

Saimaa University of Applied Sciences
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Imatra
Degree Programme in Tourism and Hospitality management
Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management

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Educational Travel in Finland and at Saimaa University of Applied Sciences from the Perspective of International Students

Thesis 2019

Abstract

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The purpose of the study is to evaluate the international students' perspectives on educational travel in Finland through their experiences at Saimaa University of Applied Sciences (Saimaa UAS).

This study used both secondary and primary materials. Secondary data was synthesized from various sources of books, grey literature, articles, newspaper, reports and the Internet. Meanwhile, primary data was collected by qualitative method of semi-structured in-depth interview. The interviews were conducted on fifteen international students attending Saimaa UAS in Imatra, starting from 18 February to 8 March 2019. There were eleven questions in total, divided into five main topics related to the travel and study experience.

The findings of the research indicate that Finland and Saimaa UAS are favourable travel destinations for education. They provide the students with high-quality education, encouraging learning environment, good and sound living conditions, harmonious foreign-local relationship as well as chances for cognitive, affective and personal development. Considering the benefits of this travel phenomenon, further research should be fostered for better management and implementation.

Keywords: educational travel in Finland, educational travel at Saimaa UAS, international students

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Appendix 1 Interview structure

1 Introduction

Educational tourism is not a newly appeared concept, instead people have already executed educational tours for several centuries (Ritchie 2013). The phenomenon is caused by the development in tourist motivations, moving upwards from common factors like relaxation, safety, work or social reasons to personal growth, knowledge and experience achievement. Besides, studies show educational tourism has significantly positive effects not only on the economy, society and environment but also the educational travellers themselves. Although this special type is recently one of the most demanded products in tourism and travel sector (Al Shwayat 2017, p.1), there is still a lack of attention and in-depth researches on the topic.

With an advanced education system, modern educational contents and teaching methods, Finland owns great competitive advantages in the industry. Therefore, the country attracts substantial number of educational travellers, including university students who are interested in the Finnish approaches to learning. Although a growth in the number of overseas students in tertiary education is acknowledged, the development rates move relatively slowly in comparison with the benchmark nations (Ministry of Education and Culture 2015, p.11). Attempting to gain more insights about the situation, the study surveys on international students' opinions and evaluation on the educational experience in Finland and Saimaa UAS. This can be a reference source for the associated tourism and education departments, which may inspire further researches and actions for future development. Understanding on the topic should create a win-win situation for not only the foreign students but the host country as well.

In order to accomplish the thesis's objective, five aims need to be achieved. Firstly, the reasons encouraging students to travel abroad for education are collected. Then, the study identifies Finland's competences and competitive advantages that can attract students to the destination. The third aim is to find out the foreign students' expectations for the mobility. After that, the quality of the real educational experience to meet or exceed those expectations is evaluated. The last aim is to assess the satisfaction/dissatisfaction and the willingness of the

students to recommend Finland and Saimaa UAS as worth-considering educational places. Following are the research questions which should be satisfactorily tackled to achieve the above objectives:

- Why do students nowadays travel abroad for education?
- What are Finland's strengths and advantages to compete in the educational tourism destination?
- Which are the most important aspects that students expect/require from the educational travel experience in Finland and/or at Saimaa UAS?
- How does the actual experience fulfil the expectations and benefit the foreign students personally?
- What would be the arguments which would lead the students to recommend or not recommend Finland?

The thesis is consisted of two main parts which are theoretical and empirical. The beginning of the theory explains the concept special interest tourism, which is the umbrella term of educational tourism. The next chapter discusses the scope of educational tourism, including definition, history, parameters and segmentation, the university student travellers, travel motivations, and its impacts in different sectors. An overview on Finland's current state related to educational travel is also covered. The empirical section starts with a description and justification for the targeted survey group and the research method chosen. Information collected from research process will then be analysed and revealed. The summaries of research results are given in the final chapter.

With the focus on university student market, the thesis leaves out knowledge related to other educational tourism's segments such as natural tourism, cultural tourism, adults and seniors' tourism. The method used in the empirical research is semi-structured in-depth interview, which consists of eleven questions organized in five themes paralleling to five thesis aims. The interviews are undertaken on international degree and non-degree students in Saimaa in Imatra. Considering the heterogeneity of the student group in Finland, the data from the studied sample may not be representative and true for the whole population.

2 Special interest tourism

2.1 Definition

The definition of special interest tourism (SIT) has been introduced in several studies (Read 1980, cited in Ritchie 2003; Derrett 2001; Novelli 2005, cited in Hannam & Knox 2010), explained by different phrasing, but all deliver the same content: a form of tourism in which people participate so as to pursue a specific interest/motivation in a particular destination. The travel experience is customized to individuals' or groups' demands, on which their satisfaction is evaluated. Poon (1993) proposes, as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.26), this type of tourism, also regarded as 'new tourism', develops due to the changes in travel trends and traveller behaviours in early twenty-first century. Owing the progressive system of the 'new tourism', SIT is *a complex phenomenon characterised by flexible delivery, market segmentation and advances in technology affecting management and distribution* (Derrett 2001, p.3). The aim is to launch an efficient operation to design bundles of tourism components desired by the niche consumer groups. Different from the 'old' version, these products concentrate on offering unique experiences relating to the destination such as authentic culture, closeness to nature and interaction with the host community, with minimized disturbance to the local environment and society. Because of its sustainable characteristics, SIT or responsible tourism is considered as greener alternatives to lessen the negative impacts caused by the growing mass tourism (Derrett 2001, pp.7,13).

2.2 Characteristics

Holidays are usually taken to escape the normal, daily aspects like work, social life, duties and chores, but through SIT, other everyday facets of a person can also be actively pursued during these leisure times such as pursuing an interest, learning a new skill or developing a hobby (Hannam & Knox 2010, p.89). During these vacations, the engagement to the interested activity seems to be enhanced further than when people are at home. As proposed by Richards and Wilson (2007) (cited in Hannam & Knox 2010, p.93), tighter relationship with the interest, deeper insights, more active involvement and fellowship development are the results of creative tourism, a form of SIT. An example of continuous pursuit of a

special interest from home to holiday can be a visit to vineyard of an oenophile, who enjoy making wines at home, to learn from the wine specialists through practical experience. Since nurturing long-standing interests and developing skills are the main motivations, travellers normally travel with a serious manner, which is equated by Stebbins (1992) (cited in Hannam & Knox 2010, p.93.) with 'career-like' pursuit. This links to the fact that SIT is recognized under another term - 'serious leisure' (Ritchie 2003). A SIT travel, or also interpreted by Read (1980), as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.29) and in Derrett (2001, p.11), as REAL travel, should consist of four features: rewarding, enriching, adventuresome and learning experience.

3 Educational tourism

This part discusses the literature of educational tourism, one of the most fast-growing segments of SIT and has been receiving more recognition recently due to the growing trend in combining learning with tourism and its substantial benefits. With the central target on the student population, though there are formal and informal education, the study focuses more on the academic form.

3.1 Growing demands for higher education

Tertiary education used to be available for the elite, but rapidly attracted mass participation and nowadays, expands universally (Sarrico 2017; OECD 1998). The demand, at first, developed rather slowly. Yet, since the late 20th century, it has grown significantly as attending higher education is believed to be a step towards rewarding jobs for many young people. Moreover, the political transition to democratisation in the 1960s successfully eliminated class discrimination and featured equity, which opened wider entry for the general public to higher education, particularly universities and their equivalents. (OECD 1998, p.20.) Until today, pursuit of higher education continues to flourish, not only in number but also in age range: a high number of students in their late twenties are noted in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway and the United States. These differences in student demographics lead to the diversity of interests, motivations and needs connected to education. (Kaneko & Kitamura 1995.)

People enter higher education, not just for personal growth, job competences and qualifications, but also for the evolution of knowledge, cultural and intellectual development of the society. The increase of the middle class with better educational level and income (OECD 1998, pp.19-20), looser visa controls and impacts of globalisation (Ritchie 2003, p.6) make participation in tertiary education within nation or abroad easier than ever before. The rise of intellectual pursuit also receives strong support from families because parents want the best possible educational opportunities for their children (OECD 1998, p.19). Therefore, a tremendous boost of 2.8 million mobile students was recorded by UNESCO between the period 2000-2016 (IOM 2018, p.24). Realizing the enormous benefits of the student inflows, many favourable policies and programs are launched as to attract this source of global talent (IIE 2018). For instance, Rico and Loredana (2009) (cited in Abubakar et al. 2014, p.59) suggest fostering more study programs in English to reach wider population and increase the market share. Or Blight (1995), as cited in Abubakar et al. (2014, p.59), notes that special effort on marketing the education system is devoted by the regional and national authorities to engage more international students. After all, educational travel is believed to contribute to a nation's wealth and tourism development.

