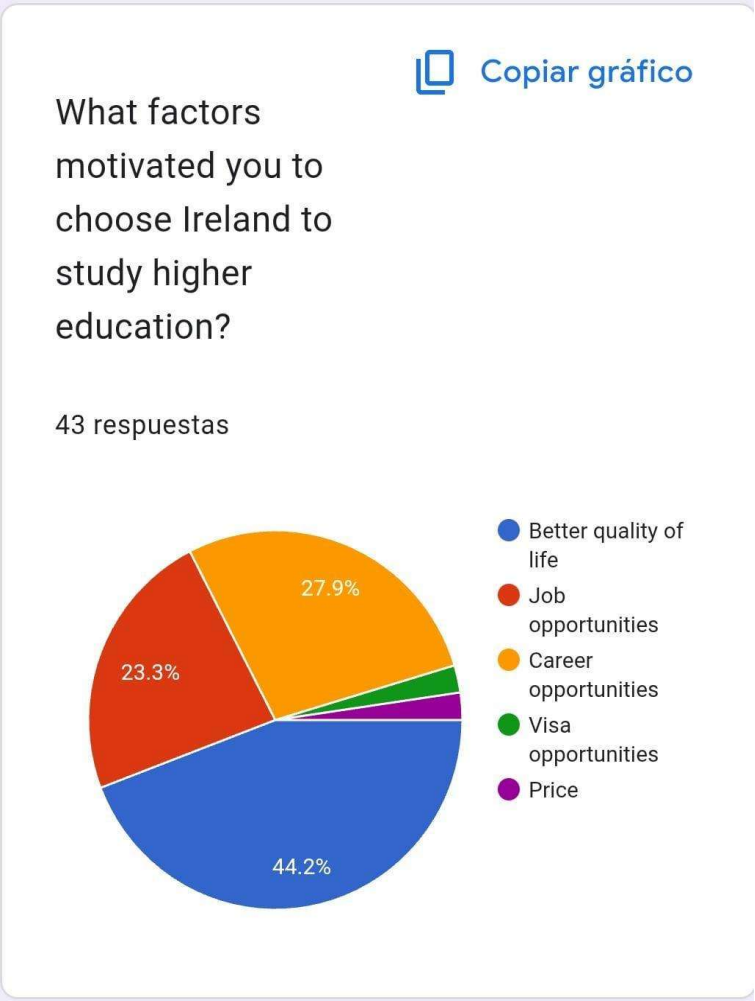


Figure 1; Students Motivation to Move to a Foreigner Country

Discussion

The primary and secondary research used for this dissertation confirm that international students are influenced by both push and pull factors when choosing the country, they want to live in and study.

Push factors influencing international students' motivation to leave their home countries are hardship and limited career development in their home countries this was the primary factor, as Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) highlighted and reinforced by 44.2% percent of the survey respondents. Pull factors influencing international students was the second factor related to career opportunities, this represents students' motivation to succeed and progress in their

academic and working field, they want to evolve and be successful. Interview respondents also aligned with what the students are saying, especially INT3 who emphasize the value that a foreign degree adds to their lives, curriculums and life experience of the international students. This shows that the international students are in fact enthusiastic about studying and learning when enrolling in a third-level academic program.

Due to this primary research new emerging themes and future research avenues have come up such as the importance and distinction of job and career opportunities.

New Emerging Theme- Career Pathways vs Visa Tourists

27.9% of the survey sample said that the students' second most important motivation factor was related to career opportunities and a long-term pathway.

INT2 highlighted a very interesting factor in relation to the role of visas motivating international students. INT2 stated that *"International students motivation varies depending on the level of study they are undertaking. 99% of students on level 9 are there for the right reasons to genuinely progress in a career in areas like business management, marketing and accounting".*

INT2 introduced the new term of *"Visa Tourists"* to describe "*students just here to work but who need to study an English language course in order to get a level 6 or 7 visa".*

INT2 pointed out that *"as levels get higher in education the less visa tourists you will see".*

Recommendations:

- Institutions should tailor Marketing strategies and support Services to clearly address and communicate how they address economical push and opportunity pull factors.
- Enhance intercultural events and orientation ongoing sessions to foster sense of belonging and help students to adjust and cope more easily to the new environment.
- Diversify communication channels, this can include an international student portal where students can have access to quick policies updates, regular newsletters and drop-in virtual office hours.

