

# The perceptions of Ghent's international higher education students

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## Background and rationale

The *Jeugddienst* of the city of Ghent wanted to gain insight in the experiences of international higher education students in the city. A survey among these students was deemed to be an excellent way to map these experiences and to see whether particular services or conditions – either under the aegis of the city or the higher education institutions – could be improved. With the growth of the international student body in mind, it seemed pertinent to take stock of the students' motivations to come to Ghent and their experiences during their stay in the city.

The Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG) of Ghent University responded to the call from the *Jeugddienst* and carried out the research project. Below, first, the research design is explained. Subsequently the key findings are thematically presented, followed by a short closing paragraph reflecting on the findings.

A word of thanks to Jeroen Paeleman from the *Jeugddienst*, who coordinated the project, to his colleagues and to the contact persons at the Ghent higher education institutions: Ghent University, University College Ghent (*Hogeschool Gent*), *Arteveldehogeschool*, Odisee, LUCA School of Arts and KU Leuven (Ghent campus), working in the internationalization office, quality assurance units or students services units. They were instrumental in both the preparation and dissemination of the survey to their students. Also many thanks to dr. Marco Seeber, Melissa Laufer and others at CHEGG offering important input to the project.

## Research design and methodology

Studying the pertinent literature on the “student experience” in higher education as well as relevant studies specifically focusing on mobile students, themes emerged that were key to their experiences and factors were categorized that potentially affect the experience. A model emerged from that literature that emphasized that students are dealing with push and pull factors when they contemplate or embark on a study period abroad. In other words: the push and pull factors “determine” their motivations. These factors subsequently affect how they experience their stay abroad in different dimensions (layers in our model): practical, university-administrative, academic, social, cultural and personal. At the same time, background variables (in our model: control variables) will affect that experience. The model is depicted in figure 1.

Subsequently, existing survey instruments were critically evaluated and, where appropriate (this was e.g. the case for some items from ERASMUS mobility surveys), items were selected to be included in our survey. For some areas we developed items ourselves. Suitable scales were developed to measure the experiences. The contact persons at the

higher education institutions were asked to comment on the items and changes were implemented, where needed.