So far, English-speaking countries are the most popular choices among international students, according to Project Atlas (2017) (cited in IIE 2018, p.3), with half of the population distributed in five areas: United States, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. However, France, Germany and Russia Federation, presented by UNESCO (2018), as cited in IOM (2018, p.24), are other tough players in the industry. Meanwhile, emerging nations, particularly China and Japan, have recently begun to edge the past competitors (IIE 2018, p.4). The movement of foreign students to a country can be subjected to social, political or safety factors, besides the education elements and living conditions. For example, the Brexit situation, xenophobia of the host community or terrorist attacks may cause serious reluctance in the majority of international students (de Wit 2018).

As stated by Smith and Jenner (1997) (cited in Ritchie 2003, p.9), tourism enriches the intellectual aspect of individuals. In other words, education is an outcome of tourism. Still, education and learning can become the primary motivation

for traveling (Stone & Petrick 2013, p.5), especially in the university students' educational tourism segment.

3.2 Definition

According to Maga and Nicolau (2018, p.343), the phenomenon was firstly recognized under the name 'educational travel' or edu-tourism. Its definition is described as *a program in which participants travel to a location as a group with the primary purpose of engaging in a learning experience directly related to the location* (Bodger 1998). In 2003, Ritchie (p.18) developed a more specific term, including the following aspects:

- Educational tourism can either occur in form of an overnight vacation or an excursion;
- The learning and education elements play either primary or secondary role in the travel experience;
- Typical types include general educational tourism, adult study tours, international and domestic university and school students' travel;
- A trip can be planned by a tour operator, guide or attraction (formally) or by the person him/herself (informally);
- A trip takes place within natural, cultural or human-made environment, depending on the purposes and tourism products which the tourists pursue.

So far, Ritchie's (2003) and Smith and Jenner's (1997) work are considered to be the most influential in educational tourism literature (Maga and Nicolau 2018, p.343).

3.3 The Grand Tour and educational tourism forms today

Traced back to the seventeenth century, the first form of educational trip has existed, namely the Grand Tour. According to Machin (2000), Hibbert (1969) interprets it as a training course for the young aristocrats, which is described by Ritchie (2003, p.10) as *a series of study tours lasting up to several years in European destinations such as France, Switzerland and Germany*. During the tours, these men visited educational institutions and took courses, escorted by servants and tutors whose responsibility was to supervise and teach them formal manners

(Machin 2000). Learning foreign languages might additionally have taken place. For instance, *learning Italian from the natives might be compulsory once in the country*, according to Trease in 1967 (Machin 2000). Activities outside the classroom like fencing, riding, dancing were also organized (Ritchie 2003, p. 10). At the time, the Grand Tour was only practiced by the nobility to seek for education and later served as their personal prestige (Machin 2000). The main reason was related to the extravagant expenses (Ritchie 2003, p.10). In addition to serious knowledge on philosophy, politics and science, these young men brought along acquired foreign words, cuisine, fashion or even servants, which was a means for boasting social status. Therefore, John Locke concluded the Tour did not aim to “build up men”, instead to “trick out a fine set of gentlemen”, reported by Hibbert in 1969. (Machin 2000.)

Gradually, the Grand Tour was adopted by other classes in the society, from noble and wealthy participants to people in middle and lower ranks and then the mass market, stated by Gee et al. (1997) (cited in Ritchie 2003). Because of this popularization and the shortened time and money spent on the trip, Steinecke (1993), as cited in Ritchie (2003), explains for the appearance of informal educational tourism, where sightseeing activities were enhanced. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the tendency of the elite to visit other uncommon destinations in the Grand Tour, which intended to escape from the lower market, led to the exploration of the Alps and numerous valuable findings in mineralogy, geology as well and geomorphology (Ritchie 2003, p.10).

Until today, learning has undoubtedly been an integral part of travel, enriching not only the travellers' intellectual minds but also the knowledge about the outside world. Thus, tourism products that serve learning purposes are drawing greater attention and demand, declared by the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) in 2001 (cited in Ritchie 2003). Smith and Jenner (1997) (cited in Ritchie 2003) name the trend 'leisure-education hybrid', referring to a blend of educational and learning activities into the leisure environment. For instance, museums and science centres are built on grounds of knowledge provision for the general community. Yet, recently, they are continuously seeking for new and creative ways to

arouse interest and engagement of wider population, especially the young generation, by implementing interactive experiences like games and mobile apps. The phenomenon is termed as edutainment, which helps to make the learning more interesting and enjoyable. (Educational Entertainment.) Through educational entertainment, fun-based locations can approach the education targets more easily; whereas the education-oriented places can employ the modern innovations of the entertainment industry (Ritchie 2003). The National Museum of Singapore is a great example for the inventive method to educate their visitors. They hold a magnificent exhibition here, whose name is Story of the Forest, comprised of sixty-nine mural drawings of different types of plants and animals. By using an app similar to the game Pokémon Go, the guests can “catch the species” with their smartphones and learn deeper about the organs, habitats or diet. (Hassassian 2018.) Nonetheless, an underlying question on the appropriate amount of education and entertainment for a successful learning experience was raised by Mann in 1996 (Okan 2003, p.262). Imbalance between the two components may lead to the dilution of museums’ role on educating (Educational Entertainment) or learners’ refusal to study when the fun is not provided, predicated by Bloom and Hanych in 2002 (Okan 2003, p.258).

Since the Grand Tour, student mobility has been still a flourishing section of educational tourism and holds remarkable records in the industry. The growing demand for offshore and lifelong education has prompted students to travel abroad and take part in learning-oriented programs. As a result, in the past decades, an emerging number of tour operators and travel agencies have entered the education market (McGladdery & Lubbe 2017), arranging various forms of tourism products such as student exchange and fellow programs, study tours, cultural tours, scientific tours and individual visits (Swain & Mishra 2012, p.132). Through these opportunities, the students can interact, exchange knowledge with the host countries, learn their cultures, living styles, traditions, languages, people, politics, and many more (Swain & Mishra 2012, p.131; Gartner 1996, p.178). Currently, ERASMUS (the European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students) is one of the most well-known examples, allowing students to travel and study at another university for a short period to obtain an international perspective on their education and training. In addition, there are many fellowship schemes

currently operated to promote exchange programs between India, America, the UK and Canada, particularly, Fulbright Scholarship, Commonwealth Fellowship and Shastri Fellowship (Swain & Mishra 2012, p.132).

3.4 Segmentation and parameters

Despite the increasing importance in the tourism industry, educational travel has only received recognition and attention until recently. Since scarce researches on the topic were carried out, plus the complexity in nature, the field's true size, extent, and spectrum are still under debate (Smith and Jenner 1997, cited in Ritchie 2003; Pitman et al. 2010). In 2001, CTC notes the range of learning and education in tourism can be demonstrated through a continuum, whose one end is 'general interest learning while traveling' and 'purposeful learning and travel' at the other end (Ritchie 2003). 'General interest learning' is mostly evoked during guided tours, interpretative programs, family holidays or backpacking rites of passages, whereas 'intent learning and travel' is achieved through offshore study, credit tours or student exchanges, which often take part in an academic plan. Educational tourism experiences fall within the middle area between the two continuum's poles. (Pitman et al. 2010, p.235.) Ritchie (2003, p. 11) remarks educational tourism may consist of more diverse sectors rather than just three types, namely adult extension programmes, adult study tours and cultural educational tourism, studied by Kalinowski and Weiler in 1992 and Wood in 2001. As suggested in his definition, an educational travel can either be 'tourism first' or 'education first'.

The concept of educational tourism is described through a simplified model developed by Ritchie in 2003 (Figure 1). Figure 1 presents some possible subtypes of the field and divides them into two groups. 'Tourism first' refers to a travel where the learning is a stimulating factor for better overall quality of the experience, which includes adult or seniors' educational tourism, ecotourism and cultural tourism. Meanwhile, 'education first' indicates study trips which always associate to credentials such as school, university and college students' tourism. However, the degree of educational element should be in a travel to be considered 'education-first' experience can hardly be measured. Those who participate in school excursions, language courses or university exchange programs still

possess the tourists' characteristics, although they may not recognize themselves as tourists. As a conclusion, *similarly to other groups and segments of tourism, classifying educational tourism is a difficult and complicated process.* (Ritchie 2003.)