- Implement a centralized letter request system, an online portal where international students can request, track letters and get notification of delivery. This will help to reduce anxiety and increase seamless procedures reducing stress and delays.

4.2 Theme 2 Students Expectations

This theme evaluates the expectations that international student had before they arrived in Ireland and how this compares to the reality and actual experience.

Students Expectations VS Reality of What They Get

- **Secondary research**

According to the University of Salford (2022), international students' expectations are related to smooth transition in academic success.

That international students believe that a foreign international degree is better than a local one. (Fara Azmat (2016)

That the reputation and quality of the foreigner country in this case Ireland plays a very significant role influencing students' expectations. (Xiong W (2022)

The reputation of Irish culture and academic context influencing students' expectation. (Thomlinson (2023)

- **Quantitative Primary Research**

Given the fact that students' motivation is driven by three key factors which are 1) better quality of life; 2) Career opportunities; and 3) Job Opportunities.

35.7% of the student sample said that they don't feel ready to get a job in the field they have studied. It is notable that 35.7% of students said that they don't feel ready to get a job in the field they have studied. This is a clear statement of the mismatch between international student expectations and the academic outcomes they have paid for, as figure 2, this gap highlights the importance of aligning the academic programs delivery with the job market requirements.

Recommendations:

- The institutions need to focus on the students' expectations for a clear career path and curriculum designers should ensure that the programs are relevant and up to date with the new trends. Example the use of AI for Marketing programs to run campaigns, as well as well as aligning the programs based on the job market demands.

Furthermore, students survey samples brought issues related to the basic requirements of a modern campus, like hot water, plug points, space for studying in groups, IT support and counselling services, provide ongoing student feedback channels, including the facility to rate lectures and administrative staff. See figure 3 and 4.

