'Educational Development in an International Perspective'

Student Mobility:

Motivations and Experiences

Mette ERNLUND, M.A. & Ph.d. - student

University College South Denmark / University of Southern Denmark

meer@ucsyd.dk

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Paper by ph.d.-student Mette Ernlund / meer@ucsyd.dk

1. Problem area

- In terms of educational policy, student mobility in higher education is high on the agenda. The economic, political, cultural and social driving forces of globalisation have brought internationalisation to the centre of the stage. As a result of this, the past ten years have seen the development of a competitive market in education.

- In order to increase student mobility, European and international strategies for periods of study abroad are constantly being revised; such strategies and various investigations of the field reveal that the question of volume tends to dominate. The Bologna Declaration, for example, has a declared goal that 20% of students should be involved in international mobility by 2020.

- One of the reasons why I am interested in exploring this topic more deeply is a desire to shift the focus away from a quantitative political agenda to a qualitative one – in which students have a voice and are able to express their own personal views on the question of student mobility. I have concentrated exclusively on students doing bachelor degrees leading to a professional qualification. I am investigating why these students choose to participate in international mobility and how their experiences in this connection are to be interpreted and explained.
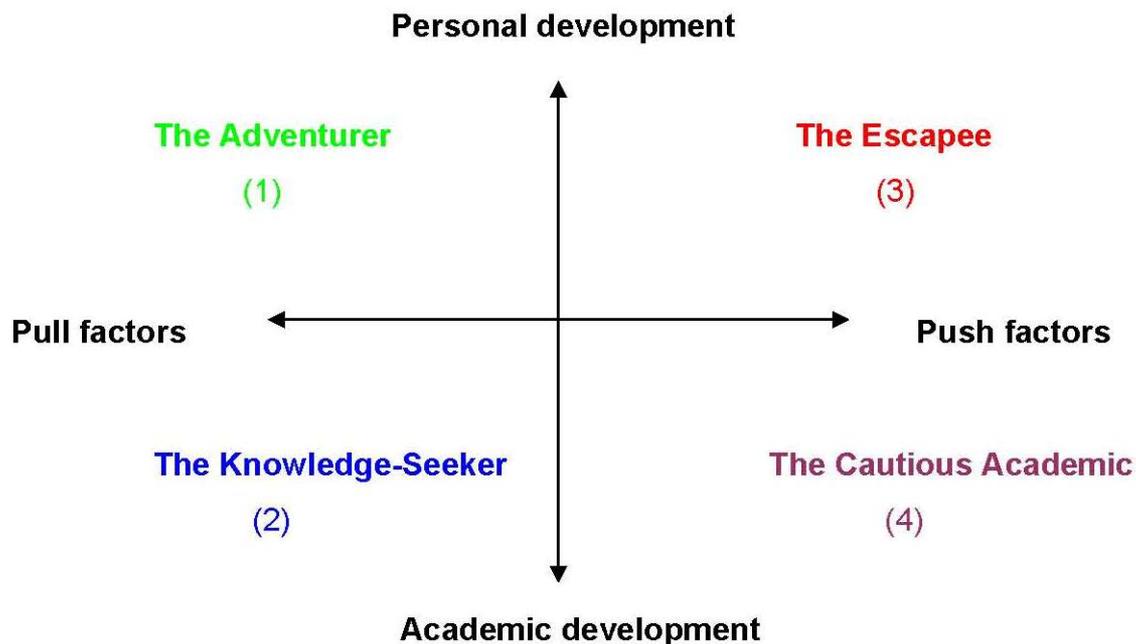
2. Empirical investigation

- I have used narrative interviews in order to let students speak freely about their lives from childhood up to the present. Following up on their narratives, I asked them a number of questions concerning themes relevant to the central problem areas of my thesis. The insights I gained through these interviews have proved to be invaluable in the analytical phase of the work in terms of understanding students' motives in choosing international mobility and their experiences in this connection.

- My research is based on 20 interviews:
  - 4 exchange students in Denmark (nationalities: Chinese, Turkish, French)
  - 7 exchange students in Norway (nationalities: Portuguese, Belgian, Spanish, German, French/Swiss)
  - 6 exchange students in Belgium (nationalities: Czech, Canadian, Swiss/Polish, Belgian)
  - 3 exchange students in France (nationalities: Czech, German)

- The students characterized the four countries as follows:

