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**PERCEPTION AND ATTRACTION FACTORS:
A STUDY OF NIGERIAN STUDENTS' CHOICE
TO STUDY AT XAMK, FINLAND**

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the perception and attraction factors of Nigerian students' choice to study at XAMK. Its aim was to acquire a better knowledge of Nigerian students' perceptions of XAMK and to determine the elements that impact their decision to study at XAMK in Finland. To achieve the aim of the study, the following objectives were set: to determine the factors influencing Nigerian students' decision to study abroad; to determine the factors that attract Nigerian students to study at XAMK; and to determine challenges faced by Nigerian students in XAMK.

The study used a mixed research method with the quantitative data collected through online surveys shared with Nigerian students in Finland's higher institutions. Also, the qualitative data was collected from Nigerian students in XAMK who were willing to participate through in-depth interviews. The study used descriptive statistics and thematic methods to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

The study found that many Nigerian students in Finland selected Finland as their study region because it offers solutions to the push factors in their home country, and it is one of the cheapest options to migrate to Europe for study. Moreover, the multicultural experience and peaceful environment that the host country offers were other factors that have influenced some of these students' choice of study destination. On the decision to study at XAMK, it was found that many of the students were motivated by the feedback they got from other international students on the school website; the university's prestige and reputation in the world ranking; and the achievement of the alumni of the school on the world stage. However, the language barrier has been on top of their challenge list as it prevents them from being able to effectively learn in class and take advantage of opportunities that are available, especially work opportunities in the host country.

Keywords: Nigerian international students in XAMK, International Studies, Study region motivation

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and the commissioner

Studying abroad has become increasingly popular among students seeking new experiences, academic perspectives, and career opportunities. According to OECD (2021 cited in Elken et al. 2021, 29), a 5.5 percent growth was recorded between 1998 and 2019, with approximately 6.1 million international students enrolled in higher education for a full degree in 2019. This growth led to a rise in competition among nations leading to a somewhat uneven market. Consequently, this placed the highly marketised nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia among the top receiving countries (Elken et al. 2021, 29).

Meanwhile, Finland which is the world's happiest country is facing a demographic dilemma with 39 percent of its workforce shrinking based on 2021 statistics. According to the United Nations' forecast, there is a possibility that this will balloon to 47 percent by 2030, as 39 percent of its workforce is currently over 65 years. This therefore necessitates the importance of attracting youth which led to its talent boost program. (DW 2021.)

Nigeria is one of Africa's most populated countries, with a sizable youth population looking for higher education possibilities. Based on a recent study, 89.87 percent express a preference to study abroad, and while most considered locations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Germany, and Australia, some considered countries such as Finland, Estonia, Greece, etc. (Iyatse 2023.) However, despite the fact that the overall trend of Nigerian students studying abroad has been growing, there is limited research on their specific choice to study in Finland, particularly at XAMK (South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences). Understanding the elements that impact Nigerian students' decision to study at XAMK is important to determine their perceived attractiveness of the Finnish education system which can assist XAMK in establishing methods to increase its attractiveness and efficiently respond to the demands of this student demographic.

XAMK, commonly known as the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, is the study's commissioner. It is one of Finland's finest educational institutions, noted for its high-quality programs and creative approach to education. It has four campuses which are located in the gorgeous area of South-Eastern Finland and provides a comprehensive variety of academic subjects and professional sectors, appealing to students' different interests and career objectives. It provides students with hands-on experiences that provide them with the skills and information needed to flourish in their chosen disciplines, with a strong emphasis on practical learning and industry engagement. The institution offers bachelor's and master's degree programs in a variety of fields, including business, technology, health care, and social work. Moreover, the institution aggressively promotes multiculturalism and draws students from all over the world, creating a varied and lively learning environment. This global viewpoint enriches the educational experience by allowing students to build cross-cultural skills and widen their perspectives. Furthermore, XAMK maintains a great focus on research and development (R & D), cooperating with industry partners, and taking part in cutting-edge initiatives. This emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship equips students to be future leaders and societal contributors. Above all, XAMK is a top educational institution in Finland, offering students a dynamic learning environment, industrial relevance, and a global viewpoint. (XAMK 2023.)

Nonetheless, the current literature on international student mobility has mostly concentrated on wider trends and variables that influence study-abroad decisions. While these studies give useful information, more study on the unique experiences and viewpoints of Nigerian students choosing XAMK in Finland is needed. This study aims to add to the current literature by offering a more nuanced knowledge of Nigerian students' perspectives and attraction factors connected to XAMK, as well as build a framework that can be utilized to recruit additional Nigerian students to study at the school.

1.2 Research problem

According to Shen et al. (2022, 23), the mobility of foreign students is critical in measuring the globalisation of higher education and developing internationally capable individuals. It has had a tremendous impact on the landscape of international student mobility, resulting in notable innovations. Additionally, the nature of international student mobility has shifted, and competition in the international study abroad market has increased (Elken et al. 2021, 29).

However, despite the growing trend of Nigerian students studying abroad and Finland's growing appeal as a study destination, there is a dearth of detailed research into the particular variables affecting Nigerian students' choice to study at XAMK, one of Finland's premier schools. Understanding the perception and attractiveness elements that influence Nigerian students' decision to enroll at XAMK is critical for both the institution and the higher education system in Finland as a whole. By tackling this research topic, this information gap will be bridged, and this will give insights that will make XAMK a more appealing option for Nigerian students pursuing higher education possibilities overseas.

1.3 Aim and objectives

The aim of this research is to acquire a better knowledge of Nigerian students' perceptions of XAMK and to determine the elements that impact their decision to study at XAMK in Finland. The study objectives are:

1. To determine the factors influencing Nigerian students' decision to study abroad.
2. To determine the factors that attracts Nigerian students to study at XAMK.
3. To determine challenges faced by Nigerian students in XAMK.

Hence, this study intends to provide a complete framework that can be used to attract more Nigerian students to pursue further education at XAMK.

1.4 Research questions

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main factors influencing Nigerian students' decision to study abroad, and specifically at XAMK?
2. What strategies can be developed to attract more Nigerian students to study at XAMK?

1.5 Research methods

The research plan for this study which will be discussed in more details in chapter 3 is the mixed method. This research strategy, often known as mixed research methodologies, incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches into a single study or research project (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004, 17). This strategy enables researchers to collect both quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights, resulting in a more complete grasp of the research issue. The mixed research approach has been frequently used in the context of analysing international student mobility to investigate various aspects of the phenomena. Researchers can collect numerical data on the magnitude, trends, and patterns of international student mobility using quantitative research methodologies such as surveys and statistical analysis (Mohajan 2020,53). These quantitative data give a more comprehensive view of general migration trends and enable comparisons across groups or periods. Moreover, with the qualitative research approach, the researcher uses interviews, focus groups, and case studies, for a more in-depth investigation which can give more insight into foreign students' experiences, motivations, and obstacles (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2017, 627). Researchers can triangulate their findings by mixing quantitative and qualitative data, verifying, and complementing each other. By combining numerical trends with human tales, cultural settings, and individual viewpoints, the mixed research technique allows for a more thorough understanding of international student mobility.

Consequently, to get a full knowledge of the perspectives and variables affecting Nigerian students' decision to study at XAMK, the mixed research method will be adopted. For the quantitative part of it, a survey questionnaire will be created and delivered to current Nigerian students in Finland through online forms which will be sent to individuals via email or other online channels. The questionnaire will

include multiple-choice and Likert scale items designed to assess students' opinions about study destination in Finland, reasons that affected their decision to study there, and satisfaction with the educational experience. The poll will also contain questions about the problems that Nigerian students experience, as well as their ideas for improvement. In the same vein, the qualitative method will be an in-depth interview that will be performed with a number of Nigerian students at XAMK who are willing to participate. The interviews will delve into their motivations, expectations, experiences, and obstacles while studying at XAMK. Open-ended inquiries will be utilised to elicit deep and comprehensive insights into the students' perspectives.

The data collected from the survey and interviews will be analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, respectively. The descriptive statistics will be used to summarise the quantitative data and identify patterns and trends in Nigerian students' perceptions of Finland higher institutions. The thematic analysis will be used to identify common themes and patterns in the qualitative data, such as the challenges faced by Nigerian students studying at XAMK and their recommendations for improving the international student experience.

1.6 Framework and Limitation

The “push-pull” framework is commonly used when discussing a topic of this nature according to Wilkins et al. (2013, 128), and this study will adopt the same model. The “push-pull” model proposes that changes in consumer purchasing habits (with the consumer being a prospective student) are affected by a mix of push and pull influences. Push factors generally originate in the source country and play a role in inspiring students to consider studying abroad. Low-quality education, for example, might be viewed as a push factor in Nigeria. Pull factors, on the other hand, work inside the host country to attract students to choose it over other prospective destinations. In Finland, for example, pull factors might include comparatively low tuition fees and the availability of English-taught courses. Consequently, this study will focus on the pull factors which is more important to the topic being addressed.