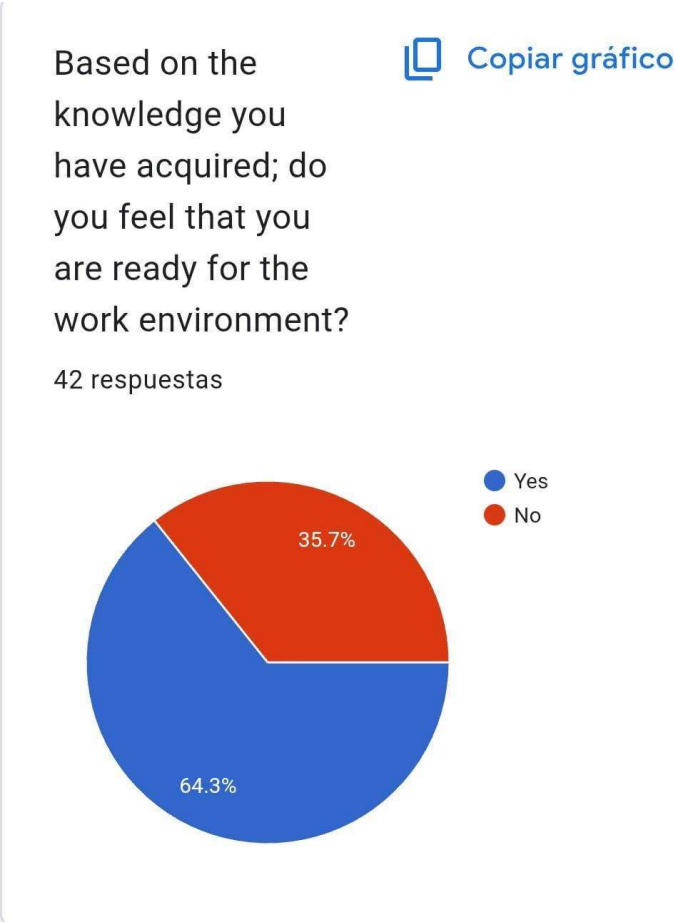


Figure 2; Students' expectation doesn't match the reality

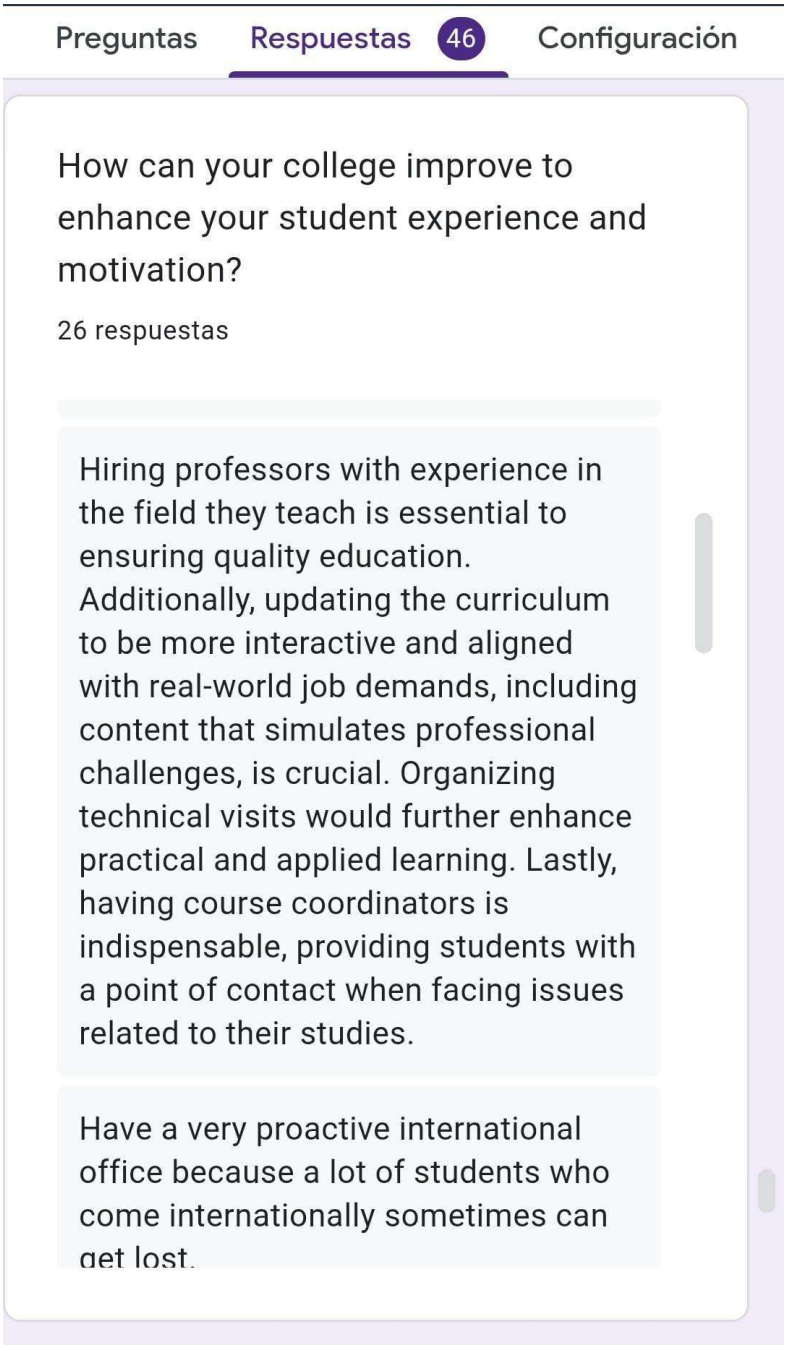


Figure 3; Student Expectations, open-ended questions 16 from student survey

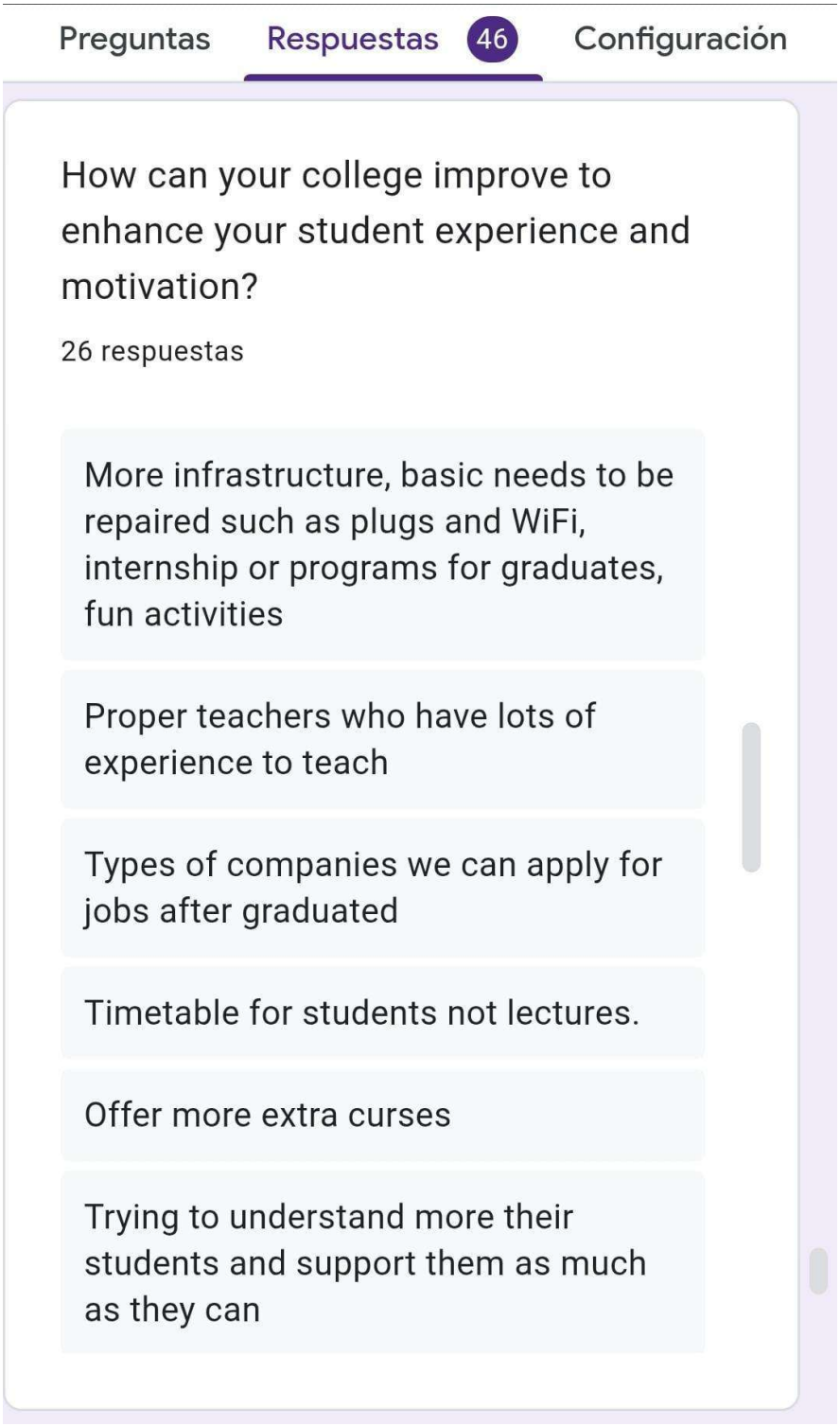


Figure 4; student expectations, open-ended question 16 from student survey

- **Qualitative Primary Research**

The qualitative primary research offered valuable findings from the insights of the international student lives and experiences. INT3 provided relevant quote saying, *"colleges need to give students a voice" "should take into account students opinions for class timetables" "there are occasional workshops, but not structure support system, they are not effective in addressing the student's needs"*. INT3 stated "the college doesn't care about what students are saying". Despite these challenges students are enduring and continuing to put effort into assisting their classes because they value the degree itself. The qualitative research findings have addressed and pointed out the need for institutions to address tangible services issues and the importance of student's well-being.

Recommendation:

- Institutions should create structured platforms where students can provide feedback and transparently follow up by addressing their needs. This platform should become a safe place where students can share their opinions and be seriously considered.
- Institutions should review and restructure administrative processes for efficiency and responsiveness promptly to address student needs.
- Implement ongoing training for staff in intercultural communication and student support. By understanding their target audience, it is presumed that the colleges can better serve the customers, in this case international students.

Discussion

Looking at the primary research outcome it is evident the gap between what the students expect from Irish third-level education and what they have experienced. The international students have stated dissatisfaction in discrepancies in areas like communication, institutional responsiveness, and support structures. The University of Salford (2022) outlines the common areas where student expectations fall under such as academic precision, social integration, and having access to services. INT3 expressed alarming concern related to dissatisfaction with administrative delays and unresponsiveness to student feedback, pointing out that there are delays in providing basic

and crucial services like visa letters for renewal, disinterest from administrative staff to students' representative feedback which aligns with what Tomlinson et al. (2023) said that the discrepancy in the expectation will affect the retention, engagement and levels of satisfaction of the international students.