- **Denmark**: Students inform me that the Danish educational system has a high reputation abroad because of its high academic level. Teaching methods are praised for the frequent use of group work, all kinds of interactive processes, a focus on process rather than product and on freedom with responsibility. Danes present a general climate of calmness, security, trust and friendliness, even though exchange students seldom feel integrated into the Danish community. The cost of living is very high and many students are therefore asking about the possibility of getting a part-time job as a foreign student.
- **Norway**: Students inform me that Norway, offering something different and unaccustomed, is often chosen as a contrast to their own countries. The majestic peace and harmony of nature and a feeling of being able to move around in safety are mentioned as positive factors, as is the stress on music and other creative subjects. The level of service is good and everything seems to be well organised, but Norwegians are not easy to get to know, which some exchange students find frustrating. The cost of living is extremely high for some students and may prevent them from getting around and experiencing the cultural and natural diversity of the country.
- **Belgium**: Students inform me that Belgium is often chosen for want of a better alternative, but it emerges that students very quickly feel at home in this country. It is multiethnic, interesting, centrally placed in Europe and has a laid-back lifestyle that suits the students. Belgians are friendly and easy to get to know, though the country's special history – involving the division between the Flemish and the Walloons – is somewhat mystifying for many students.
- **France**: Students inform me that France is often a first choice because of the language and the attractions of a very varied culture. The country offers a wealth of natural experiences, but students feel that it can be hard to get to know the French, even at educational institutions. Many students are shocked by the authoritarian, disciplinary approach, though they emphasise the many extra-curricular activities available for students to participate in.

3. Empirical analysis

- My research is based on 20 interviews. Four ideal types have been identified as a tool to reduce the complexity of student profiles and to bring to the fore central empirical aspects of their thoughts and actions. The following model is based on students' motives for choosing international mobility.

Personal development

The Adventurer
(1)

The Escapee
(3)

Pull factors ←——————→ **Push factors**

The Knowledge-Seeker
(2)

The Cautious Academic
(4)

Academic development

- The Adventurer: this Ideal Type is attracted by the unknown, wants to experience new places and people and enjoy personal freedom.

- The Knowledge-Seeker: this Ideal Type displays academic and cultural curiosity and wants to learn new languages, new methods and new skills. This type is career-minded and often very competitive.

- The Escapee: this Ideal Type is seeking identity and is under pressure (from outside or inside) to find herself, to start afresh.

- The Cautious Academic: this Ideal Type is keen to learn more, but has to be pushed along by others, or by personal factors, before making a move.

Most of the students in this survey find themselves on the border between Types 1 and 2 or within Type 2, but students can be found in all four areas of the model.

4. Preliminary results concerning students' motives

Motivation model

- Firstly, I insert my four Ideal Types into a motivation model designed by Wiedemann & Zeuner (2012), in order to investigate how interior and exterior motives are related to that personal and academic development that is the main purpose of the exchange. This provides us with the following model:

	Motivation: reasons for choosing international mobility		
Aims: whom/what does international mobility benefit?		Pull factors (interior pressure: feelings, impulses, needs)	Push factors (exterior pressure: values and knowledge)
	Personal development	1) The Adventurer	3) The Escapee
	Academic development	2) The Knowledge-Seeker	4) The Cautious Academic

- The Adventurer is motivated by a desire for change, new social networks, freedom, responsibility

- The Knowledge-Seeker is motivated by language, culture, career

- The Escapee is motivated by a search for identity, a new start

- The Cautious Academic is motivated by academic ambitions, intercultural understanding

Culture and society
- Next I investigate a possible connection between the current cultural context of a particular society and the students' mobility choices. I do this by applying my empirical data to recent theories concerning youth, as the students I have met are all part of the modern youth culture. My conclusions:

- choices	play a role in
- identity	terms of students'
- meaning	international
- freedom	mobility choices
- structure	
- happiness	

Mobility capital

- In the final step of my analysis of students' international mobility choices, I make use of Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) concept of 'mobility capital' to investigate the significance of the students' mobility capital for their mobility choices. Mobility capital has four components:

- personality   very significant for
- adaptive experience   international mobility choices*

- previous mobility experience   less prominent for international
- family background   mobility choises*

* For the students I have met

Despite the fact that the four components of mobility capital are not equally weighted, the concept would appear to have a good explanatory value when applied to my empirical data concerning students' international mobility choices. All the students I have talked to in my empirical investigation brought a greater or lesser amount of mobility capital with them, so none of them could be regarded as completely deviant from the model. However, I did note that in cases of students with low mobility capital, a willingness to learn, to seek personal development and to defy their lack of capital greatly influenced their decision to go abroad.