However, it has been observed that the sample size will be very small (<30) and that is because the study will rely on collecting data from only Nigerian students who are currently studying in Finland and particularly XAMK for the qualitative research. Moreover, all Nigerian students currently in XAMK enrolled for the same course and that implies that there is the possibility of obtaining the same response from all participants. Consequently, a reliability test will not be carried out as recommended by Samuels (2015, 3), but the data will be collected twice in the space of two weeks: (1) Using a questionnaire and (2) an in-depth interview.

2 INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, ITS CHALLENGES, AND NIGERIAN STUDENTS' MOBILITY FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

International education also known as overseas study has been widely researched and for this reason, this section focuses on the review of the relevant literature on the subject of this study. It reviewed the information available in this field to identify the gap. Consequently, this section discussed the following topics: (1) international student mobility trends and patterns, (2) factors influencing international students' study abroad decisions and their choice of institution (3) challenges faced by international students (4) perceptions and motivations of Nigerian students studying abroad, (5) Finnish higher education system and its attractiveness to international students.

2.1 International student mobility trends and patterns

The spatial dynamics of the world have undergone a significant shift from being "static" to "mobile", primarily driven by globalisation and advancements in information technology (Khanna 2016 cited in Hou & Du 2022, 248). This shift has facilitated the flow of resources across geographical boundaries, including not only traditional resources like minerals, energy, and capital but also high-quality human capital and knowledge (Friedman 2005 cited in Hou & Du 2022, 248). Consequently, international student mobility has experienced substantial growth and transformation over the last few decades, leading to the emergence of distinct patterns. Understanding these patterns is crucial for governments,

educational institutions, and researchers to develop effective policies and programs that attract and support foreign students. (Hou & Du 2022, 248.)

The immigration rate globally has kept increasing and based on reports this has risen from 2.8 percent of the world's population in 1995 to 3.5 percent of the world's population in 2019 as depicted in Figure 1 (World Economic Forum 2020). According to the World Population Review (2023), where the immigration and emigration data by country was analysed, India has the largest number of emigrants in the world as of 2020, while Nigeria was ranked 46th with a total emigrant of about 1.7 million people. Meanwhile, according to Sasu (2023), Nigeria with about 206 million people has always stayed negative in terms of its net migration rate despite having the largest population in Africa and the seventh largest population in the world as there is more emigration to immigration.

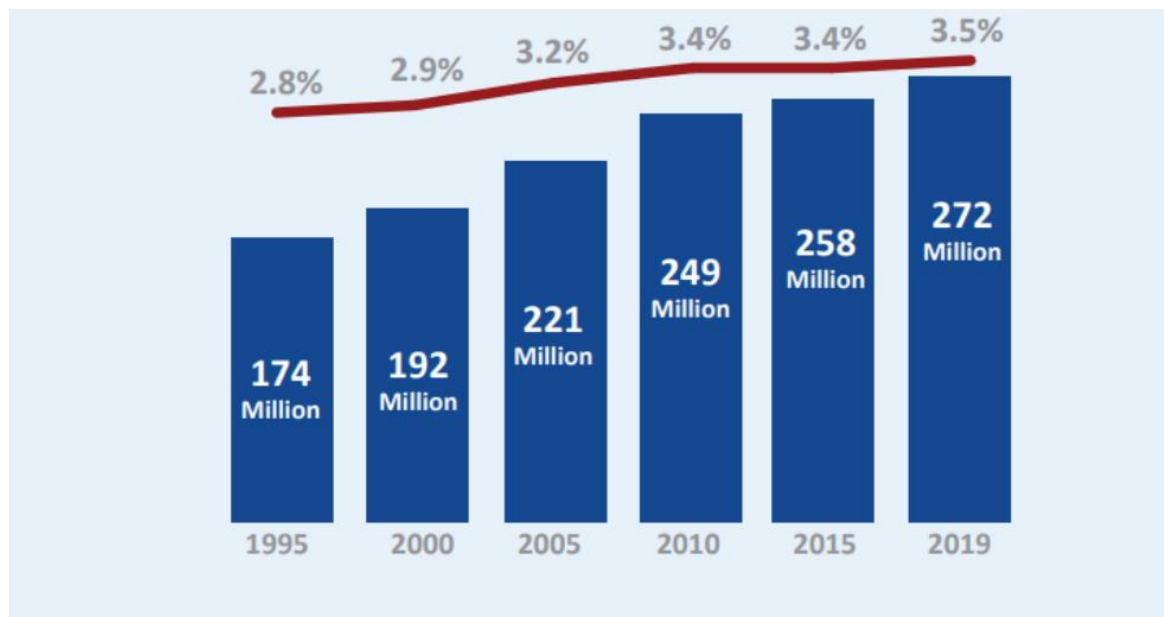


Figure 1. Global immigration rate (World Economic Forum 2020)

Meanwhile, on a global scope, it has been identified that there are various reasons for people's migration and the first pattern that has been identified is the rate at which students migrate which has consistently increased since 1998. According to an OECD report (2021 cited in Elken et al. 2021, 29), there has been a notable 5.5 percent growth in international student enrolment between 1998 and 2019. In 2019 alone, approximately 6.1 million international students

were enrolled in higher education for full-degree programs, indicating a significant rise compared to previous years. This expansion can be attributed to various factors, including increased global connectedness, professional growth opportunities, the proliferation of higher education institutions, rising demand for international credentials, and the desire for cultural enrichment and personal development through studying abroad (Shkoler et al. 2020, 61).

2.2 Factors influencing international students' study abroad decisions and their choice of institution

Several factors have been identified to influence prospective international students' decision of their study destination (Kunwar 2019). This section discussed some of these factors and it covers the following sub-topics: (1) changing landscape of preferred study region (2) study cost (3) scholarship (4) course suitability (5) institution prestige and program offering (6) student support (7) teaching quality.

2.2.1 Changing landscape of preferred study region

Over the years, the landscape of study has kept changing and this change has influenced students' preferred study destination from what it used to be. According to Trines (2019), China, Germany, and Canada have gained increasing significant prominence as most students' preferred study destinations instead of countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia which were previously the most students' choice. According to Yuan (2022, 12), these countries offer high-quality education, attractive scholarship opportunities, and favourable immigration regulations, all of which contribute to their growing popularity among foreign students.

2.2.2 Study cost

The financial status of everyone is always a factor when considering a study destination and this affects both local and international students. This is because each family has a different social-economic background and higher education in most nations is relatively expensive. Consequently, this factor has received

several attentions from researchers and has been identified as a key factor according to Wilkins et al. (2013, 128).

Shanka et al. (2005, 35) argued that study cost goes beyond just the student tuition fees when it comes to international students but includes some other costs. This implies that the cost of study goes apart from the tuition fee and includes other costs such as day-to-day living and other expenses throughout the course life cycle. While this has been considered to be expensive in some nations such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada concerning Australia, it is considered less expensive in regions such as New Zealand (Shanka et al. 2005, 35). According to a study conducted in the UK by Wilkins et al. (2013, 136), tuition, when expensive, makes students consider alternatives; which indirectly implies that it affects their choice of study destination. Moreover, Jupiter et al. (2017, 94), in their study, found that the majority of students consider this factor before they make their choice because they will have to come up with their sponsorship. Additionally, Liu et al. (2018, 103-104), in their study, found that students consider this when coming to study in countries like China, especially those coming from developing areas because of their financial status/background, thus, increasing their pursuit of scholarships.

2.2.3 Scholarship

Scholarships have emerged as a major component affecting international students' decision-making processes. This is because students studying abroad usually have to pay higher tuition fees, and expensive travel costs from their hometown to the study destination besides other living expenses compared to students studying in their home country. So, the availability of scholarships can be very appealing to international students who may not have been able to afford tuition and living expenses without the possibility of financial aid. (Liu et al. 2018, 104.)

According to Jupiter et al. (2017, 94), several universities as part of their commitment to encouraging human capital development, provide scholarships to students from third-world nations. However, Liu et al. (2018, 104) opined that

scholarships are usually not available to everyone and despite this, students still find their way to get enrolled for the degree they wanted. Similarly, Dahari & Abduh (2011, 10618), in their study to investigate students' priorities when it comes to decision-making factors, found that students prioritise "program offered" and "tuition fees" over all other factors; but while scholarship is not considered the most important, it is still prioritised over factors such as the environment in which the institution is built and the convenience of the physical appearance. Nevertheless, the study conducted by Drewes and Michael (2006 cited in Dahari & Abduh 2011, 10616) revealed that Canadian students prefer universities that "spend more on scholarships and teaching".