4.3Theme 3 Students' Satisfaction

Students Satisfaction – Expectancy Disconfirmation Model

- **Secondary research**

Key predictors of student's satisfaction are related to teaching quality. And when the quality of teaching doesn't meet the expectations of the students is when the dissatisfaction occurs. (Sweeny (2016)

Factors like Illness, and financial stress can demotivate and influence students' satisfaction and engagement. (Thomson & Prieto, (2013)

- **Quantitative Primary research**

23.8% of the survey participants said that they are not satisfied with the educational experience and 7.8% said that they are very dissatisfied due to poor lecturing and lecturers' experience and other issues like dirty facilities and limited space.

A far more revealing result emerges from the survey open-ended questions about the current level of student satisfaction, one respondent said that they were very dissatisfied based on "*The university's lack of ethics, inadequate student support, unprepared faculty, and absence of practical activities reflect an institution ill-equipped to provide quality education. Additionally, the outdated curriculum undermines students' development, leaving them unprepared for the job market".* Other respondents complained about *"Weak lecturers, subjects are not up to date with the market reality, new rules are made up by college each semester"* and other factors like *"poor Communication"; "bad administration"; "Building, facilities, is dirty, no space enough in the canteen, etc".*

The research confirms that students' satisfaction is directly related to the quality of service they experience based on their expectations and motivations, especially in the context of the communication chain from college via lecturer to the students as well as the physical aspects of the campus like cleanliness and lack of resources.

- **Qualitative Primary Research**

INT3 stated that in spite of being a class representative for 3 years "the college doesn't care about what the students are saying" and also said *"there are ongoing delays with administration problems, delays with processing visa letters"* and that the *"feedback channels for students boils down to self-drive questions in meaningless students survey that discourage students to participate as the end up saying 'what's the point' given that their complains are falling on deaf ears".*

Recommendations:

- Institutions should collaborate with industry partners to enhance job placement and provide more opportunities for development to the international students.
- The introduction of alumni mentorship schemes where graduate students or final year students can provide guidance to current students or first semester students so they will feel less lost in the foreigner country.
- Emphasize career pathways and post-graduate study opportunities.
- Partnering with public colleges to provide their programs to upscale student's transcript and recognition and enhance reputation of the colleges.

Discussion

The survey sample and interview instrument agree with what Sweeny 2016 said, that the key predictor of student's satisfaction is related to the quality of teaching. Based on the discontent of the international students we can say that the disconfirmation occurs because the quality of teaching does not meet the students' expectations.

New Emerging Theme: Recognition and Value of an International Degree

As INT3 points out that even if the graduate goes back to their home country, the value of an Irish degree in a global market context and in their home, countries add significant appeals and puts them ahead of those who held a local degree. This new theme combines both motivation and satisfaction and shows a broader strategic positioning of third-level education in Ireland.

4.4 Theme 4 The Role of Academic Staff and Quality of Service

This theme describes the importance of communication and engagement from the college and the impact of lecture-student relationships and how this impacts the student's level of satisfaction and learning outcomes.

- **Secondary research**

The importance of academic staff and their relationship with the students. Creating channels where the students engage and interact with the college/staff. This will help to enhance communication with the students and improve satisfaction. (Kun, et, all., 2005)

The critical importance of the lecturers and draws from the insightful perspective of communication theory and audience research as well as the cultural and ethnographical considerations. (Eco, 1967)

- **Quantitative Primary Research**

The sample survey showed that just 22% of students were satisfied with the quality of the lecturers (7% very satisfied and 15% satisfied). This result is alarming given the critical role lecturers play in the provision of the educational services to the students.

Students complained about "lecturers being unprepared" not having teaching experience and not having post-graduate qualifications and that a "big number lacks the methodology to teach".

- **Qualitative Primary Research**

INT1 pointed out that "we as teachers have a huge responsibility" and the role of a lecturer can be bad and good, they can even "damage the student's confidence and encourage them to be lazier". INT 1 also said *"a lecturer can excite students' imagination or bore them to death; they can challenge the students to explore new academic avenues or completely demotivate them".*

INT2 also points out that there are significant differences in the quality of the lecturing staff from campus to campus. INT2 notes that in their current institution *"if the students are complaining about a lecturer in this new institution I work in, the lecturer is very unlikely to be there three months later".*

INT3 highlighted another interesting finding that *"the majority of the teaching staff work on short term revolving contracts which might be impacting their levels of motivation to push students to achieve excellence".*

INT1 said that in their institution *"Students are given the ability to rate your lecturer at the bottom of the Moodle page."* Giving them important feedback channels to their lecturers.