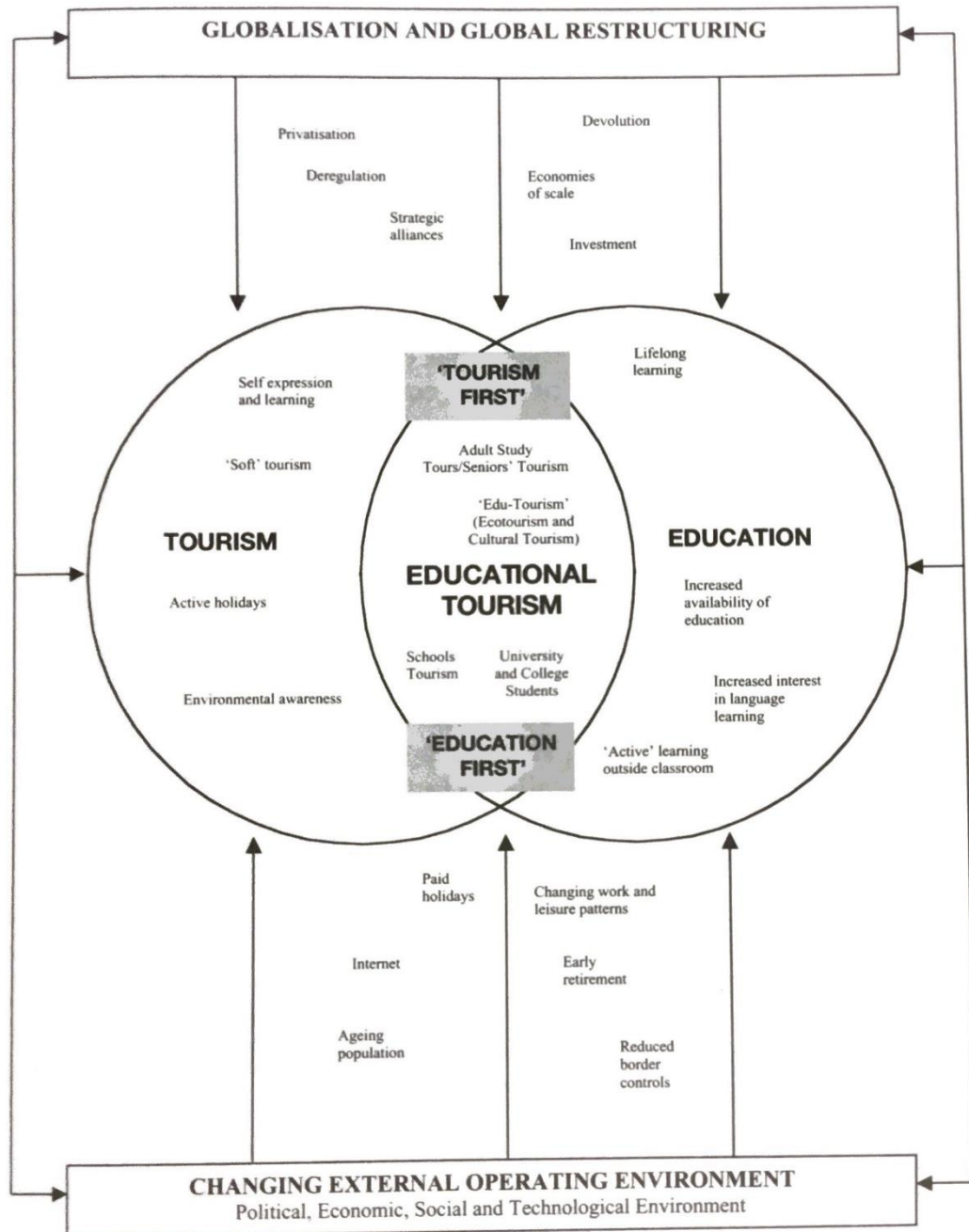


Figure 1. Conceptualising educational tourism: a segmentation approach (Ritchie 2003, p.13)

Still, the model shows some problems when considering human as self-identity and each individual has different attitudes towards learning and education. For instance, As cited in McGladdery & Lubbe (2017), Pitman et al. (2010) and Road Scholar (2015) state that lifelong learning can play the prime role for many senior travellers, though adult and seniors' tourism is classified as 'tourism first' by Ritchie. Or else, school excursions, which are expected as outdoor learning by the teachers, are usually contrarily viewed as fun visits by the children. In addition to Ritchie's bunch of 'edu-tourism', which includes ecotourism and cultural tourism, a few other suggestions like agritourism, heritage tourism and literary tourism can be added as types of travel for general learning. (McGladdery & Lubbe 2017, p.323.)

Another important contribution to the study of educational tourism is made by Ritchie. In terms of length of time, intentions, motivation, preparation, formality and settings, he set out the parameters, within which an educational travel experience varies. The experience can last half a day like a school excursion or be three-month long like a summer camp. Moreover, Ritchie (2003, p.17) believes some factors may influence another, in particular, motivation and intentions on preparation, or preparation on formality level. For instance, a person undertaking a one-year MBA program for higher qualifications needs more thoughtful planning than when going on a cultural tour with a tour guide. Likewise, preparation involving a tour guide or an instructor would be regarded as formal organization through an affiliated or unaffiliated group; while informal tourist experience is autonomously organized by the individual (Ritchie 2003, p.17).

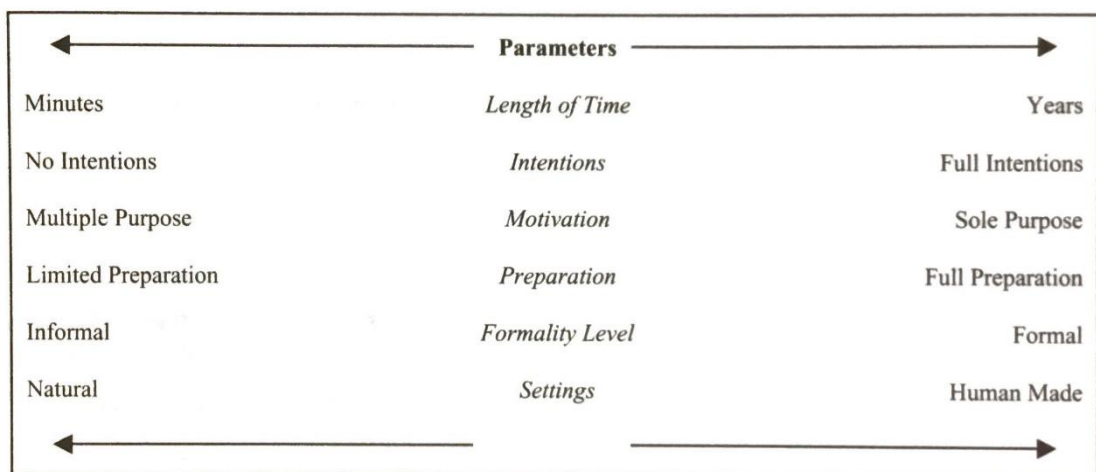


Figure 2. Parameters of educational tourism (Ritchie 2003, p.17)

Although the parameters help to discuss the phenomenon in a narrower framework, it is problematic to specify the true nature, especially concerning the duration of the experience (Maga & Nicolau 2018, p. 344). According to Weaver and Oppermann (2000), as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.2), a traveller should make at least an overnight stay outside the usual environment to be qualified as a tourist; or else, the person is called an excursionist. Yet, the maximum length of stay required for an educational tourist experience remains unidentified throughout Ritchie's study. This matter may be caused by the disunity of the tourism definition and tourism concepts. In 1988, Smith remarks that *there are many different legitimate definitions of tourism that serve many different, legitimate motives* (Ritchie 2003, p.2). For example, as cited in Maga & Nicolau (2018, p.344), EACEA (2017) notes the longest stay to be classified as a travel for tourism in Europe is ninety days, whereas WTO (2017) claims it should be under one year. The thesis concedes the second concept introduced by WTO, which is as well agreed in several previous researches (Maga & Nicolau 2018; Swain & Mishra 2012; Abubakar et al. 2014). To conclude, educational trips/tours involve the act of traveling away from the usual environment for learning purposes, within a time frame from minutes (e.g. a visit to the national gallery) to under 12 consecutive months (e.g. 6-month exchange study program).