2.2.4 Institution prestige and program offering

Academic institution prestige and program offerings have been identified as a factor that encourages international student migration. Briones and Bueno (2019, 132) noted that high academic standard is an important consideration for students when deciding where to study. International students are more likely to attend institutions with a solid reputation and high-quality academic programs compared to others (Lu & Schulmann 2015, 19). Moreover, the quality of the institution, its academic reputation, rankings, and the quality and skills of the instructors were found to be extremely important factors in drawing foreign students to certain locations. Prospective overseas students are more likely to be drawn to countries and universities recognised for their academic prowess and various program offerings. This is because students are more inclined to pick well-regarded schools with a great track record of producing successful graduates. Hence, institution prestige and program offer play an important role as students are drawn to universities with a good academic reputation, well-regarded programs, and offer perceived chances for personal and professional development. (Jupiter et al. 2017, 92-94.)

2.2.5 Course suitability

According to Sundarrajh and Zulkfili (2019, 21), the availability of student-preferred programs is another important component in foreign student decision-

making. For this reason, educational institutions strive to provide unique programs just to distinguish their offering. This is because research has shown that the diversity of programs provided has a significant impact on potential students' decisions when choosing an educational institution (Dahari & Abduh 2011, 10616). However, in today's world, if a program acquires an industry reputation and captures the attention of a large number of potential students, other colleges tend to follow suit (Dahari & Abduh 2011, 10616). Consequently, this factor may have other dependencies such as the perceived quality of how the program will be delivered.

2.2.6 Teaching quality

Teaching quality is another factor that is considered by prospective students. According to Liu and Winder (2014 cited in Ahmad & Buchanan 2015, 5) “the appeal of being taught in English and the perceived high-quality teaching/research opportunities” serve as another form of motivation to these students. Although, this factor may be difficult to assess directly by prospective students; testimonials like the following can make a difference in the decision they make: “Despite several difficulties being away and feeling lonely from family, I am impressed with the teaching quality and learning experience here” (Ahmad & Buchanan 2015, 10). Hence, this factor may not influence prospective students' decisions directly, but indirectly through other means such as peer recommendation.

2.2.7 Student support

Effective support services according to Johnson et al. (2022), are critical in providing pleasant overall experiences and increase the chances of international students completing their degree program. These services may include pre-departure orientation, academic and linguistic aid, cultural integration programs, and career services, among others. According to Arifin (2018, 156), individual schools' provision of student assistance has emerged as a critical element influencing foreign students' choice of institution as it gives a lasting impression

that their challenge can be resolved easily. Research has shown that the accessibility and quality of support services have a direct influence on the ease of admission and the overall experience throughout their stay. Moreover, university support programs and services have been found to encourage the success and integration of international students in higher education. (Martirosyan et al. 2019, 172.)

Tillman (1990 cited in Martirosyan et al. 2019, 178) emphasised the importance of institutional commitment in ensuring the efficacy and relevance of support services. He noted that while establishing support services, it is critical to consider international students' academic and personal requirements since this approach would make the services more valuable to them. Consequently, the pre-departure orientation sessions give foreign students with essential information and advice before they begin their educational adventure (Townsend & Poh 2008, 6). This assists students in navigating the admissions process, understanding academic requirements, and becoming acquainted with the institution's regulations and services. Such orientations can help to ease fears and doubts, allowing for a seamless transfer into a new educational setting. Additionally, academic, and linguistic aid programs are critical for overseas students who may have language problems or need extra help to achieve academically. Language classes, tutoring, study skills improvement, and academic counselling are examples of these services. Institutions may improve students' learning experiences and encourage academic achievement by meeting their academic demands (Martirosyan et al. 2019, 178).

2.3 Challenges faced by international students

To attract more international students, it is expedient that the currently enrolled students are satisfied according to Ozoglu et al. (2015, 227). Consequently, in this section, the following sub-topics were reviewed based on past studies: (1) language barrier (2) teaching style/pattern (3) social/cultural (4) psychological (5) financial, and (6) demography.

2.3.1 Language barrier

The existing research reveals that overseas students with inadequate language competency have major language and communication issues in both academic and social situations (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 228). According to Titrek et al. (2016, 151), based on a study conducted in Turkey found that this language hurdle prevents international students from comprehending lectures, actively participating in classroom discussions, and effectively completing reading. Although, some of the students commend their instructor's effort; the challenge is not going away and could eventually contribute to academic underperformance (Wu et al. 2015, 5; Titrek et al. 2016, 151). Moreover, according to Kuo (2011, 41), language and communication challenges also have a negative impact on students' social and cultural adaptation outside of academics, and this may cause some psychological concerns such as social isolation, feelings of loneliness, and despair (McLachlan & Justice, 2009 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 228).

2.3.2 Teaching style/pattern

Townsend and Poh (2008, 6) opined that learning problems in a foreign language are a common academic issue that international learners encounter. Moreover, a lack of sufficient knowledge of the host country's educational system, notably its norms and practices, leads to a variety of academic challenges among international students. Those who are unfamiliar with the host institution's teaching and learning techniques face several difficulties during their educational journey (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 228).

In addition to these issues, McLachlan and Justice (2009 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 228) contend that international learners encounter more academic pressure since failure has more serious implications for them. For example, overseas students receiving financial aid from their home country or host institution risk losing their scholarships indefinitely if their academic performance falls short of expectations. Similarly, self-financed overseas students who need to prolong their studies owing to academic failures may suffer increased tuition costs (McLachlan & Justice, 2009 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 228).

2.3.3 Social/cultural challenges

For international students, adjusting to a new social environment and cultural customs may be difficult. Culture shock is a well-known issue among this population, as they battle with the socio-cultural differences between their home countries and the host countries (Wu et al. 2015, 2). As they attempt to adjust to different cultural norms and social behaviours, international students typically face a slew of social and cultural challenges (Sherry et al. 2010, 34). Language barriers and cultural differences, for example, can make it difficult to socialise and form relationships with both local residents and fellow international students, affecting their socio-cultural and psychological adjustment (Townsend & Poh 2008, 6). According to research, the bigger the cultural differences between the home and host nations, the more stressful the transition process for students becomes (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229). Cultural differences can also lead to misconceptions, which can have an influence on students' adjustment and psychological well-being (Sherry et al. 2010, 34). In addition to cultural misunderstandings, prejudice or discrimination have been documented as additional social challenges that negatively affect international students' social and psychological adjustment (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229).

2.3.4 Psychological challenges

The existing research reveals that international students frequently experience psychological difficulties such as homesickness, loneliness, social isolation, disorientation, and depression (Sherry et al. 2010, 34; Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229). These psychological disorders are inextricably linked to the difficulties adolescents confront in both their social and academic lives. This could cause some mental health difficulties such as depression and severe homesickness (Poyrazl & Lopez, 2007 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229). According to Sherry et al. (2010, 34), students who fail to interact socially or maintain poor social relationships owing to inadequate language competence and cultural adaptation obstacles are more vulnerable to psychological disorders, such as feelings of loneliness and homesickness. Furthermore, the academic pressure that

international students face can have a negative impact on their social life, leading to social isolation and increased feelings of loneliness (McLachlan & Justice, 2009 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229).

2.3.5 Financial challenges

Numerous studies have found that a sizable number of overseas students face financial issues or are under financial stress (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229; Sherry et al. 2010). These financial difficulties are frequently caused by a combination of circumstances, such as the loss of scholarship possibilities, limits on work permits, and rising tuition and housing prices (Smith & Khawaja 2011, 704). In a study on students studying in the UK, Li and Kaye (1998 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229) found that financial pressure is one of the most often mentioned challenges among international students studying in the country. According to their findings, around one-third of the participants indicated financial concerns. Furthermore, McLachlan and Justice (2009 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229) discovered that financial worries are particularly prominent throughout the first years of a student's academic journey.

2.3.6 Demography

The existing research has found that students from varied demographic origins experience unique and varying problems (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229). Although there is limited research in this area on the challenges faced, Poyrazl and Lopez (2007 cited in Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229), demonstrated a relationship between discrimination perception and characteristics such as race and ethnicity. Furthermore, studies have shown that characteristics such as marital status, place of origin, gender, and age might impact the amount to which students face these difficulties (Ozoglu et al. 2015, 229).