Recommendations:

- Develop ongoing academic advising and track students' progress.
- Increase transparency in colleges' budget and reinvestment in students' services.
- Improve motivation and long-term planning in lecturer contracts.

Discussion

The critical role the lecturer plays brings us back to the communication model proposed in the methodology for this dissertation, where the Shannon and Weaver traditional communication model of (Sender-Message-Receiver) was reformulated as (Lecturer-Education-Student). Clearly any failures at "sender /lecturer" level will have fundamental negative impacts on the overall result of the educational service communicated and its reception by students in turn impacting their satisfaction.

Moreover, students feel that institutional decision-making is often profit-driven rather than students focus. While some interviewees appreciate the small class size and closer lecturer-student engagement, issues arising relate to poor management practice, weak student support services, and lack of structure were evident especially in the survey sample and as INT3 noted, many lecturers are on short-term contracts, and this may be affecting the consistency and quality of teaching.

New Emerging Theme for Future Research: Teaching as Service: The Lecturer's Role and Impact on Learning and College Perception

4.5 Theme 5- Challenges and Opportunities for Colleges Service

The delivery of top-quality academic courses to satisfy the needs and expectations of international students is complex and challenging.

The research designed for this dissertation illustrates that analyzing the key elements of the communication chain alongside the key research themes provides significant insights into the opportunities available to all the stakeholders.

From Disatisfaction to Strategy: Communication Challenges and Market Responsiveness in Higher Education.

- **Secondary research**

Mazzarol,1998 has highlighted the nature of education as marketable services. Mazzarol has identified critical successes strategies for marketing international education based on 1) Quality and Reputation; 2) Possession of International Strategic Alliances; 3) Quality and Expertise of Staff; 4) Organisational Culture; 5) Innovation. These factors confirm the general hypothesis for this thesis. Essentially that the more the college focus on students' motivation, needs and expectations and create students' satisfaction the greater the mutual benefits that accrue through retention, reputation enhancement and word of mouth recommendation.

- **Quantitative Primary Research**

  The quantitative research sample highlighted two damning result findings. After 3 years studying and approaching graduation 39.5% of students surveyed would not recommend their college and 41.9% said the overall student experience was not worth the money. This is a very negative result for students after 3 years of time effort and money invested in their overseas education.

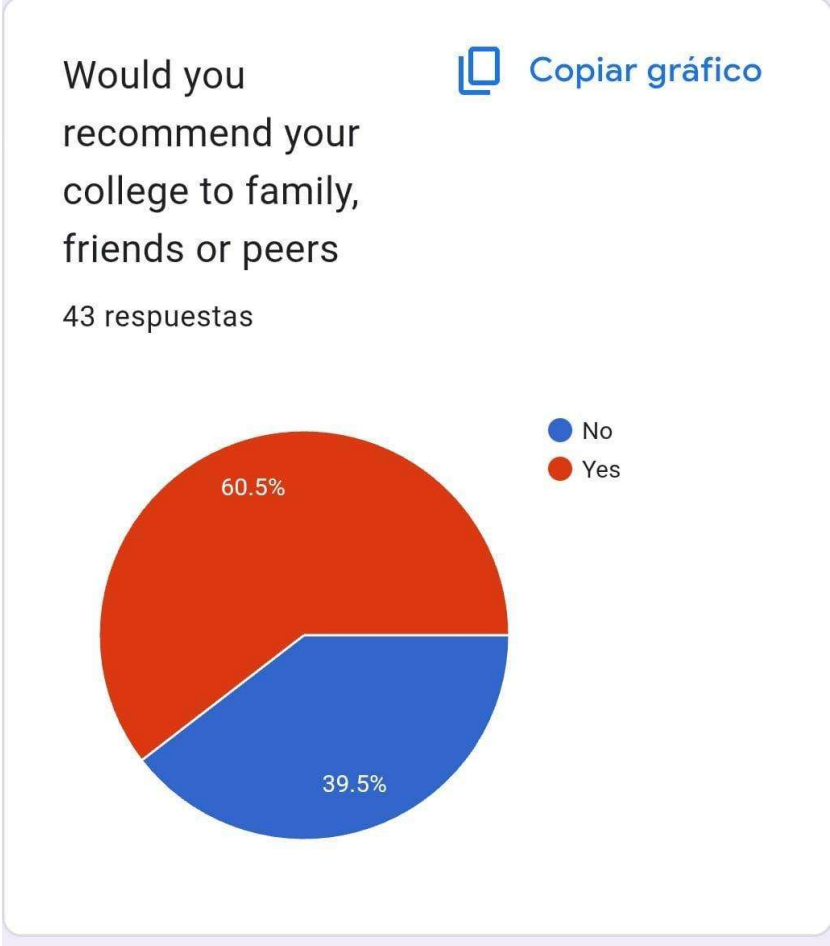


Figure 5; student survey question 20, Challenges and Opportunities.