3.5 Forms of educational tourism

Due to the extensive coverage, it is challenging to detect every possible type covered by educational tourism. Besides, there is a difference in opinion among the tourism scholars on the segments constituting educational tourism. As cited in McGladdery & Lubbe (2017, p.321), Richards (2011) believes educational tourism is a phenomenon emerging from cultural tourism and exists as a distinct concept from volunteer tourism, language tourism and creative tourism. On the contrary, The City of Cape Town (2009) (cited in McGladdery & Lubbe (2017, p.321)) claims educational tourism and volunteer tourism have strong relation. McGladdery and Lubbe (2017, pp.323-324) also agree and suggest creative tourism and spiritual tourism, whose travel motive is centrally about personal growth, knowledge and skill achievement, to be included in educational tourism group.

Despite the contrasting ideas above, there are educational tourism themes that are widely recognized and accepted in some previous studies (Bodger 2009; Ritchie 2003; Wood 2001), including ecotourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, adult and seniors' educational tourism, schools' educational tourism, and college and university students' tourism. In this section, only university students' tourism is defined and emphasized due to the relation to thesis purposes and target population.

University students' tourism

Based on Carr's categorization, as cited in Ritchie (2003), there are two types of travels in university students' tourism: (1) travel that is carried out mostly for leisure purposes in university vacation periods, and (2) travel that is a fundamental element in the university experience and takes place during academic terms.

The first form can be considered 'tourism first' since the majority of students perceive it as a chance for recreational activities. However, a lack of prior examination on a wide range of holidays and student holiday behaviours has been noted by Sirakaya and McLellan (1997), and Babin and Kim (2001), according to Carr in 2003 (cited in Ritchie 2003, p.183). Consequently, knowledge on the patterns and level of the students' participation in learning components during university breaks still remain undetermined.

The second travel type places heavy emphasis on the education and learning component. Following Carr's segmentation (cited in Ritchie 2003), there are three variations: spontaneous mobility, organized mobility and field trips. Spontaneous mobility happens when a student decides to study in a foreign university without inter-institutional agreement or financial support, whereas organized one is bound with the exchange programs agreed between institutions or nations, as defined by Carr (2003), as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.191). Students who commit the spontaneous travel are indicated by Jallade et al. (2001) (cited in Ritchie 2003, p.195) to be driven largely by the desire to escape from the confining educational situation in home countries such as educational requirements and place availability. Organized mobility, on the other hand, provides the students with an international dimension to education, culture and social values while studying in

another region. ERASMUS, one of the leading study-abroad programs, has supported over three million students to achieve this learning opportunity in the last 30 years (European Commission n.d.). Lastly, field trips are practically course-based activities, where theory and reality are integrated for more profound understanding on the subject, according to Carr (2003) (cited in Ritchie 2003, p.209). As stated by Meyer-Lee and Evans (2007), as cited in Stone & Petrick (2013, p.4), experiential learning like excursions can result in greater openness and engagement to knowledge.

3.6 Students as educational travellers

Students are one of the most notable forces in educational tourism field due to the rapid expansion in volume and impacts. As the Institution of International Education (IIE) (2018) declares, the number of students crossing borders for education is at all times considerable, with a record of over 4.8 million students in 2016, retrieved from UNESCO's source (IOM 2018, p.24). The trend is anticipated to continue to flourish for years to come. Although the majority of university students are young, the group is regarded separately from the youth travellers (18 to 30 years old), because of the difference in their travel behaviours that are associated with the difference in age, sociocultural, educational and economic situation. Pritchard and Morgan (1996), as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.181), also underline explicit dissimilarities in the holiday patterns between students and young people who has a full-time job, which may stem from the difference in financial allowance, time availability, and work commitment. Students are described to have a low budget (Nordin 2005, p.36), generous free time outside the university semesters and few work duties to take care of due to the small proportion of full-time employed students, according to Davies and Lea (1995) (cited in Ritchie 2003, p.184). Despite the limited budget, they tend not to let the fact prevent them from traveling and obtaining valuable experiences (Ritchie 2003; Nordin 2005). Besides personal funds, bank or student loans and relatives' financial support (Ritchie 2003, pp.184,185), students tend to either work or take on debts, widening the spending pocket to enjoy the best out of the travels (Nordin 2005, p.36). Furthermore, students' time schedules allow them to frequently carry out long trips which are considered by Richards and Wilson (2003) (cited in Nordin

2005) as “once in a lifetime opportunity”. These experiences tend to have a rich and long-lasting meaning to their lives. (Nordin 2005, p.36.)

3.7 Travel motivations

To understand the system of educational tourism or tourism in general, it is fundamental to thoroughly understand the travel motivation – the ‘why’ factor behind the tourist behaviour. Nevertheless, the study on the topic poses many obstacles, caused by the vast variety of individual needs and the difficulties to measure them as well as the challenges in the generalization process of motives across cultures (Pearce 2005, p.51). Still, multiple attempts were made, resulting in two most well-recognised applications of motivation theories into tourism field, which are Crompton’s push and pull factors (1979) and Pearce’s Travel Career Ladder (TCL) model (1988) (Yousaf et al. 2018). Crompton’s push factors, as described by Andersen et al. (2000) as cited in Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael (2010, pp.14-15), are internal and intrinsic stimuli for traveling, including the desire to escape from everyday life and routine, education, self-exploration, novelty, prestige and so on. Pull factors, in contrast, are destination-specific attributes such as landscapes, activities offered, service quality, and other tourism products that benefit the push motives. Meanwhile, adapted from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the TCL suggests five levels of travel motives, moving from relaxation, safety/security, relationship, self-esteem and development to self-actualisation/fulfilment (Pearce 2005, pp.52-53). However, Rowan (1998), as cited in Pearce (2005, p.53), believes constructing theories of travel motivation based on Maslow’s simply hierarchy may not adequately represent the two sophisticated facets of self-esteem, self-actualization and competence needs. Hence, Maslow’s pyramid is only a part in the TCL theory, as tourist motives can be affected by other factors such as individuals’ life-course transitions (Pearce 2005; Mahika 2011; Hall 2005). Some important determinants include family (i.e. marriage, children, divorce or separation), economy (i.e. income, career, retirement), health (i.e. frailty, illness, disabilities) and travel experience (previous travels may affect tourist’s expectations and attitudes towards the later ones) (Mahika 2011; Hall 2005). A tourist may be influenced by the combination of those forces, but one motive is more likely to dominate (Mahika 2011, p.17; Pearce 2005, p.53).

As shown in the self-esteem/development and fulfilment needs of the TCL model and also outlined by Crompton in 1979, the desire for education and learning is one of the primary factors encouraging traveling. However, all tourism provides knowledge, clear distinction between educational and other types of motives can hardly be drawn. For instance, curiosity about a cultural heritage can be considered as either a cultural or educational interest. Or else, social motivation like following a hobby may connect to learning if the action is viewed as knowledge broadening. (Ritchie 2003, p.30.) Though education is becoming an influential force of travel, discussions on educational tourists and their travel behaviours are scarce. The situation is subjected to the problems in defining and measuring precisely the broad educational tourism field; whereas, the task is less demanding in more specific segments such as schools' tourism or university and college students' tourism (Ritchie 2003, p.32).

Yet, a variety of travel stimuli within the student population should be acknowledged. Two different types of university and college students' tourism are stated to have different purposes for traveling. Those who travel outside the university term-time tend to be appealed to *a combination of passive, social and hedonistic activities* (Ritchie 2003, p.185), which originates from the low-level needs in the TCL. Josiam et al. (1994), as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.185), relate 'passive' to relaxation, 'hedonistic pursuits' to desires to party, dance and drink, and 'social motives' to visiting relatives/friends. They also add that the lure of changes in the normal surroundings provokes travel intention. Additionally, as cited in Ritchie (2003, p.185), Carr (forthcoming), Chadee and Cutler (1996) suggest this group shows little interest in learning, personal growth or employment-related elements. The other type of university students' tourism, in contrast, travels abroad priorly to access new experiences and achieve many educational benefits, which is explained by Carlson and Widaman (1988) (cited in Ritchie (2003, p.192)) as *intellectual and professional development, general education, personal growth and the furthering of international understanding*. Besides, as cited in Abubakar et al. (2014, p.59), Felix and Steve (2007) state 'pull' factors from the host destinations also affect greatly the students' travel decisions, for example, the country's international recognition for higher education and safety, and institution's education

quality, for instance, university curriculum, teaching expertise, and accommodation cost and availability.