2.4 Perceptions and motivations of Nigerian students studying abroad

Oguche (2022, 67) investigated the motives of Nigerian students studying abroad. He discovered that the desire for a higher quality education is the key motivator for Nigerian students to study abroad. Students believe that studying

abroad gives them access to premium academic programs, facilities, and resources that they may not have access to in their native country. Suleiman and Mikail (2020, 233-234) investigated the attitudes of Nigerian students studying in Malaysia in another study. According to the data, Nigerian students see studying in Malaysia as an opportunity to obtain foreign experience, widen their viewpoints, and build worldwide networks. The quality of education, cost, and safety were regarded as important factors influencing their decision to study in Malaysia. (Suleiman & Mikail 2020, 234). In addition, Raji (2019) conducted research on the motives and attitudes of Nigerian students studying in the United Kingdom. According to her findings, Nigerian students saw studying in the UK as a road to greater professional possibilities and enhanced employability. The prestige of UK universities, cultural variety, and English language skills achieved while studying in the UK were also recognised as major reasons influencing their decision to study in the UK. (Raji 2019, 2.) Moreover, Iseolorunkanmi et al. (2020) investigated the motives and views of Nigerian students studying in South Africa in a distinct setting. According to the report, Nigerian students are drawn to South Africa because of the perceived quality of education, better facilities and to escape the challenges faced by academic activities in Nigeria such as prolonged industrial disputes. (Iseolorunkanmi et al. 2020, 13-14.) The existence of Nigerian communities, as well as the availability of scholarships, were recognised as factors that affected their decision to study in South Africa. Additionally, according to this research, Nigerian students studying abroad are driven by the desire for a higher quality education, international exposure, greater job opportunities, and cultural experiences. They see studying abroad as an opportunity to expand their knowledge, talents, and future prospects. The repute of the academic system, cost, safety, and the existence of Nigerian communities or scholarships, all impact the choice of study location.

2.5 Finnish higher education system and its attractiveness to international students

Kunwar (2017) investigated the factors that influence the appeal of Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) to international students. According to the findings of the study (2017, 49), the Finnish higher education system is seen as appealing

because of cross-cultural experiences, high-quality education, and the opportunity to earn (by working part-time) while they learn. Moreover, well-structured study programs, comparatively low tuition fees, close student-faculty interactions, employment opportunities, and a supportive learning atmosphere were also mentioned as attractive features (Kunwar 2017, 48). Furthermore, the OECD (2022, 30) report emphasized the impact of Finnish education policy and government activities on increasing the appeal of the higher education system. Tuition-free education for EU/EEA students and low tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students have contributed to rising international student enrolment in Finland. Scholarships and financial assistance programs that are available, such as the Finnish Government Scholarship Pool, also play a significant role in attracting international students. Aside from academic considerations, the cultural and social aspects of studying in Finland have been investigated. Wu (2021) researched international students' impressions of Finland and discovered that the Finnish lifestyle, nature, safety, and equality were highly regarded. Opportunities for personal growth and cultural interchange, as well as the welcoming and equitable society, were cited as major reasons influencing the decision to study in Finland.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a mixed research strategy to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. According to Almeida (2018, 137), mixed research strategy is a research method that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a single study to provide a more thorough knowledge of a specific subject. Based on the same study, this approach is used when a complete and in-depth evaluation that includes both comparative analysis and the development of many aspects of the research is required. The use of mixed techniques allows researchers to solve the limits inherent in either quantitative or qualitative procedures, allowing for the capture of complete and important insights that would not be possible using either method in isolation (Almeida 2018, 137). This methodological choice will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting the decisions of Nigerian students studying

in Finland and will provide a better basis for developing a framework to attract more prospective Nigerian students to study at XAMK.

3.1 Data collection

The core data for this study was collected directly from Nigerian students in Finland using survey and interview approaches which represent the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. An online platform (Google Forms) was used for survey administration to improve accessibility and easy data reporting. The poll included a wide variety of sections, including educational background, personality qualities, personal and family background, factors affecting early decisions, drivers of ultimate decisions, and challenges experienced during their tenure in the institution.

The literature review served as the framework for developing the survey and interview questions. The survey questions, as provided in Appendix 1, were adapted from Kunwar (2017), a study which is closely related to the current study. On the other hand, the interview questions which are provided in Appendix 2 were developed using the insights gained from the studied literature and were designed to serve as discussion starters, allowing for more inquiry as needed. It is worth mentioning that the interviews were aimed to be extensive and open-ended; thus, closed-ended questions were shunned to allow for a more in-depth discussion of the subject matter.

For the survey, a convenience sampling method was used and both XAMK and non-XAMK Nigerian students in Finland participated. The link to the survey was shared using communication channels such as WhatsApp and email. The author shared the link directly with 15 people and requested assistance to share with friends who are non-XAMK but also Nigerian students studying in Finland. The data collection took place between 25th and 29th September 2023.

The in-depth interviews commenced on 29th September 2023, and this exercise was completed on 3rd October 2023. Conducting this after the conclusion of the

online survey was deliberate and that is to aid in the verification of response consistency, given the study's inherent limitations in evaluating reliability due to the small sample size, as previously stated. The interview was conducted virtually (using Microsoft Teams for all participants except for Abiodun who opted to use Facebook Messenger) with recordings done using a mobile phone. All interviewees were XAMK students (who are willing to participate) since the commissioner is XAMK. The interview sessions generally consisted of open-ended and non-leading questions meant to elicit as much detailed information as possible. Consequently, the interview sessions began with simple questions and advanced to more complex ones, ensuring that thorough information was gathered throughout each engagement.

3.2 Data Analysis

The information collected from both surveys and interviews was meticulously analysed utilising approaches appropriate to their unique natures. The survey's quantitative results were submitted to a thorough descriptive statistical analysis. This statistical technique aids the distil of raw numerical data into more digestible summaries, giving light on the prevalent trends and patterns in Nigerian students' opinions of XAMK.

The statistical analysis focused on some essential statistical markers such as means, standard deviations, and percentages. These metrics provide a comprehensive picture of the respondents' demographic features, educational backgrounds, and feelings about various parts of their XAMK experience. Furthermore, this analysis was useful in spotting any significant changes or correlations in the quantitative data.

Concurrently, the qualitative data gathered through interviews was thematically analysed. Thematic analysis is a way of studying qualitative data that is methodical and in-depth, allowing researchers to find common themes, reoccurring patterns, and subtle insights contained in the narratives of Nigerian students (Clark & Braun 2017, 297). Thematic analysis was specifically focused

on finding and categorising themes connected to the factors that influenced Nigerian students studying at XAMK. It also assisted in determining the ideas and proposals made by these students to improve the foreign students' experience at the university. It hopes to give a full narrative that goes beyond basic descriptions by doing a rigorous theme analysis, capturing the complexity of the qualitative data, and illustrating the multiple facets of the students' experiences and viewpoints.

In essence, a thorough and well-rounded depiction of Nigerian students' perspectives, experiences, and ideas in the context of their academic journey at XAMK was obtained by combining descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the data gathered from both the online surveys and the in-depth interview. For the online survey, a total of 26 participants were contacted, 20 responses were received and only 19 (i.e., 95%) of these responses were valid for the study as the study considered only students who are already enrolled into a program in a Finnish University. The interview on the other hand featured 5 XAMK students and each interview lasted for an average duration of 35 minutes. The recordings were transcribed using Transcripator, a paid subscription software.

4.1 Survey results

4.1.1 Participants' demography

The poll showed that only Nigerians participated in the survey and based on the image in Figure 2, all of them are a member of a University in Finland with 42.11% attending XAMK; and 15.79% each attending the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) and HAAGA Helia in Helsinki; 10.53% attending Savonia UAS; and 5.26% each attending JAMK, Tampere University and University of Oulu. Out of these 19 participants, 18 of them (i.e., 94.7%) are enrolled in a bachelor's degree program and one of them is a master's degree student.

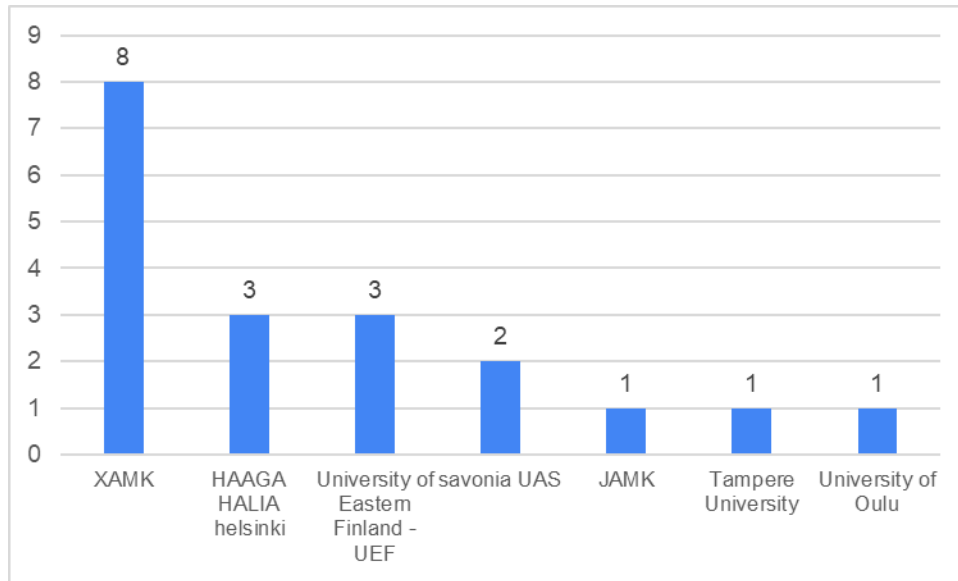


Figure 2. Survey participants per school

Only 5.3% have been in their current university for up to 4 years, but the majority are first and second-year students with their statistics being 36.8% and 42.1%, respectively. So, in terms of gender distribution, the male gender is more represented with a ratio of 11:8 i.e., 57.9% to 42.1% of female respondents. Moreover, in terms of their age distribution, most of the participants are within 31-40 years, while others within the 26-30, 21-25, and 41-50 age brackets. The age distribution is depicted in Figure 3.