5. Preliminary results concerning students' experiences

- In my analysis of students' experiences in connection with international mobility, I investigate personal, academic, social and cultural factors. Two theoretical approaches have been used: one based on narrative and one on cultural history.
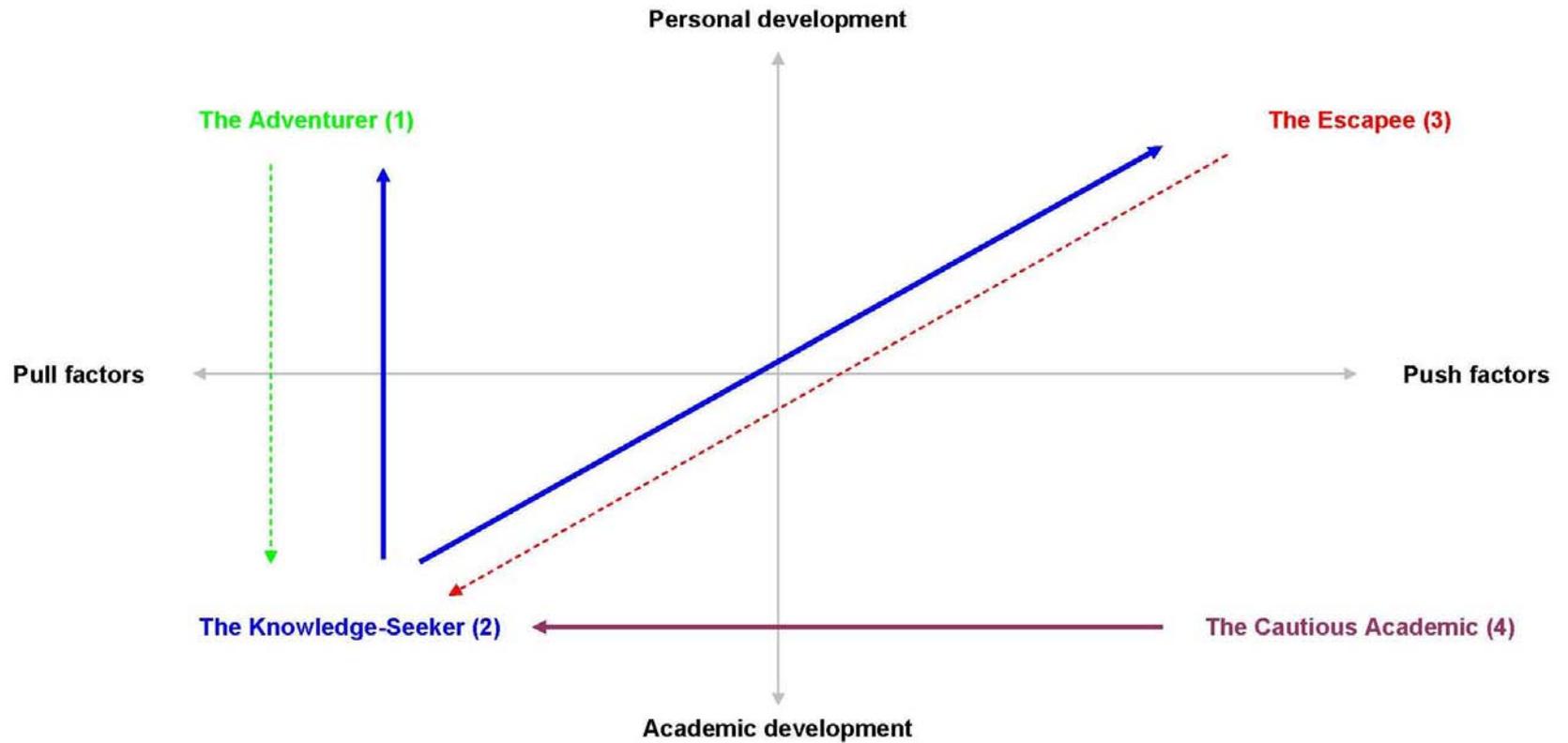
  Narrative approach
- The Adventurer uses the fairy-tale genre
- The Knowledge-Seeker uses 'Bildung' narratives
- The Escapee uses narratives of suffering
- The Cautious Academic uses narratives of the anti-hero

Shift towards other Ideal Types

- I discovered that some students in the course of their development, some more clearly than others, move beyond the immediate horizon of their experiences towards other Ideal Types.

- Reading my Ideal Type model in this light, we can see that in terms of personal development the 'Adventurer' and the 'Escapee' show very little movement, except in the direction of some deepening of their academic experience. On the other hand, in the case of the 'Knowledge-Seeker' and the 'Cautious Academic', who have chosen international mobility for academic purposes, there is a shift within their field of experience, though not in the same direction. The 'Knowledge-Seeker' moves in the direction of personal development characterised by more experience-seeking or identity-seeking behaviour, whereas the 'Cautious Academic', feeling more self-confidence and courage, moves towards more knowledge-seeking behaviour.