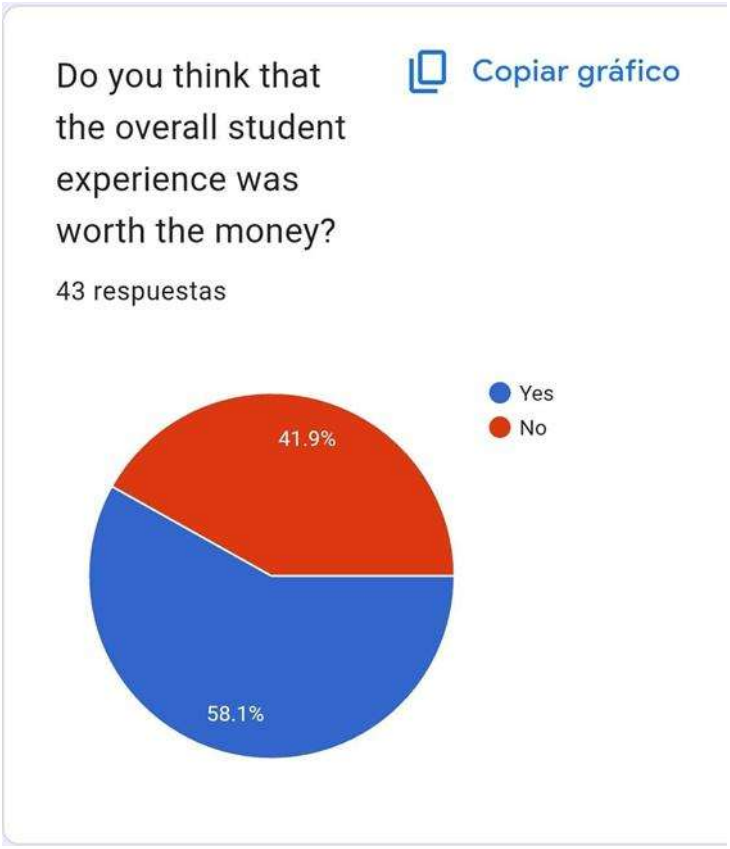


Figure 6; student survey question 18, Challenges and Opportunities.

- **Qualitative Primary Research**

INT2 states that *"once the policies are in place to support the students and help them to progress and complete their success rate is much better"* INT2 also highlights the importance of the culture of the organization when it comes to small colleges stating that *"if you have poor policies and poor procedures, and not enjoyable students experiences you are going to invite students that are here for the wrong reasons, but this culture depends on the institution".* INT2 continues to add that *"being student driven and profit driven go hand and hand. There is no profit without the students. Students are the business. Students are the profit; therefore, students are the priority. They are our customers, and the priority is to make them happy."*

"The key stakeholders in the process are the students, the lecturers, the owners and the management, and once the culture, communication chain and feedback are connected positive outcomes are inevitable".

Discussion

It must be noted that while a student driven stakeholder communication culture provides for the best educational outcomes, this approach is not provided equally across the various small colleges with some institutions far more student focused than others.

Therefore, it is the choice of institutions to embrace the fundamental challenge of student satisfaction as a priority.

International students now demand far more from their college than a work visa as has been clearly highlighted by this research. Students want a college to provide career pathways, peer mentoring programs and important backups like free counseling services as well as robust academic programs up to date with the latest trends including AI, technological support delivered by lecturers with top academic credentials with real life business and industry experience.

Therefore, there are massive opportunities for colleges to improve their overall approach and become more of a student focused to increase their brand image and reputation.