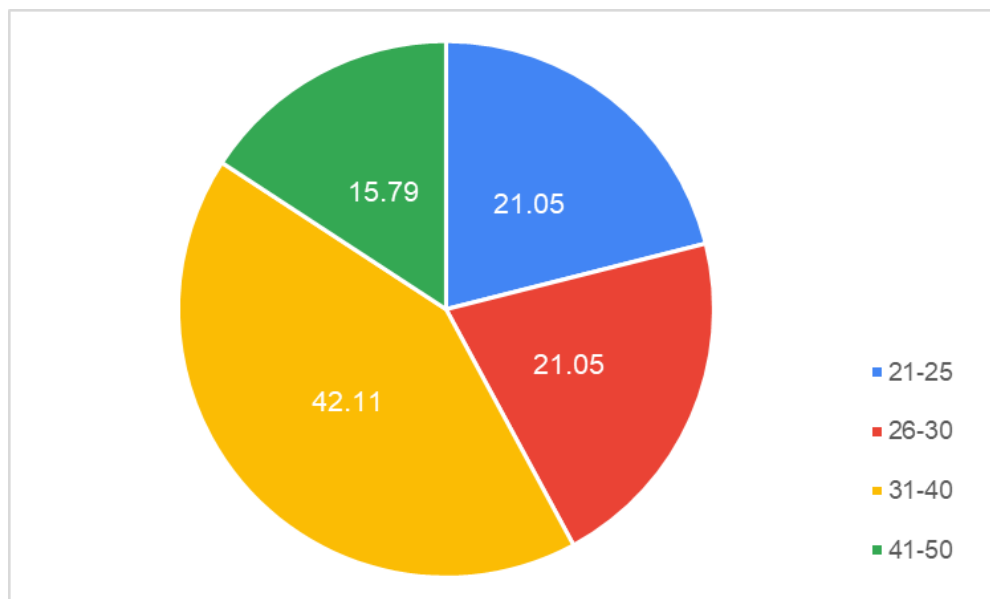


Figure 3. Age range of survey participants

Regarding their course of study, more Business/Economics students participated, while others in sciences, engineering, health sciences, education, and hospitality and tourism experience are as depicted in Figure 4: 10.52%, 5.3%, 10.52%, 5.3% and 5.3% respectively.

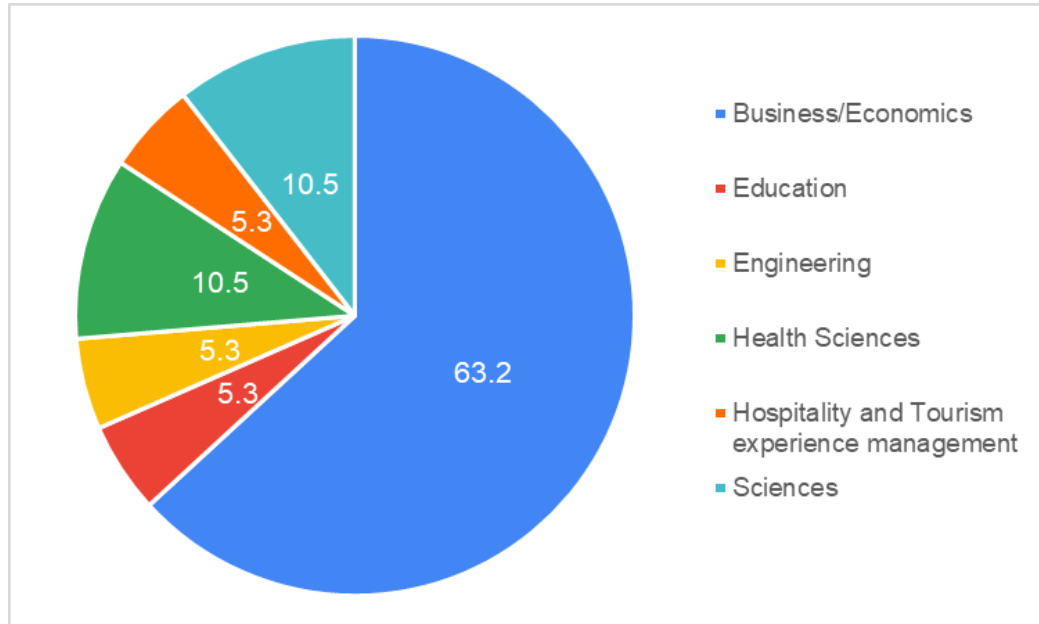


Figure 4. Respondent's field of study

On self-reporting of their academic performance, the majority of them are high-flyers, with more than 60% within the 71-100% mark for their average GPA as depicted in Figure 5.

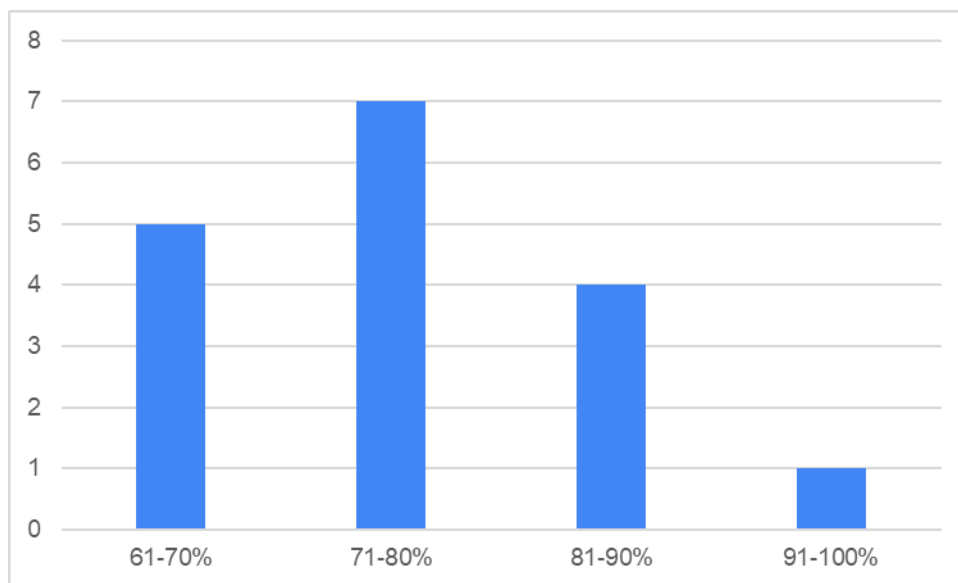


Figure 5. Respondent's academic performance

4.1.2 Supporting agent for their international studies decision

To assess the supporting agent, the highest level of education of the participants' parents was assessed. Out of the 19 participants, 2 parents (1 father and 1 mother) have master's degrees, and this is the highest attained educational level by these students' parents. As Figure 6 depicts, 6 mothers and 7 fathers have bachelor's degrees, and 4 mothers and 7 fathers are high school graduates. But comparatively, there are more mothers for "some high schools" and "vocational training/diploma" compared to fathers.