3.8 Impacts of educational tourism on various aspects

3.8.1 Social impact

According to Wood (2001, p.189), educational tourism connects people more intimately to the travel destinations, by *telling stories of places, teaching them how to decode places visually, how to see the relationships between places, and how to locate places in the evolution of society and culture*. In addition, educational tourists are the new, intelligent travel force (Wood 2001) who have proper respect to the visited destination and host community, according to Horne (1992) (cited in Pearce (2005, p.22)) and contribute to the local economy, according to Swarbrooke (1999) (cited in Pearce (2005, p.23)). These factors are expected to lessen the negative effects of globalization and cultural dilution caused by the mass tourism. The visitors-local interactions with the place's culture and values may also be encouraged as students' educational trips tend to take place frequently and in a longer period compared to other types of travel. Furthermore, student travellers are more likely to build deep associations with the local residents like teachers, other students and the local residents. (Aliyeva 2015, pp.18-19.) This may erase negative cultural stereotypes, develop global mindset, broaden perspectives and form cosmopolitan hospitality towards others (Lilley 2014, p.5).

3.8.2 Economic impact

International students' travel has been proven to bring substantial profits to the economy of the visited destinations/countries (Ritchie 2003; Obrien & Jamnia 2013; Adekalu & Oludeyi 2013; Abubakar et al. 2014). Not only does the number of students traveling for higher education rapidly increase (IIE 2018), but this group also has plenty of favourable features that attract heavy governmental investment, for instance, in Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore, South Africa, Japan and South Korea (Obrien & Jamnia 2013, p. 171). Bywater (1993) refers to the university student tourism as a multibillion-dollar business (Ritchie 2003, p.181). The

US and UK, two leading players in the field, benefited respectively from the international students \$32.8 billion (Struck 2016) in 2015/16 and approximately £17.6 billion (Migration Advisory Committee 2018, p.3) in 2015.

The financial benefits of a student can be evaluated through three major sources. Firstly, the direct revenues come from tuition fees and payment of other needs like visa, accommodation, subsistence, transportation, health insurance and so on. Secondly, indirect income is generated by the 'knock-on' effects, which derives when universities and suppliers of those products and services bought by the students both use the money from students further on employees, goods and services from other sectors in the economy. (London Economics 2018, pp.1-2.) In the year 2014/15, the foreign students in the UK generated an estimation of £4.8 billion for tuition fee and £11.3 billion for subsistence (Universities UK 2017, p.3), proving to be an influential source of export earnings. Although the students may not perceive themselves as tourists, Weaver (2003) still acknowledges their active participation in other types of tourism and associated leisure activities during the school breaks (Obrien & Jamnia 2013, p.172). The group can largely be budget travellers, but the travel spirit is high and they tend to dedicate time, energy and money to the experiences of their lifetime. The last source to mention is the spending of the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) during the students' stay in the host countries (London Economics 2018; Migration Advisory Committee 2018; Universities UK 2017; Struck 2016). An impressive amount of £480 million in gross value added to UK GDP from the VFR visitors was reckoned in year 2014/15 (Universities UK 2017, p.5).

However, the more benefits a nation's economy receives from the student travellers, the more dependent on the group it becomes. As noted by Bay (2000), the chief executive of UKCOSA declares that the survival and development of a sector of society will have to rely upon the international talents as future workforce if the foreign students account for more than half of the population. (Ritchie 2003, p.194.)

3.8.3 Environmental impact

Educational tourism is believed to effectively generate awareness and environmental knowledge for the general public by providing certain tourism experiences (Grušovnik 2010, p.173). Through direct contact with the natural surroundings, Kobori (2009) as cited in Bhuiyan et al. (2010), states that people can achieve positive improvements in education, skills and attitudes towards the nature. For instance, children may form positive habits to conserve forests when they participate frequently in school excursions in forest areas. (Bhuiyan et al. 2010, p. 21.) Tour programs, furthermore, can also be designed to include unattractive sights of landfills, mining sites, industrial and production areas, aiming to prompt recognition on negative impacts of human's lifestyles on the environment (Grušovnik 2010, p.173).

Nonetheless, Ritchie (2003, p.63) notes serious issues can, after all, encounter in educational tourism when proper management is not performed. Despite ecotourism's core aims of conservation and preservation, a vast increase in ecotourists will still lead to the exploitation of natural environment to fulfil tourist demands and make profits. According to Cater (1993), wildlife will be disturbed and endangered because of coastal resort expansion or growing business of souvenirs, trophies and gifts (Ritchie 2003, p.69). Additionally, threats of irresponsible behaviours of the tourists still need assessing, regardless their high education level and great experience in travel. For example, the risk of souveniring in Antarctic area must be verified and minimized if needed (Ritchie 2003, p.116).

3.8.4 Personal impact

An educational travel is expected to influence students in three dimensions: interculturality, maturity and intellectual development (Gu 2012). These personal changes take place due to the shift from their comfort zones to new places and experiences. In a strange environment, students are forced to create intercultural relationships with the local communities or even co-nationals. Within these contacts, the emulation of someone may foster their personal growth. Gradually, students acquire better understanding and empathy for other ethnic groups. As they

widen their perspectives, a global mindset is then adopted and global citizen behaviours are formed. (Lilley 2014, p.5.) This entire progress can be regarded as transformative learning, where a disorienting dilemma affects the person's psychology, conviction and behaviours (Transformative Learning). The relation between travel and transformative learning in students is discovered and widely agreed by Brown (2009), Werry (2008), and Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) (Stone & Petrick 2013). Moreover, independence, self-confidence, adaptability and problem-solving skills are normally achieved when living away from families and peers, as proven in studies of Gmelch (1997), Hansel (1988), Stitsworth (1988) and Carlson, and Widaman (1988) (Ritchie 2003, pp.192-194). Lastly, educational travel can offer students better-quality education with lower costs (Carr 2003, p.191). For instance, most of German public universities provide top education and require no tuition fees (Goetz 2019) except for termly administration fee, which is more affordable than most of the studies in the US and UK (Study International 2018a). In addition, the establishment of international exchange schemes similar to ERASMUS increases the chances for students in developing nations to experience a more advanced and innovative education system in developed ones (Carr 2003, p. 206).

3.9 University student travel in Finland

3.9.1 The Finnish tertiary education system

In recent years, Finland's education system has been praised to be one of the best in the world, owning an admirable position in the global PISA (Visit Finland 2018) and Universitas 21 Ranking (Williams & Leahy 2018, p.6). Unlike many other prestigious nations, Finland has its distinctive way to approach education such as reducing school days, minimizing homework and exams, fostering experiential learning and focusing on self-development and individual autonomy (Visit Finland 2019, p.3). Yet, excellent results are produced, thanks to high-qualification educators and excellent educational contents, effective school management, trust-based teaching methods, equality in study environment, and a lifelong learning attitude cultivated throughout the society (Visit Finland 2018, p.9).

While the Finnish education system may not be considered to be long-standing like the ones of UK and US, the country still owns some of the world-class universities, for example, University of Helsinki, Aalto University and University of Turku. Still, a number of Finnish universities are underrated by quality in the international marketplace (Visit Finland 2018, p.21), possibly because of the conventional ranking method, which determines ratings through national income and expenditure levels (Study International 2018b). Meanwhile, as declared by Eyewitness News, when referring to GDP per capita as a measurement of educational quality, Finland takes over the US and UK, which are the two most desirable destinations for tertiary education (Study International 2018b).

3.9.2 The international student market in Finland

The achievements in education have intrigued curiosity among new international student travellers, who are fascinated to spend a whole or part of their degree in the country. The students can travel with an organized program or independently, and study in a UAS or traditional university. In 2017, over twenty thousand degree students and over ten thousand exchange ones were reported by Statistics Finland. Some of the top countries of origins includes Russia, China, Vietnam, Nepal, Germany and France. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018.)

3.9.3 Current situation of tertiary education in Finland

The implementation of tuition fee for non-EU citizens starting from August 2017 is revealed to decrease the total international applications for tertiary education, noting a 20% decline in 2018 compared to 2016. Still, it is believed that the Finnish universities are able to bounce back in the near future thanks to the world-class education system. (Anderson 2018.) Remaining positive about the current situation, the government is putting more effort into fostering education export business. The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) has announced to carry out the Education Finland, a governmental cluster program, aiming to provide support to education providers in their expansion to the international market. So far, the country's expertise has been applied by many others, particularly, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Indonesia and South Africa.

(Tuomi 2017.) The potential for Finland to benefit from its top-quality education system is still enormous.