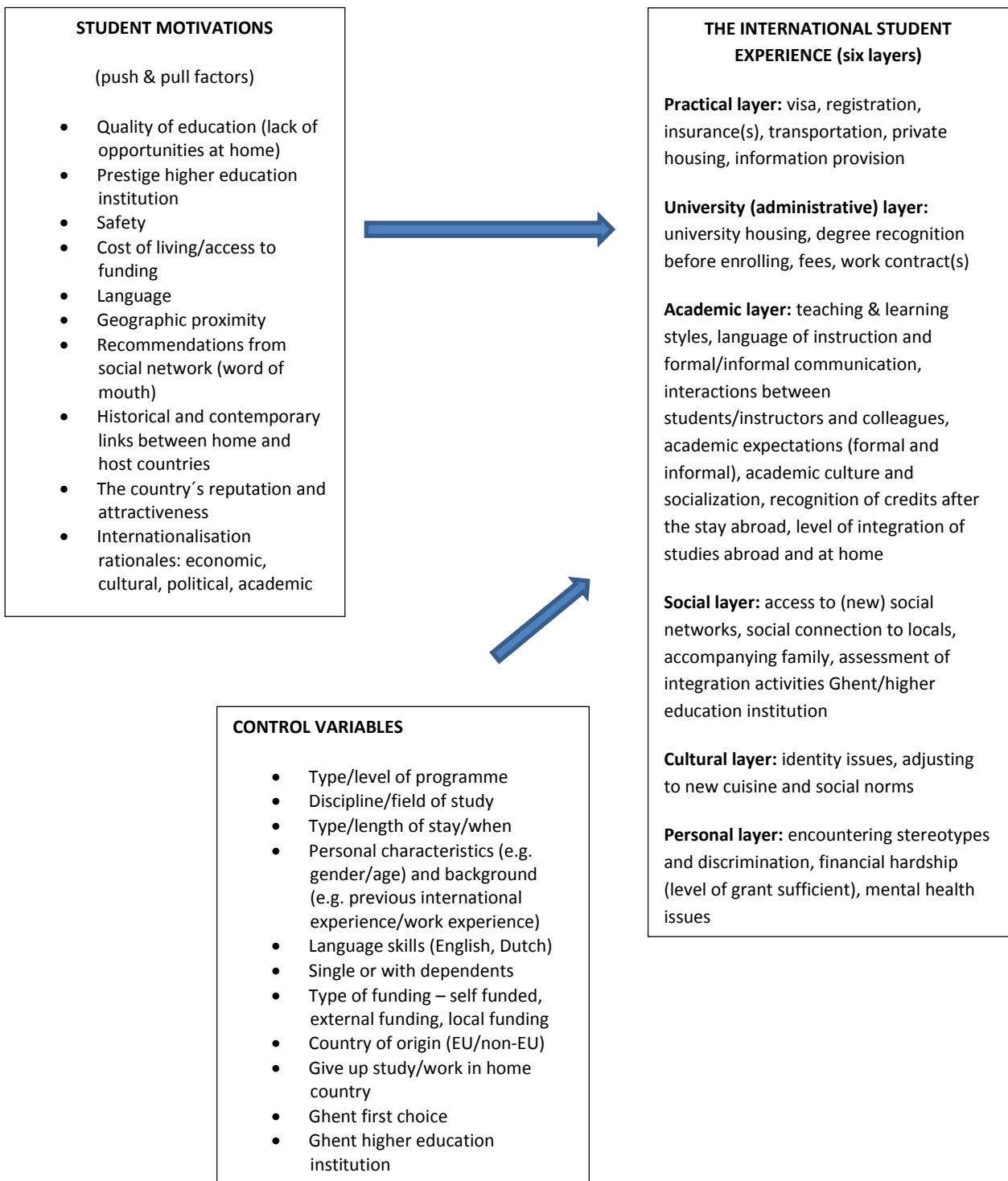


Figure 1: key variables affecting the international student experience

A final round of reflections improved the consistency of the questionnaire and also led to deleting a couple of items to ensure that the survey could be answered in a relatively short time (to reach a fair response rate). This also implied we did not include all variables presented in figure 1. In that context, it was also agreed to only use closed questions (with the exception of a closing open question): respondents were asked to tick the most appropriate answer, either from a set of alternatives or on a 1-5 or 1-4 scale of agreement.

The survey structure was as follows. The first set of questions dealt with the essential background variables on the student and his/her programme. The middle – and most important part – dealt with their experiences with various aspect of life in Ghent (administration, housing market, educational experience, mobility within Ghent, discrimination), ending with two questions regarding their general satisfaction about their stay in Ghent. A last section asked for a couple of additional background variables and about the students' future plans (in relation to returning to Ghent).

The survey was administered through LimeSurvey and the contact persons at the higher education institutions sent the link to their international students and followed up with a couple of reminders. The survey was available during the period mid-May to the end of July 2018, the higher education institutions choosing the “right” moment to disseminate the survey. The anonymous responses were analysed by the lead researcher. After data cleaning, 803 valid responses were retained. Analysing the incomplete responses (i.e. students dropping out during filling out the questionnaire) led to the conclusion that most students that continued after the first couple of questions also completed the survey, i.e. the overwhelming majority of “drop-outs” appeared to be curious, but only clicked on the link to see what the survey was about, without intending to answer all questions.

The response rate (11%) was deemed reasonable, but especially the rate among bachelor students was low. The response by type of programme was: 23.9% bachelor students, 29.6% master students, 42.1% PhD level, 4.4% other, (n=796)<sup>1</sup>. Most respondents were from Ghent University (83.5%), not surprisingly for this university hosts most of the city's international students. Response rates varied significantly across the six higher education institutions.

## Key findings

### *The profile of the respondents*

Obviously, the average international student does not exist, but the following data give some insights in the composition of the group of students that participated in the survey.

- 58.5% are female, 39.6% male (n=793).

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<sup>1</sup> Percentages are based on the number of valid responses, i.e. excluding respondents that did not fill out the question or ticked the box “not applicable”.

- The two largest age groups were 27-35 years (41%) and 22-26 years (39.5%) (n=792).
- Most international students were from Europe (58.5%) and Asia & Oceania (26.3%) (n=791).
- The overwhelming majority lives in Ghent (postal code 9000, 82.1%) (n=747).
- Their accommodations are quite diverse: 36.6% found an accommodation on the private market, 29.1% share a house/apartment and 27.3% lives in university/university college accommodation (n=800). Those that live in university/university college accommodation are younger (48.8% 22-26 year old) in contrast to those that find something on the private market (49.1% are 27-35 year old). For those that share a house/apartment the two largest groups are the 22-26 year olds (43.7%) and the 27-35 year olds (42.9%).