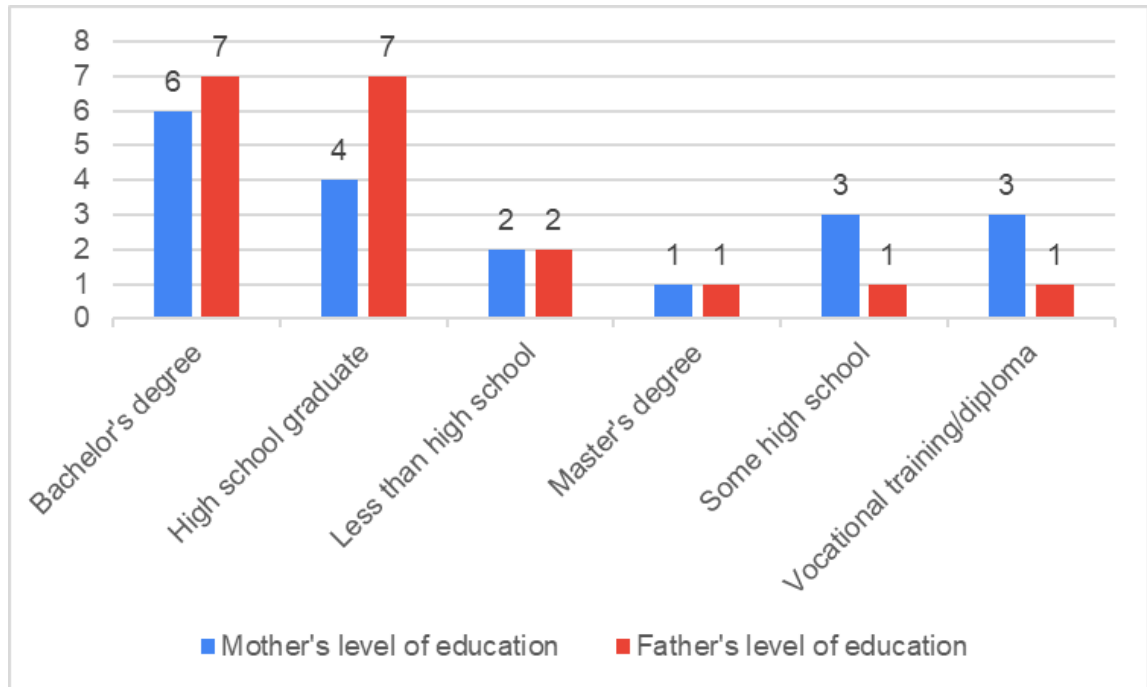


Figure 6. Parent's level of education

Moreover, in terms of the parents' occupation, most of the mothers are traders as depicted in Figure 7, while some run businesses, one is retired, and others are involved in professional lines such as accounting.

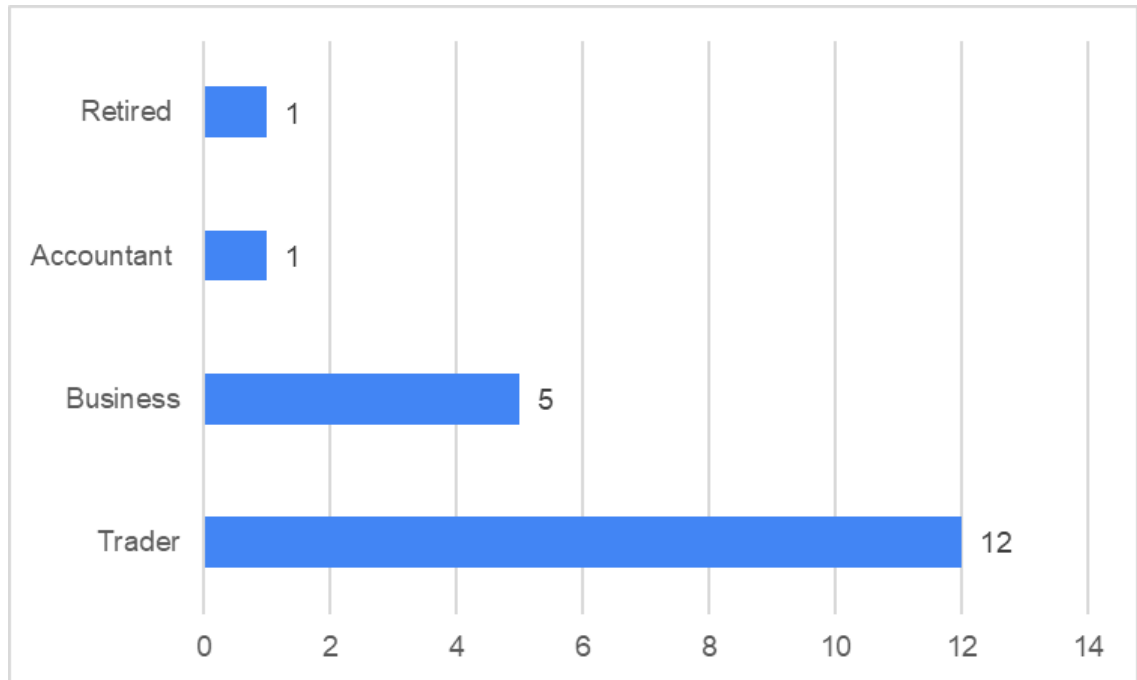


Figure 7. Parents' (mother) Occupation

On the other hand, most of the fathers are involved in the professional line, in fields such as engineering, estate survey & valuation, accounting, education, medicine, and others (except one who is late) are as depicted in Figure 8.

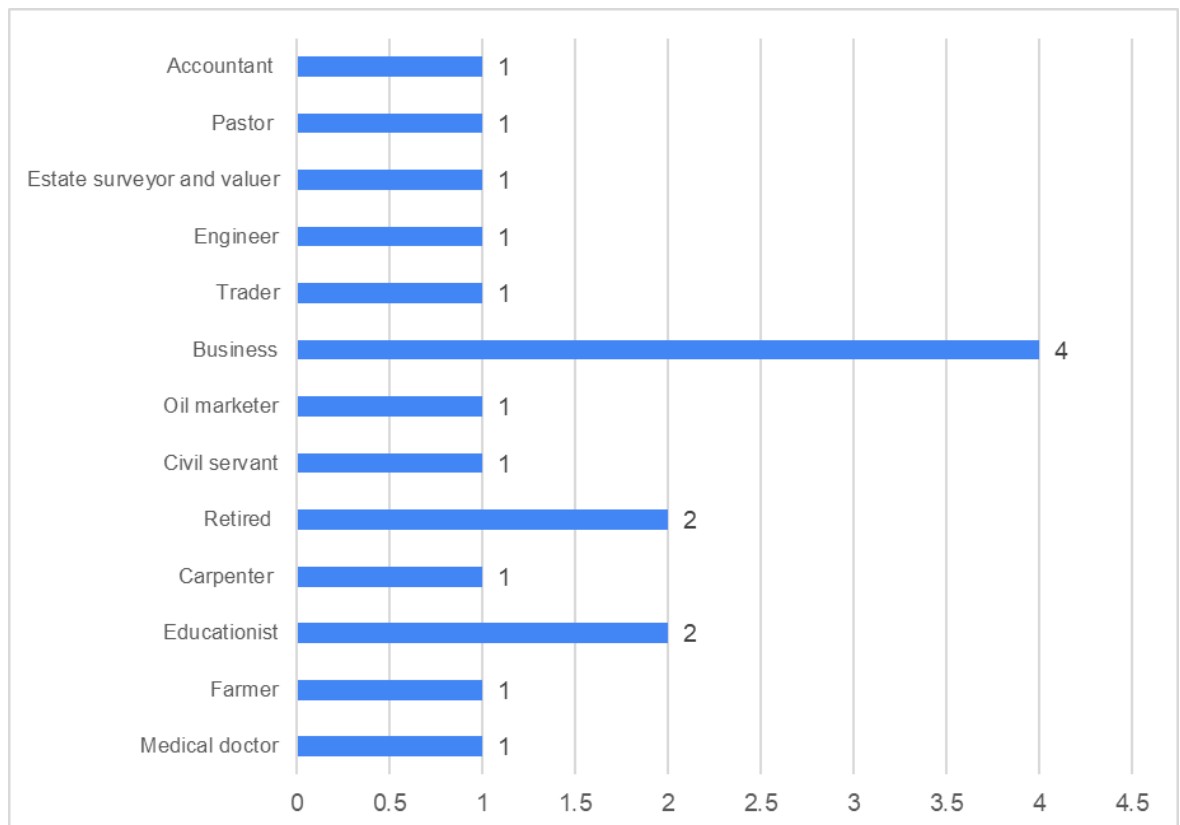


Figure 8. Parents' (father) occupation

Furthermore, to assess their household average (monthly) income, only 2 participants (i.e., 10.52%) of the population earn more than 5000 euros with a participant (i.e., 5.26%) each stating that their average is between 5001 – 10000 euros and above 10000 euros as depicted in Figure 9. Moreover, still on the supporting agent, only 4 out of the 19 participants have had a family member in the school they are currently enrolled at; and these include their brother, their sister, or both.