4 Methodology

The methodology chapter clarifies the choice of qualitative approach and describes the stages in the research process, including defining the participants, selecting research methods, identifying delimitations, collecting, analysing and interpreting data. The specific data collection method chosen is semi-structured in-depth interview.

Introduced in the beginning, the study's main objective is to evaluate the perspectives of overseas students on higher-educational travel in Finland. Since the desired information chiefly deals with students' subjective viewpoints, thoughts, feelings and experiences, qualitative method should be the suitable tool, when considering its featured characteristics. According to McGivern (2009, p.612), qualitative research produces comprehensive, detailed knowledge about the subject (Mirola 2017). Moreover, it is regarded to be useful in discovering subtleties and nuances in the collected data (Mirola 2017), which can be beneficial for the exploration and description of various students' responses.

4.1 Research population

Aligning with the study's topic, the research participants were the international students who had participated in forms of educational tourism in Finland. Due to the author's difficulties in approaching a wide geographical population, the study focused only on the foreign students studying in Saimaa UAS and either attending a full-time degree or exchange program. The interview group was different in age (19-26) and nationality (Russian and Vietnamese).

Since the sample size was comparatively small to the actual incoming student population in Finland, it might not be representative enough. Nevertheless, the independence on statistical representativeness and generalizations of qualitative research (Mirola 2017, p.25) helped lessen the risk. Additionally, the author aimed to select the sample segments possessing key features such as age (19-

26), country of origin (common nations are Russia, Vietnam, China and Germany) and education level (Bachelor's degree) similar to the larger group.

4.2 Research method

In-depth semi-structured interview method was employed with a sample of 15 international students. The participants were questioned on five aspects: (1) their travel motivations for learning and education; (2) their reasons for choosing Finland as an educational destination; (3) expectations before mobility; (4) the real experience in Finland and Saimaa UAS; and finally (5) their overall reflection on the experience. Open-ended questions were dominantly used during the interviews so as to obtain as much rich, specific information as possible. As Bridget Byrne in 2004 (cited in Silverman 2006) comments, this type of question tends to raise greater thoughtfulness in responses than closed one, involving more of the interviewee's subjective opinions, attitudes and values. In other words, open-ended questions can turn the participant's implicit knowledge about the topic explicit (Flick 2006, p.156).

Taking into account the author's lack of previous experience in conducting interviews, this qualitative method was a legitimate choice. It requires no specialist skills except the ability to interact, actively listen and let the interviewees openly express their minds. Still, the interviewer has the control to take the lead of the entire conversation. (Silverman 2006, p.110.)

4.3 Delimitations

The lack of diverse backgrounds of the international students in Saimaa UAS might reduce the divergence of opinions and experiences collected. Another concern related to the sample size. Despite the attempt to achieve data saturation, the saturation concept itself is elusive and relative in qualitative research due to the scarcity of solid rules or test to measure a sample's sufficiency in volume (Marshall et al. 2013, p.11).

4.3.1 Question formation

A structured set of twelve open-ended interview questions was formulated to evaluate the foreign students' tourism experience. These questions were distributed into five topics (see Appendix), aligning with the five research aims:

- (1) Travel motivations for learning and education: question 1;
- (2) Explanations for choosing Finland: questions 2 to 4, dealing with the students' preferences for specific educational destinations, reasons for choosing Finland and Finland's advantages as a favourable candidate;
- (3) Expectations before mobility: questions 5 and 6, asking about the students' expectations and demands for the travelled place and the most important elements among them;
- (4) The actual experience in Finland (or Saimaa in particular): questions 7 to 9, surveying on whether the reality meets expectations, highlights and drawbacks of the travel experience as well as its impacts on the students;
- (5) Reflections: questions 10 and 11, asking for the interviewees' evaluation at the experience, satisfaction and the people they would recommend Finland to.

The interview concentrated on the students' personal viewpoints and the course of events in their lives, so the participants already had the knowledge at hand. Still, the amounts of possible data were vast. Reflecting and refining the interview questions, therefore, were taken throughout the data collection process in order to increase the feasibility of gathering ideas relevant to the topic.

4.3.2 Pilot test

In qualitative research, it is hard to estimate the outcomes until the actual process has been carried out, according to Steven (n.d.) (Silverman 2006, p.199). Because the subject matter mostly worked with the students' subjective experiences and psychology, it was challenging to ensure the desired information was covered in the students' answers. Thus, pilot test was a necessary step to detect underlying faults, abstruse sentences, or any weaknesses in the interview questions for further reformulation. It was, moreover, a useful practice for the interviewer to be familiar with data collection techniques, which might support her in leading the

talk effectively to acquire the needed data. The samples of the pilot test and real interview were similarly chosen to guarantee the consistency in outcomes.

The pilot test was conducted on 3 international students, taking place two weeks before the official interview, from 1 – 8 February 2019.

4.3.3 Interview procedure

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted on fifteen international students who were at the time studying at Saimaa on Imatra campus, starting from 18 February to 8 March 2019. The author decided the number was the data saturation point of the survey (when no new information could be interpreted). The time chosen for the interviews was during lunchtime or small breaks between lectures. Each conversation lasted ten minutes on average. The international students were chosen randomly, but different approaches were implemented for full-time degree and exchange international students. Based on definition on length of stay of educational tourism used in this study (under 12 consecutive months), the degree student group was evaluated on any university field trips in which they had participated, while the non-degree one was asked about the exchange study.

The beginning of the interview aimed to find out basic information about the students, including current study program and nationality. Then, the flow of questions continued, following the sequence of topics presented in the interview structure (Appendix 1). However, the main research topic (i.e. educational tourism) was kept unrevealed to the interviewees; instead, they were directly asked to talk about either one educational field trip or one exchange program within Finnish regions. Reason for the action was to avoid any influences on the response that might occur when the participants were aware of the research interest (Silverman 2010, p.197). Furthermore, results from pilot test suggested restricting the talk on a specific learning-driven travel experience helps stimulate more specific data than requesting for opinions on educational tourism in general. Throughout the interviews, conversational style was adopted, allowing the students to share more freely their perspectives but still related with the subject matters. All interviews were recorded with the permission from the participants.

4.4 Data analysis process

Before starting to process the data, it was crucial to firstly carry out the transcription step, which was done after each interview instead of waiting for the whole fieldwork to be completed. During this stage, the researcher also focused on reviewing the transcripts several times in order to have a good grasp on the contents and ideas in the students' responses. Additional notes and early impressions were written down to for data association afterwards.

Theoretical coding was adopted as the main tool for data analysis. Due to the chaotic, extensive and complex nature of qualitative data, especially when relating to human psychology and individual experience, coding can help reduce the vast details, give meanings, categorize and connect them together. Following the structure established by Glaser and Strauss (1967) (cited in Flick 2006), the study employed three sequential coding stages: "open coding", "axial coding" and "selective coding". Open coding, the initial level, breaks down textual material into fragments which are later examined, compared and conceptualized. Similarities found in those fragments are, after that, coded and grouped into categories. Meanwhile, axial coding searches for relations between categories to make new data arrangements. The initial codes in a category are merged together, with the addition of relevant codes taken from other groups. The highest level, selective coding, analyses the connection between the newly created categories to discover patterns in data and determine a core category which is usually described in a highly abstract way. (Flick 2006, pp.296-302.) Below is the table demonstrating the theoretical coding process adapted from Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Open coding	Axial Coding	Selective coding
Motivations of short-term travel for education (question 1)		Finland and Saimaa UAS are promising

Reasons for choosing Finland over others (questions 2 to 4)	Dimensions of the educational travel in Finland and at Saimaa UAS	places to travel for higher education.
Expected and real experience (questions 5 to 7)		
Achievements acquired after mobility (question 8)	Educational travel experience's impacts on students	
Highlights and drawbacks of the stay in Finland (question 9)		
Feedback on the experience (question 10)	Students' reflection on experience	
Willingness to spread WOM about Finland (question 11)		

Table 1. Theoretical coding process

5 Research results

5.1 Dimensions of educational travel in Finland and at Saimaa UAS

5.1.1 Students' travel motivations for education

It has been noticed from the interviews that one individual can have several travel motivations and these motivating factors may differ among individuals. Still, in general, there were three motives which were mostly mentioned, including "new places", "new experience" and "new people". In other words, students desired to escape from the usual, familiar education system and sought for changes in the study environment in which they took new approaches to learning and met new people. Through traveling, the interviewees had the opportunity to visit interesting

destinations, obtain practical, authentic experiences as well as get in contact with the local community. The more interesting “pull factors” (e.g. beautiful nature, historical sites, cultural heritage, friendly locals, fascinating cuisines, etc.) the place has, the more the students are attracted to that destination.