In terms of behaviour:

- Responding students are generally more aware of the city of Ghent website for international students (62% aware, n=800). The brochure of the city of Ghent is least known (44% aware, n=802).
- In general, the students prefer e-mail as the most appropriate communication channel (average 3.49 on a 1-4 scale, n=790).<sup>2</sup> There are significant differences by age group (17-21 years, 22-26 years, 27-35 years, 36 years and older) for some of the communication channels. Younger age groups are more keen, compared with older age groups, to receive information through Facebook, Instagram and face-to-face (ANOVA).
- The students primarily move around in Ghent by foot (average 3.69, n=763) and by bike (average 3.10, n=650).
- A variety of approaches is visible in how they find accommodation: through the higher education institution (29.7%), but also through real estate agencies (18%), friends and family (16.2%) and social media (16%) (n=802).
- Responding students generally interact more often with other international students (average 3.49, n=792) and to a much lesser extent with Belgian students (average 2.59, n=794) and local citizens (average 2.36, n=786).
- Students experience some levels of discrimination within the higher education institution (4.6% to a large or very large extent, n=760), in the public domain (4.4%, n=757), in nightlife (4%, n=702) en in shops/restaurants/sport clubs (3.6%, n=758), but – relatively – much more on the housing market (8.5%, n=729). There are significant differences by religion/world view for all these forms of discrimination, with Islam and Hindu students reporting significantly higher levels of discrimination than other religions/world views. The analysis by continent also shows significant

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<sup>2</sup> Averages are always based on a 1-5 scale, unless explicitly stated otherwise.



differences, apart from the item “discrimination in nightlife”. There is not a straightforward pattern, but students from Asia/Oceania and North America and sometimes students from Africa experience higher levels of discrimination.

- Students are primarily motivated to go abroad for personal development (average 4.59, n=781) and the development of academic knowledge and skills (average 4.57, n=783), to a limited extent because of suggestions from friends and family (average 2.50, n=710) or because financial support was available (average 3.07, n=696).
- A large share of the students is or will be visited by family and friends from their home country (77.5%, n=797).
- Respondents are relatively “vulnerable”, because of financial insecurity (average 3.25, n=798), giving up a job in their home country (34%, n=798) and leaving behind dependent family members in their home country (16%, n=796). The fact that 15% (n=801) work alongside their studies may be indicative of a financial need to do so.

### ***Satisfaction***

The general satisfaction among respondents is very high (tables 1 and 2). The international experience in Ghent is rated 7.59, with only 10% scoring 5 or lower on a 1-10 scale (n=802) and the satisfaction of the city of Ghent is 8.24, with only 5% scoring 5 or lower (n=801).

*Table 1: What is your overall assessment of your international experience at Ghent?*

	freq	%
1 – very poor	4	.5
2	10	1.2
3	6	.7
4	20	2.5
5	39	4.9
6	67	8.4
7	179	22.3
8	256	31.9
9	140	17.5
10 – excellent	81	10.1

Note: freq = number of respondents agreeing with the score, % = percentage of students agreeing with the score.

*Table 2: What is your overall assessment of Ghent as a city?*

	freq	%
1 – very poor	2	.2
2	-	-
3	11	1.4
4	12	1.5
5	15	1.9
6	35	4.4
7	117	14.6
8	229	28.6
9	221	27.6
10 – excellent	159	19.9

Note: freq = number of respondents agreeing with the score, % = percentage of students agreeing with the score.

Additionally, the respondents would recommend Ghent as a place to visit to friends and family (average 4.32, n=790) and would like to return themselves for a visit (average 4.30, n=790).

*Table 3: Satisfaction city of Ghent administration and registration procedures*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to the completion of the Migration Office's registration procedures	3.48	1.11	697
I am satisfied with respect to information about the Migration Office's registration procedures	3.52	1.06	703
I am satisfied with respect to support offered by the staff	3.74	1.03	696
I am satisfied with respect to support offered to my family/significant other(s)	3.51	1.01	407

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

Zooming in on different aspects of their experiences, the following results are noteworthy. The satisfaction about the registration procedures and the administrative office of the city of Ghent ranges from average 3.48 to 3.74 (table 3). Regarding the procedures at the higher education institutions the satisfaction ranges from 3.69 to 4.10 (table 4).