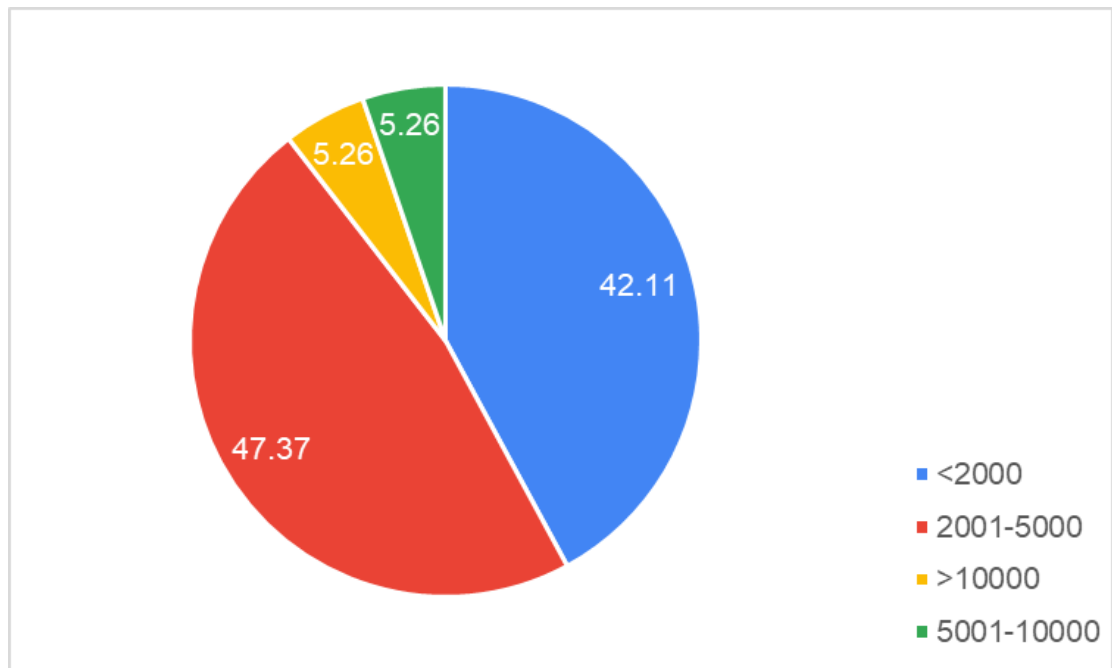


Figure 9. Average household (monthly) income

4.1.3 Factors affecting their study abroad decision

16 out of the 19 participants tied their major driver to study abroad to the need to gain cross-cultural experiences, while the other 3 stated one each of these three reasons: the unavailability of the program they are interested in (in their home country); the low quality of education in their home country; and the cost of the program they are interested in (in their home country) being on the high side. However, out of the 16 that were motivated by cross-cultural experience, 5 added the low quality of education in their home country to their list of factors; 4 added the impossibility of combining work with study in their home country to their list of

factors; 2 added the unavailability of the program they want to study in their home country as a factor; and 2 of these participants each added one of these factors to their list: the cost of the program they are interested in (in their country) being on the high side and the toughness of the admission criteria in their home country. Moreover, in the country they would have gone to study besides Finland, 7 out of 19 participants still found Finland to be perfect. However, others have multiple choices except for 5 participants in the ratio 3:2 who exclusively chose the United States of America (USA) and Canada respectively. Conversely, 4 other participants found Finland to be perfect, but they had other choices on their list such as Canada, UK, USA, New Zealand, Ireland, etc., as in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' study destination should they have a choice

Finland is perfect					
Finland is perfect					
Finland is perfect					
Finland is perfect					
Finland is perfect					
Finland is perfect					
Finland is perfect					
USA					
USA					
USA					
Canada					
Canada					
Finland is perfect	UK				
Finland is perfect	UK	USA			
Finland is perfect	Canada	USA			
Finland is perfect	Canada	New Zealand	Ireland	UK	
USA	Canada				
USA	Australia	Canada	New Zealand	Ireland	
USA	UK	Australia	Canada	New Zealand	Ireland

This implies that the choice to study abroad for majority of the participants is to gain multicultural experiences and to adapt better to a global society. Moreover, the need to be considered for international jobs is another compelling reason for most of them to pursue international degrees as majority of them are of the opinion that the quality of education in their home country is low and as such will affect their competitive advantage for any role they choose to take on in their career. Meanwhile, only 36.84% of these participants deliberately chose Finland as a country to study and others would have preferred to be somewhere else if

given the option. Nevertheless, their responses showed that the multicultural experiences offered by Finland universities attracted some of them and the same is the relatively low tuition fees and unique programs offered by some institutions in the host country.

4.1.4 Factors that influenced their decision to study in Finland

Following the revelation of their country of choice, their responses in this subsection showed that many of the participants considered the high standard of education in Finland over other factors, as 16 of the 19 participants stated this as their reason for choosing Finland as their study destination. Meanwhile, others who are less concerned about the education standard in the country chose Finland because of the comparatively low tuition fees while one of them based his/her selection exclusively on the multi-cultural environment that Finnish university offers. However, besides the education standard, some of the 16 participants mentioned above also considered other factors such as safety and friendliness of the environment, the global recognition of the degree obtained from a Finnish university, ease of admission, opportunity to work while studying, the multi-cultural offering from Finnish universities, low racial discrimination in the country, the comparatively low tuition fee compared to other European union countries, and positive attitude of Finland towards international students.

Furthermore, participants were tasked with rating numerous influences that affected their decision-making process on a scale of 0 to 5. A rating of 0 signified insignificant, 1 denoted low importance, 3 represented moderate influence, and 5 indicated high significance. These individual ratings were then aggregated and averaged to get a mean of their responses. From Figure 10, it is clear that the university website had the most influence while relatives/siblings had the least influence. Nevertheless, in descending order of importance, the following are the major influencers: university websites, guidance counsellors, teachers, college promotional materials, parents, etc.

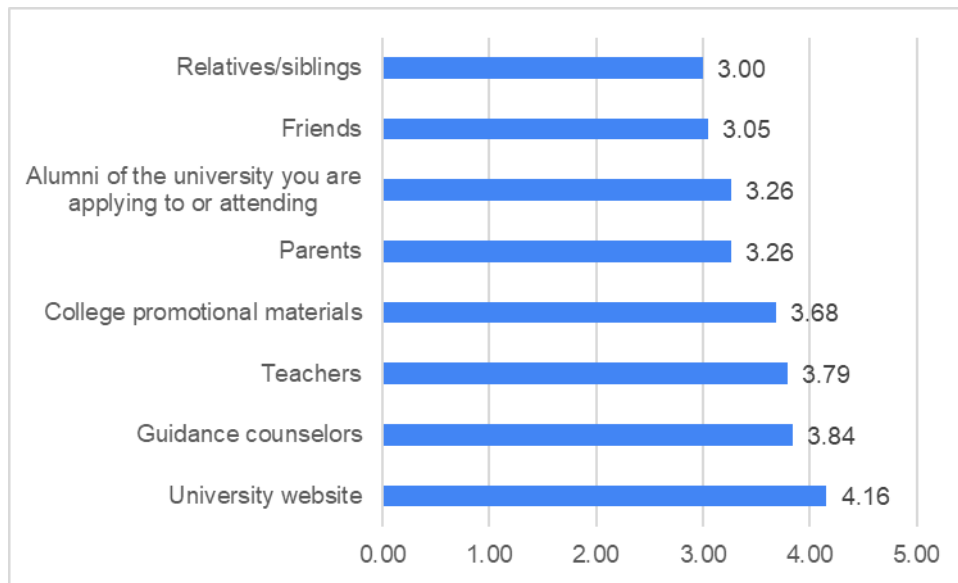


Figure 10. Factors influencing international students' decisions

Besides the university website being the top influencer in the participant's decision-making, the world has gone digital, and it is expected that some students might rely on this for their information gathering. Consequently, to understand what the participants are checking when gathering information, Figure 11 showed that social network sites are considered the most important on the university website followed by the likes of student testimonials, university events, education consultancy services, etc.