“I would like to see how other students in the world study. (...) Would it be the same as in my country?” (A Vietnamese degree student)

“What motivates me to travel for studying is about the place itself. I usually look for the interesting places, some opportunities to live and to how to spend time there (...) maybe some historical sites and good infrastructure.” (A Russian exchange student)

“It’s all about experience. Maybe I can meet new people there and participate in some activities that I’ve never tried.” (A Russian exchange student)

Since knowledge and qualifications are primary purposes for travel, heavy emphasis was placed on the quality of education in the visited country compared to their home nations. Experiencing better education may promote students’ personal and intellectual maturation, after all. Some of them believed studying in an international environment with modern educational programs may be helpful for their future careers.

“Well, for me, I would choose the country where I can receive the best possible education. The education system in my hometown is not so good. (...) I guess, the travel can affect considerably on the qualifications and skills I will learn there.” (A degree student from Vietnam)

Another element which possibly encourages educational travel is “having relatives and/or friends in the near area”. They travel not only for knowledge but also for visiting someone.

“At first, I wanted to study in Germany, because of the education, of course. And also my aunt lives there. I wanted to visit her.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

5.1.2 Reasons for choosing Finland

When being asked about the preferences of destination to study, it was no surprise that most of the respondents mentioned the two long-standing favourites, the US and the UK. Additionally, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland were other answers noted. Nonetheless, Finland had some competitive advantages to win over these international students. The most repeated factor was the high quality of the Finnish education with relatively small tuition fee during the admission times (when compared to the US, UK or Switzerland). A unique and innovative approach to learning and education such as stress-free workload, equality between teacher-student and student-student relationships, experiential learning, and so on were truly appreciated by the students. To receive world-class education at reasonable cost, as an interviewee commented, was like “a dream come true”.

“(..) it [Finland] has one of the best educational systems in the whole world, so I think it will be very helpful for me to study here and see how it works, because it’s really different with the one in Sylvia. And this one is one hundred times better because it is interesting and I really enjoy the time here.” (An exchange student from Russia)

“(..) for example, here, it’s not only about Finland but our school organizes kind of weekly trips to other countries to study for intensive programs. That’s kind of stuff really interesting, to visit different cities and learn new things.” (A Russian degree student)

“To me, the fee is an important matter and Finland can provide good education with reasonable price.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

In addition to the educational program, distance of travel was one of the most decisive reasons for choosing Finland, particularly for short-duration travel. When considering 3- to 6-months’ time of an exchange program, the foreign students were more likely to choose destinations that are not so far from their home university. A fair distance would save the student travellers more time, money and effort. As most of the interviewees were from Russia, Finland was the best (if not the only) option in their list of exchange universities.

“(...) I can only think about what my university offers. But I was happy because Finland is near Russia.” (A Russian exchange student)

“Finland is the best case for me because it has Tourism programs and is near Moscow.” (A Russian exchange student)

Environmental factors such as “beautiful nature”, “safety” and “peaceful atmosphere” also contributed to Finland’s attractiveness as a destination for education.

“I heard from the previous students that Finland is very safe and peaceful (...) a lot of nature and trees.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

“Well, I looked up on the Internet and found out many pictures about Imatra. I was impressed by the views, lakes and so on. I lived in the city, so I’ve always wanted to try living in peaceful and natural places.” (A Russian exchange student)

English has become the lingua franca of many parts of the world. Therefore, it is widely used by international students to communicate with the local community. Ranked in the 6th place as one of the countries with the highest English Proficiency Index globally (higher than some popular European countries e.g. Germany, France and Switzerland) (EF 2019), Finland is an appealing choice for many students. It would be simpler for them to integrate with the host society, especially as their stay can be considered fairly short to learn a new language.

“Everyone speaks English, well, maybe except some very old people (...) It’s really rare that you meet someone who does not speak English. (...) I feel like with “Kiitos” and “Moi moi” you can live here without problems because when you go to, for example, to the bank or police station, people can speak English.” (A Russian degree student)

5.1.3 Real experience meets expectations

The interviews suggested that the international students tended to expect acquiring things which in the beginning led them to Finland for education. They hoped the unique features of the Finnish education system such as high-quality contents, well-organized curriculum, experienced teachers, innovative teaching

methods and modern technology can support their growth in academic performance. Simultaneously, the expectation to “learn more about the place and people” was mentioned by some interviewees. Being informed about the Meet a Local Family program before mobility, they were all interested in participating to gain insights into the Finnish family life, exchange cultures and traditions as well as create long-lasting relationships. Besides contacts with the Finns, friendships with students from different countries were also desired.

“I expected it [the educational program] would be really different from my university and I will learn practical, professional things here (...) I also expected to gain new experiences, meet a lot of people or friends.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I’ve already known before mobility that this university has a lot of exchange students from different places in the world.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I heard about the Meet a Local Family from a friend and I find it really interesting. I would love to participate.” (A Russian exchange student)

Regardless long (exchange programs) or shorter (field trips) length of travel, the students engaging in either forms wanted to find useful information for the future career plan. In case of university excursion (particularly Travel Fair and Gastro Fair in Helsinki), the degree students perceived it as a chance to directly interact and build connections with the potential employers and professionals in the industry. Meanwhile, from the exchange students’ perspective, the exchange experience was a trial to identify a suitable place for living and career horizons.

“At first, when I opened the website and saw the introduction of the fair, I thought of the chances to contact some companies and apply my CV there.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

“During this exchange opportunity, I want to see if it’s possible for me to live there and of course, find a job in the future. I think it will be a valuable experience.” (A Russian exchange student)

Yet, two interviewed students admitted that before mobility, Finland was just a vague concept to them and the Saimaa UAS was the only option for exchange

study. Consequently, no prior expectations were formed except the excitement of the escape from the usual life.

When being asked about how the real experience had fulfilled/exceeded the expectations, the majority of responses were positive. In the environment where students are “customers” and the satisfaction is measured on the quality of education, Finland has so far lived up with its reputation. All the interviewees agreed the Finnish education that they received was better compared to their home universities. Loose study curriculum, few assignments, equality and autonomy in classroom and interesting courses were noted by the exchange students. For those who were questioned specifically on the excursion experience, they hold also promising opinions. The total travel experience was smoothly organized, from the schedule, transportation, food and drinks, the main event to the return trip. Both fairs were professionally held with the participation of various companies in travel and culinary industry, leaving the students the impression of entering the real business world. They were able to personally approach, obtain and learn information about the companies from the representatives.

“It [the study] is a lot easier and much more interesting. (...) There are people all around the world and I have made many new friends, especially those from Vietnam. I’ve never known so much about the country.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I am having a really good time here. It makes me feel like learning could also be fun.” (A Russian exchange student)

“They teachers in the school are very nice, also the other students. They are very friendly. It is also great that everyone is treated equally in classroom.” (A Russian exchange student)

“(...) the expectations were met. I sent my application there, also. (...) I could see beautiful multicultural features from various countries, how companies organized their stands and the way they introduced their businesses.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

“I would say the organization of the trip was good. They provided us food, transport to the destination, introduction about the fairs and so on. The visit of the fair was successful, I suppose.” (A Russian degree student)

Not all expectations of the students were satisfactorily met, however, they had minor effects on the overall experience. According to an open thought shared by one exchange student, the university campus was much smaller than his anticipation. Also, Imatra was quite “boring” for the young people who would often prefer to live in metropolitan cities with wide range of amenities, services and entertainments. On the contrary, another student rather disagreed, believing these elements yielded intimacy in social relationships and peacefulness in life. Furthermore, high living expenses were a problem to most of the international students.

“(...) One minus thing about the place is that it is quite boring. It doesn’t have lots of entertainments around here like cinemas, restaurants and things. When you want to have fun, for example, go bowling or have a drink, it’s also much more expensive than in my country.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I come from a country with low living standards and low prices. And Finland, meanwhile, is one of the most expensive countries in the world, so it was difficult for me at the beginning.” (A Russian exchange student)

In case of study field trip, the interviewees remarked an insufficiency in the visiting time, which constrained them gaining all the knowledge desired. Additionally, the short duration made the learning experience rather like a fun-driven activity.