*Table 4: Satisfaction higher education institution administration and procedures*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to information about the registration/enrolment procedures	4.09	0.91	796
I am satisfied with respect to the completion of the registration/enrolment procedures	4.10	0.88	793
I am satisfied with respect to support offered by the departments/faculties	4.03	1.00	786
I am satisfied with respect to support offered regarding the recognition of my previous academic qualifications	4.00	0.94	718
I am satisfied with respect to support offered to my family/significant other(s)	3.69	0.95	437

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

With respect to accommodation, students are most satisfied about the way they are generally treated by the owner of the accommodation (3.81) and least satisfied about the costs (3.16) (table 5).

*Table 5: Satisfaction regarding housing and accommodation*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to information about the housing market	3.10	1.05	746
I am satisfied with respect to finding accommodation	3.26	1.23	764
I am satisfied with respect to the quality of my accommodation	3.79	1.08	780
I am satisfied with respect to the cost of my accommodation	3.16	1.15	776
I am satisfied with respect to the way I am generally treated by the owner of the accommodation	3.81	1.09	762

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

Regarding their financial situation, the respondents are least satisfied about the financial support from their home country or institution and most satisfied with the fees of the higher education institutions at Ghent. Their satisfaction with the contract (only for part of the PhD students) is 3.79 (table 6).

*Table 6: Satisfaction regarding financial issues*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to the level of fees charged by the higher education institution	3.65	1.08	665
I am satisfied with respect to the level of financial support (grant, bursary, scholarship) from my home country	3.15	1.25	563
I am satisfied with respect to the level of financial support (grant, bursary, scholarship) from the host higher education institution	3.50	1.26	545
I am satisfied with respect to support offered by the host higher education institution in case of financial challenges	3.18	1.07	441
I am satisfied with respect to contractual conditions (for PhD students only)	3.79	1.02	365

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

The respondents' satisfaction regarding mobility (in the city) are highest for travelling around by bike (4.30) and lowest – relatively – for public transport (3.52) (table 7).

*Table 7: Satisfaction regarding mobility*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to the services offered by the <i>Fietsambassade</i>	3.89	0.97	412
I am satisfied with respect to public transport	3.52	1.02	727
I am satisfied with respect to moving around in Ghent by bike	4.30	0.89	644

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

The satisfaction regarding their educational experiences varies. It is relatively low (but still positive) regarding the interaction during lectures (3.64) and how the higher education institution deals with mental health issues (3.24). It is relatively high regarding the educational facilities (laboratories, classrooms, etc., 3.97), educational materials (3.95), orderliness of the buildings and facilities (3.95), interaction with teachers (3.89) and other facilities (catering, sports, 3.87) (table 8).

*Table 8: Satisfaction regarding the educational experience*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to the teaching style	3.77	0.94	674
I am satisfied with respect to the quality of educational materials	3.95	0.86	715
I am satisfied with respect to the quality of the higher education institution's educational facilities (classrooms, labs, library, etc.)	3.97	0.93	769
I am satisfied with respect to the quality of the higher education institution's other facilities (catering, sports facilities, etc.)	3.87	0.86	734
I am satisfied with respect to the interaction with lecturers	3.89	0.93	677
I am satisfied with respect to the interaction with supervisor(s) and/or academic advisors	3.92	1.03	775
I am satisfied with respect to classroom interaction with other students	3.64	1.06	665
I am satisfied with respect to the tidiness of the institution's premises	3.95	0.89	751
I am satisfied with respect to the degree of difficulty of the study	3.77	0.85	735
I am satisfied with respect to social events organized by the higher education institution	3.65	0.93	725
I am satisfied with respect to support offered in case of mental health issues	3.24	1.00	390

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

The satisfaction regarding living in Ghent in general is highest with respect to the safety of the city (4.36), the freedom to express oneself (4.10) and the possibility to participate in various leisure activities (4.04) and lowest regarding the open-mindedness of the local population (3.76) and the Belgian way of life (3.75) (table 9).