  These shifts among Ideal Types can be seen on the following model; the dotted line shows a minor tendency, the heavier line a major one:

Shifts in the development of experience

Personal development

The Adventurer (1)

The Escapee (3)

Pull factors

Push factors

The Knowledge-Seeker (2)

The Cautious Academic (4)

Academic development

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Ernlund / meer@ucsyd.dk

- It may clearly be seen that my empirical data shows no shift towards the 'Cautious Academic', which, if it happened (as is hypothetically possible), would mean that the student would lose self-confidence, strength and courage in the course of the exchange period and would feel forced to learn something new in a foreign environment against her or his will.

Self-confidence

- Taking a closer look at the Ideal Types, my analysis shows that the 'Adventurer' and the 'Knowledge-Seeker' both throw themselves into international mobility with a much greater portion of self-confidence than do the 'Escapee' and the 'Cautious Academic'. Not surprisingly, this affects the kind of things students experience and the way their identities develop: the stronger students tend to add a superstructure of new experiences to what they already have; the weaker ones are generally in the process of building a foundation. The narratives show that in general international mobility may benefit both categories of students, as long as the weaker ones are given the necessary help and support before and during the period of mobility.

Accomodation

- The 'Escapee' and the 'Cautious Academic' mention accommodation as a very important condition for the acquisition of new experiences; these students especially need the right environment to feel secure and a sense of belonging. All students have something to say about their accommodation and the social and cultural experiences connected with it, but accommodation does not have the same vital importance for all of them. Students are looking for widely different forms of accommodation, but their accounts provide no evidence for linking specific types of accommodation to each Ideal Type. Accommodation such as host families, student hostels and various kinds of communal arrangements are mentioned by students of various Ideal Types across the board.

Social networks

- The social aspect is important to all students, but in very different ways. While the 'Adventurer' and the 'Knowledge-Seeker are looking for new friendships and networks, the 'Escapee' and the 'Cautious Academic' are attempting to understand the social scene and their position within it. We are looking at different goals here, and the experiences gained are very diverse, but the data shows that international mobility can greatly benefit both categories of students.

Practice placements

- In terms of learning, the narratives clearly show that students who have a practice placement during their exchange period gain a very rich store of experience both academically and culturally. Faced with the foreign culture at close quarters in a professional environment, students report that their professional identity is developed in quite a unique fashion. Hard work is called for, and is indeed demonstrated by students of all Ideal Types, but the rewards are almost indescribable.

Meaning and internationalisation

- None of the students I have spoken to have returned home from their exchange without new experiences. Despite difficult moments and having to confront various problems, all of the students have returned home with a smile on their lips and a rucksack full of good experiences. Some find meaning in their lives through what they have experienced during their time as exchange students; others find meaning in the self-adopted role of an ambassador and hope to be able to pass on the experience they have gained to others when they get home. All the students appear to have been 'internationalised' to a greater or lesser degree by the new personal, linguistic, cultural, social and academic skills they have gained, though this manifests itself differently within each Ideal Type.

6. Further work to be done

- I am interested in finding out whether Hofstede's cultural theory can supplement my narrative analysis by, in some cases, explaining the students' experiences in terms of the cultural encounter that takes place between the student and the host country.

- When I have finished my analysis of the empirical data, I will be faced with the further task of seeing whether my analytical results can be used strategically in the Danish higher education sector where I am employed. New knowledge gives rise to new questions – and these I look forward to discussing in my concluding reflections.

7. What questions have been raised by my work so far?

1. Are institutions today sufficiently aware of the fact that students come with different backgrounds and motives – or are they all just treated the same way? Do we treat them all as Ideal Type 2 because this matches our conception of the ideal student?

2. Would identifying the students' Ideal Types when they go on exchanges better help them to widen the horizon of their experience while they are away – that is, help them move beyond the horizon they presently perceive?

3. If exchange visits became obligatory for all students on all degree courses, the number of students in Ideal Types 3 and 4 – those with the least self-confidence – would increase. How would one be able to give these students that extra support that would help make the exchange a success for them? How could we ensure the 'internationalisation' of such students?

4. When discussing these matters today, do we sufficiently focus on the fact that most young people measure what is good and what is bad against the yardstick of their individual needs and feelings rather than the course they are following and what it offers academically and professionally?

5. When discussing transfer credits, could we give greater recognition to a different set of factors, that is, focus on linguistic, personal, social and cultural skills as credit worthy in this connection? Would knowing that they are not being measured on academic or professional criteria alone perhaps increase the motivation of students to study abroad?

6. Should a practice placement be an obligatory part of a student's period of study abroad, given the positive influence this would seem to have on the development of students' professional identities?