“Well, it was a one-day trip and from here to Helsinki is 4 hours already. We only spent 2 hours there. I had expected to have more time at the fair, maybe one full day. It’s like a visit to an event to me.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

“(...) the time schedule was quite strict. (...) I think it will be more effective if we could spend more time there, we could learn a lot. The event actually lasts 3 days and different activities are organized on different days. We actually missed a lot.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

5.2 Impacts of the educational travel on international students

The information collected from the interviews implied personal growth benefits through educational travel have longer and more significant influence on the international students than the knowledge from the academic programs themselves. Even though the education system was one of highlights, the new experiences the participants gained were what they remembered the most. Since the time required for studying was minimized here in Finland, the students could visit around, take photos, broaden social lives or pursue new hobbies. Having a lot of free time outside university timetable allowed them to take part in student events and parties, socialize and make friends. Developing relationships with the locals was an enjoyment for the foreign students as well. As they spent time with the Finnish families, gradually they understood more deeply about the culture, traditions, language, cuisine, and people. Vice versa, it was a chance to introduce their countries and cultures to the Finns.

“I got to know a Finnish family through my friend. (...) At weekends, they usually invite us to their house, having dinner and talk a lot. We also go to the sauna and have camp fire together. (...) I am really happy because I have learnt so much about the Finnish culture and their lives.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I started to enjoy ice hockey since I came to Finland. (...) I think maybe I got the interest from my Finnish friends.” (A Russian exchange student)

“We usually have parties every month when lots of people gather around and talk. After these parties, I have made a lot of friends, from Finland, Vietnam and even Russia, but from another university.” (A Russian exchange student)

Not only could the interviewees collect valuable memories but also developed personally, for example, self-confidence, independence, communication skills, problem-solving skills or even their lifestyles.

“I did change my lifestyle, actually. I used to live in Moscow, a very big and crowded city. But since I moved here, everything is so peaceful and quiet. I started to enjoy the nature, fresh atmosphere and peacefulness of the area.” (A Russian exchange student)

“(..) it [high living costs] was difficult for me at the beginning. But through time, I learnt how to control my pocket, what to spend and what should not. So I think I’ve grown in some way (...).” (A Russian exchange student)

“I haven’t changed much, to be honest. But I guess I become more mature, independent and adaptable to the new life. Here I have to do everything by myself and I’m proud (...).” (A Russian exchange student)

Although how exciting “new experiences” in “new place” with “new people” might sound, possible problems of loneliness, culture shock, language barriers, homesickness and so on could still exist. Despite these problems, overall, the exchange study in Finland and at Saimaa UAS was a memorable lifetime event for the exchange students.

“Sometimes it feels a little bit lonely and strange (...) But luckily, I met lots of friends and they help me to overcome it.” (A Russian exchange student)

The interview outcomes proposed that a one-day excursion left a less significant effect on the students than an exchange study of 3 to 12-month duration. Nevertheless, field trips were still proven to make some progress in their individual growth. To many interviewees, the Travel Fair and Gastro Fair were the first professional events that they had ever attended. After the visits, they interacted with the companies in person and were informed with the latest knowledge about the potential employers. Interestingly, a student shared the experiential learning experiences helped her later with the organization in another event.

“It was the biggest event that I’ve ever attended in my life. It was very impressive. (...) I gained very useful experience. One month later I applied to DuuniDay organizer and I learnt a lot from the past events. So I think my effective work in DuuniDay was because of the experience I had in the Travel Fair.” (A Vietnamese degree student)

5.3 Reflections on experience

The answers indicated a clearly positive attitude towards the educational experience in/within Finland among the international students. Evaluating the entire educational tourism experience in terms of components and activities included,

quality and impacts, all the interviewees were pleased to give a good score. Moreover, they showed a willingness to recommend this study travel further to their peers and acquaintances. Finally, when being asked about the intention to participate in another educational travel in/within Finland, every interviewee expressed a certainty if they had the chance.

“I would give this exchange study a 10/10.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I’ve already recommended it [the exchange program in Finland] to the students in lower classes in my university.” (A Russian exchange student)

“I intended to visit the Gastro Fair after the Travel Fair this year, but it was closed. Still, I definitely will go if they open it again.” (A Russian degree student)

6 Conclusion and discussion

In general, Finland is widely recognized for the high-quality and distinctive approaches to learning and education. Yet, the country is still in its infancy to attract international students when compared to other popular destinations such as America, the UK, Germany and France. For further development in the education and travel industry, deeper researches are required. Therefore, the thesis has been conducted to evaluate the perspective of international students on their educational experience in Finland, with the particular case of Saimaa UAS. This objective was intentionally accomplished through five central aims: (1) travel motivations for studying abroad; (2) Finland’s competitive advantages in the market; (3) the expectations before mobility; (4) the actual experience; and (5) students’ reflection on the experience. The study was divided into two main parts: the literature review explained the phenomenon of educational tourism and its scope, whereas empirical section described the research methodology and analysed the answers for the five subject matters. The research method implemented was semi-structured in-depth interview, conducted on the international students at Saimaa UAS in Imatra. There were also five question topics, aligning with five research aims.

The data collected from five topic questions was analysed and then categorized into three new themes relating to the educational travel experience in Finland and Saimaa UAS: (1) the scope of the educational experience, (2) its impacts on the students personally and, (3) students' reflection on experience.

In the first theme, motives and reasons for international students to travel to Finland for education as well as their expectations on the mobility and the real experience undergone are identified. As introduced in the theoretical part and noted from the interview, the desire to "escape" from the environmental and social familiarity is one of the decisive incentives for traveling. Studying abroad is a way to change to new settings, routines and the surrounding people. Popularity of the destination country in education is another driven factor; whereas, visiting relatives and friends is also mentioned but is rather less important. Grounds and expectations for the educational travel experience in Finland and at Saimaa UAS appear parallel to each other. The world-class education with low tuition fee is, undoubtedly, the most attractive element for choosing Finland over other popular countries. Simultaneously, the students tend to expect to receive the benefits in the Finnish advanced and unique education system such as experiential learning, equality and autonomy, creating enjoyment and effectiveness in study. Other reasons for the destination decision can be the travelled distance to Finland, living environment (safety, peace and beautiful nature) and the country's high proficiency in English. These factors are supposed to assist the students in quicker adaptation to the new life, social relationship building and even critical thinking on their future place of residence. However, there are cases where no prior expectations or requirements for the travel are recorded during the interview process, due to the fact that Saimaa is the only partner university offering tourism and hospitality program. Still, regardless the differences in demands and needs, overall, all the foreign students agreed that Finland and Saimaa have provided them with a better educational experience than they expected, except minor disappointments on the campus's size and dullness of the surrounding area felt by some individuals.

The second theme of the results deals with the social, personal and intellectual impacts of the short-term mobility for education on the student travellers. The

research suggests that social and personal development affect an individual more deeply than the academic attainments. The interviewees were noted to broaden their social contacts, feel more confident, independent and mature, become adaptable, as well as widen their lives and mindsets. Yet, studying abroad may not always be a pleasant experience due to the encountered loneliness, homesickness, culture shock or language barriers.

The last theme asserts the surveyed international students' satisfaction with the quality of Finnish education and living conditions in Finland. The satisfaction is evaluated comprehensively on the total travel experience, expressed by the interviewees' compliments given, voluntary spread of word of mouth and keenness on another opportunity to engage in educational travel in Finland.

In conclusion, the thesis serves as a reference source, identifying the international students' motivations, preferences, expectations, demands and attitudes when traveling to Finland for education. From the interview results, Finland, or more specifically Saimaa UAS, can be considered a favourable destination for foreign students to travel to and pursue their studies. Still, empirical research on these aspects on larger scale is scarce, urging more efforts from the interested parties. Educational tourism among overseas university students can bring many benefits such as tourism income from relatives and friends, positive word of mouth, intercultural knowledge or even workforce in short-term employment. Therefore, proper understanding on the topic is necessary for future directions in development, better management and marketing for the Finnish universities.

Figures

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview structure

Topic 1. Motives for going abroad for education.

1. Why do you travel abroad for education?

Topic 2. Preferences for different countries as educational destinations.

2. What countries would you also consider as targeted educational destinations?
3. How did you decide to go to Finland?
4. What advantages does Finland have over those other countries?

Topic 3. Expectations before mobility.

5. What aspects would you expect/consider when traveling to a place for education?
6. Which aspect is the most important?

Topic 4. The real experience of the stay.

7. Compare to the real experience with your expectations.
8. What have you gained through the educational mobility?
9. What are the highlights and drawbacks of the experience that you have taken part in?

Topic 5. Reflections on experience.

10. How would you evaluate your educational experience?
11. To whom would you recommend Finland as a potential educational destination?