*Table 9: Satisfaction regarding living in Ghent*

	average	std	N
I am satisfied with respect to finding food to my liking	3.83	1.04	783
I am satisfied with respect to the safety of the city	4.36	0.76	782
I am satisfied with respect to open-mindedness of the local population	3.70	1.10	777
I am satisfied with respect to coming to terms with the Belgian way of life	3.75	0.92	774
I am satisfied with respect to access to medical services	3.87	0.91	652
I am satisfied with respect to freedom to express myself	4.10	0.87	772
I am satisfied with respect to opportunities to attend cultural activities	4.00	0.88	761
I am satisfied with respect to opportunities for leisure activities	4.04	0.84	768

Note: average = average score of respondents, std = standard deviation, N = number of valid responses for the item.

### ***Differences between groups of students***

The following and final set of tables offers some insight in differences among the respondents. We looked at gender, type of programme, age, continent of origin and religion/world view. Regarding gender, women are generally more satisfied than men, but the difference is not significant (T-Test, at level  $p = .05$ ) (table 10).

*Table 10: Average satisfaction international experience and Ghent (by gender)*

	International experience	Ghent as a city
Women	7.64	8.27
Men	7.60	8.21

Note: average = average score of respondents on a scale: 1 (very poor) -10 (excellent).

PhD students are less satisfied than master and bachelor students (the latter being most satisfied). The difference is significant for the international experience, but not for the item satisfaction about Ghent as a city (ANOVA, at level  $p=.05$ , table 11).

*Table 11: Average satisfaction international experience and Ghent (by type of programme)*

	International experience	Ghent as a city
Bachelor	7.84	8.37
Master	7.64	8.20
PhD	7.35	8.13
Other	7.60	8.23

Note: average = average score of respondents on a scale: 1 (very poor) -10 (excellent).

Younger students are generally more satisfied, but the differences are not significant (ANOVA at level  $p=.05$ , table 12).

*Table 12: Average satisfaction international experience and Ghent (by age group)*

	International experience	Ghent as a city
17-21	7.96	8.35
22-26	7.59	8.24
27-35	7.49	8.20
36-older	7.49	8.31

Note: average = average score of respondents on a scale: 1 (very poor) -10 (excellent).

Also, the differences by continent of origin are considered. Students from Asia/Oceania and Africa are generally less satisfied than students from Europe and North America. Students from Latin America are most satisfied. Differences are significant (ANOVA at  $p=.01$  level, table 13).

*Table 13: Average satisfaction international experience and Ghent (by continent)*

	<i>International experience</i>	<i>Ghent as a city</i>
Europe	7.73	8.34
Asia & Oceania	7.30	7.95
Africa	7.35	7.91
Latin America	7.94	8.59
North America	7.70	8.65

Note: average = average score of respondents on a scale 1 (very poor) -10 (excellent).

Finally, a distinction between students by religion/world view is made. Students that identify with the Islam or Hinduism and agnostic students are generally less satisfied, compared to those that associate themselves with Christianity and atheism (ANOVA, significant at  $p=.01$ , table 14).

*Table 14: Average satisfaction international experience and Ghent (by religion/world view)*

	<i>International experience</i>	<i>Ghent as a city</i>
Christianity	8.05	8.61
Islam	7.25	8.14
Buddhism	7.75	8.08
Hinduism	6.94	7.82
Atheism	7.55	8.13
Agnosticism	7.31	8.17

Note: average = average score of respondents on a scale 1: (very poor) -10 (excellent).

## Reflection

In general, the respondents are very satisfied about their educational experiences and their stay in the city of Ghent. In some areas, the students were less satisfied, but their satisfaction was generally still well above the average score (of 3.00). There are some



significant differences by background characteristics (e.g. by continent of origin and by religion/world view). Although none of the findings are alarming in the sense of needing immediate action, it would be good to keep a close watch on those areas that were perceived as (relatively) less satisfactory. In that light, it would also be good to monitor the level of satisfaction over time, by repeating the survey, e.g. bi-annually.

It is difficult to offer specific policy suggestions, for the project did not aim to explain why certain students may be more/less satisfied. It would be helpful if the higher education institutions would organize follow-ups to the survey, by further exploring the reasons for (dis)satisfaction among international students, to arrive – ideally – at tailor-made solutions for each international student.