Recommendation

INT1 points out a potential recommendation by saying that “Post Graduate Education is the latest iteration in the offering for overseas students” and that in a new master’s program they are teaching in Trinity College “90% are overseas students with a 95% attendance”. Unless small colleges recognize these emerging opportunities and invest sufficiently to cater for the increasing expectations of international students, they risk being reduced to purveyors of mediocre education for disinterested Visa Tourists. If colleges teaching marketing cannot effectively market themselves and satisfy students’ needs, they may face existential survival issues in competition with other institutions who grasp the importance and implications of the results of this research dissertation project.

- Expand academic partnerships and international accreditations to enhance the credibility of the service offering.
- Offer webinars and resources using visible platforms where students can find out more about how degrees are valued by employers in various regions.

- Encourage participation from students through class representatives in decision-making to become more student driven.

CHAPTER V- Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The research element of this dissertation has uncovered critical issues relating to how small third-level colleges can greatly improve international service experience.

By placing the student in a marketing approach to the educational service, there is a clear opportunity for improvement especially in the communication chain between the college/lecturer and students via the educational service.

The potential benefit for all stakeholders is maxifold; from a college perspective the importance of providing a satisfactory educational student experience is a financial and existential necessity, student satisfaction with the overall service is critical.

The lecturer's role is also critical and how the overall culture operates. Collectively the findings suggest that Irish private colleges service are still appealing to the international student, however, there are clear areas of improvement, especially in communication, academic structure and administrative staff efficiency. The recommendations in this research outlined across each theme provides practical strategies for improving the international student experience while sustaining Ireland's competitive edge in global education.

Additionally, this research shows that these small third-level education colleges are providing international student courses in fields of business and marketing without them knowing how to market themselves, focusing mainly on the business side but forgetting the main reason they are still in business which is their customers/international student. While they still fulfilling a need of allowing students to remain in Ireland legally while studying higher education, they ignore the

impact they cause by ignoring the needs, motivation, expectations of the international students and this is reflected by the clear dissatisfaction shown in the survey sample used for this dissertation.

Further research could explore student outcomes, rates of success after graduation, and the long term implemented changes in satisfaction and success.

5.2 Limitations

i. Notable reluctance from in-depth interviewees, lecturers and administration staff showed a very suspicious initial reaction to the research questions and were very apprehensive to divulge information despite guaranteed anonymity.

ii. In hindsight, the limitations of quantitative research demonstrated that qualitative methods like focus groups could have provided deeper insight into the complexity of motivation, expectations, and satisfaction of international students based on cultural, ethnographic research formulations as outlined in the research methodology.

iii. The cultural and ethnographic background of international students is underestimated and there has been no significant research in the Irish context.

5.3 Recommendations

Theme	Recommendation
Theme 1 Student Motivation	• Institutions should tailor Marketing strategies and support Services to clearly address and communicate how they address economical push and opportunity pull factors. • Enhance intercultural events and orientation ongoing sessions to foster sense of belonging and help students to adjust and cope more easily to the new environment. • Diversify communication channels, this can include an international student portal where students can have access to quick policies

	updates, regular newsletters and drop-in virtual office hours. • Implement a centralized letter request system, an online portal where international students can request, track letters and get notification of delivery. This will help to reduce anxiety and increase seamless procedures reducing stress and delays
Theme 2 Student Expectation	• Institutions should create a structured platform where students can provide feedback and transparently follow up by addressing their needs. This platform should become a safe place where students can share their opinions and be seriously considered. • Institutions should review and restructure administrative processes for efficiency and responsiveness promptly to address student needs. • Implement ongoing training for staff in intercultural communication and student support. By understanding their target audience, it is presumed that the colleges can better serve the customers, in this case international students.
Theme 3 Student satisfaction	• Institutions should collaborate with industry partners to enhance job placement and provide more opportunities for development to the international students. • The introduction of alumni mentorship schemes where graduate students or final year students can provide guidance to current students or first semester students so they will feel less lost in the foreigner country.

	• Emphasize career pathways and post-graduate study opportunities. • Partnering with public colleges to provide their programs to upscale student's transcript and recognition and enhance reputation of the colleges.
Theme 4 Role of Academic Staff and Quality of Service	• Develop ongoing academic advising and track students' progress. • Increase transparency in colleges' budget and reinvestment in students' services. • Improve motivation and long-term planning in lecturer contracts.
Theme 5 Challenges and Opportunities for Colleges Service	• Expand academic partnerships and international accreditations to enhance the credibility of the service offering. • Offer webinars and resources using visible platforms where students can find out more about how degrees are valued by employers in various regions. • Encourage participation from students through class representatives in decision-making to become more student driven.

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