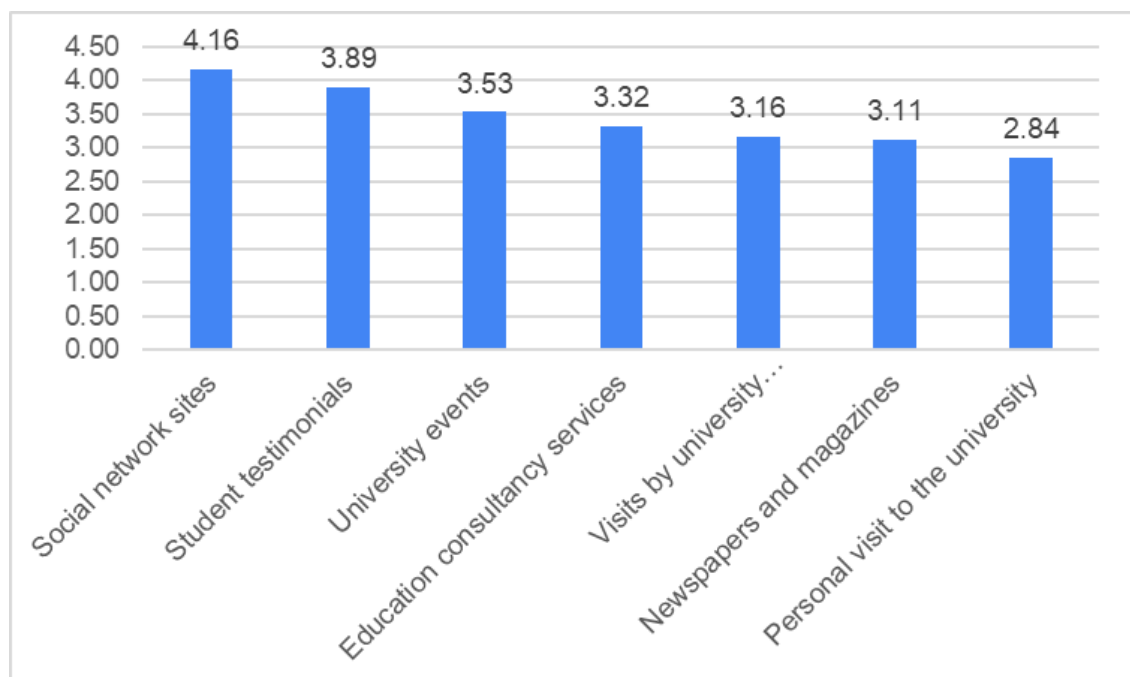


Figure 11. The relevance of university's website pages in student's decision-making

Hence, in today's digital world personal branding goes a long way to create awareness and build online presence. The students rely mostly on first-hand information that they can get from the school over what they are being told by others. The only way they can get this is what is available on the internet as many of them are miles away and may not have the opportunity to "come see things for themselves" before making their decision. Consequently, the digital image of a school which can be delivered effectively through its website and social media handles, affects its attractiveness to potential students.

4.1.5 Personal factors' influence on students' decision-making

The participants were also given a list of personal factors, which they may have considered while deciding on their present institution in Finland. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of each aspect in their decision-making process on a Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree," 2 representing "disagree," 3 representing "neither agree nor disagree," 4 representing "agree," and 5 representing "strongly agree." The results for each factor were then collated and averaged, yielding a mean response rating. As shown in Figure 12, it is clear that the participants' choices are not significantly influenced by recommendations but by their interest in career development, network expansion, understanding of a different culture, improving language skills, etc.

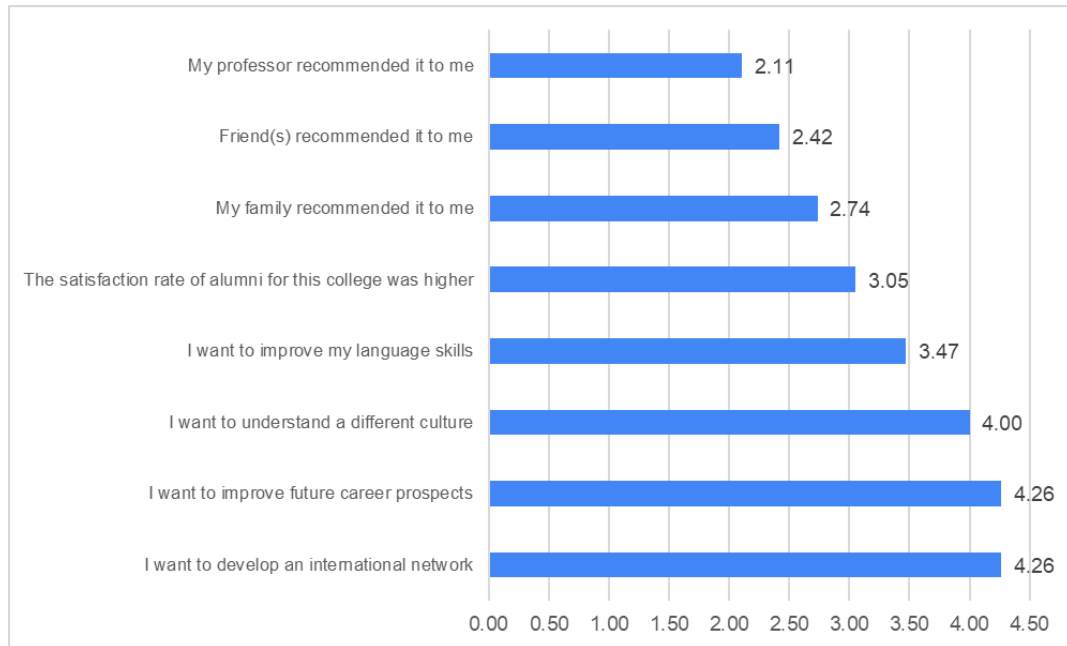


Figure 12. Personal factors in student's decision-making

4.1.6 University and program-specific factor in student's decision making

The participants were given a list of university-specific factors, which they may have considered while deciding on where they would like to further their studies in Finland. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor in their decision-making process on a Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree," 2 representing "disagree," 3 representing "neither agree nor disagree," 4 representing "agree," and 5 representing "strongly agree." The results for each factor were then collated and averaged, yielding a mean response rating. As shown in Figure 13, the high-quality facilities in the university and a well-equipped library were ranked the highest while the connection of the school to their home country or their university in their home country was ranked the lowest. Hence in descending order, the factors include the availability of high-quality facilities and a well-equipped library, reputation, and quality of academic faculty members in teaching and research, university reputation, accessibility of entrance exam in the home country, the position of the school in the university ranking system, etc.

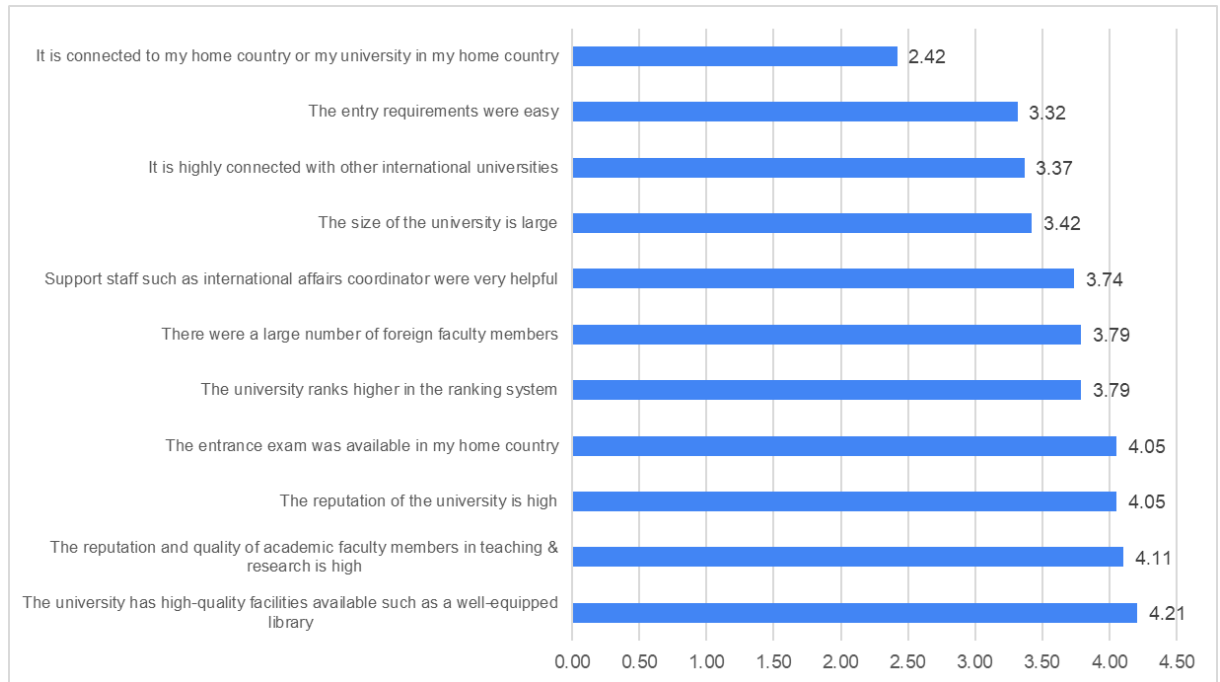


Figure 13. University-specific factors in student's decision-making

Similarly, the participants were also given a list of program-specific factors, which they may have considered while making their choice of the institution to study in Finland. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of each factor in their decision-making process on a Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree," 2 representing "disagree," 3 representing "neither agree nor disagree," 4 representing "agree," and 5 representing "strongly agree." The results for each factor were then collated and averaged, yielding a mean response rating. As shown in Figure 14, the delivery of the course/program in English language is ranked the highest since English is not Finland native language; on the other hand, the implementation of the program on part-time basis was ranked the lowest. So, in a descending order, participant ranked these factors in the following order: delivery of the program in English, program suitability for individual requirements, program offering such as exchange and further study abroad opportunities, course workload suitability for individual abilities, etc.

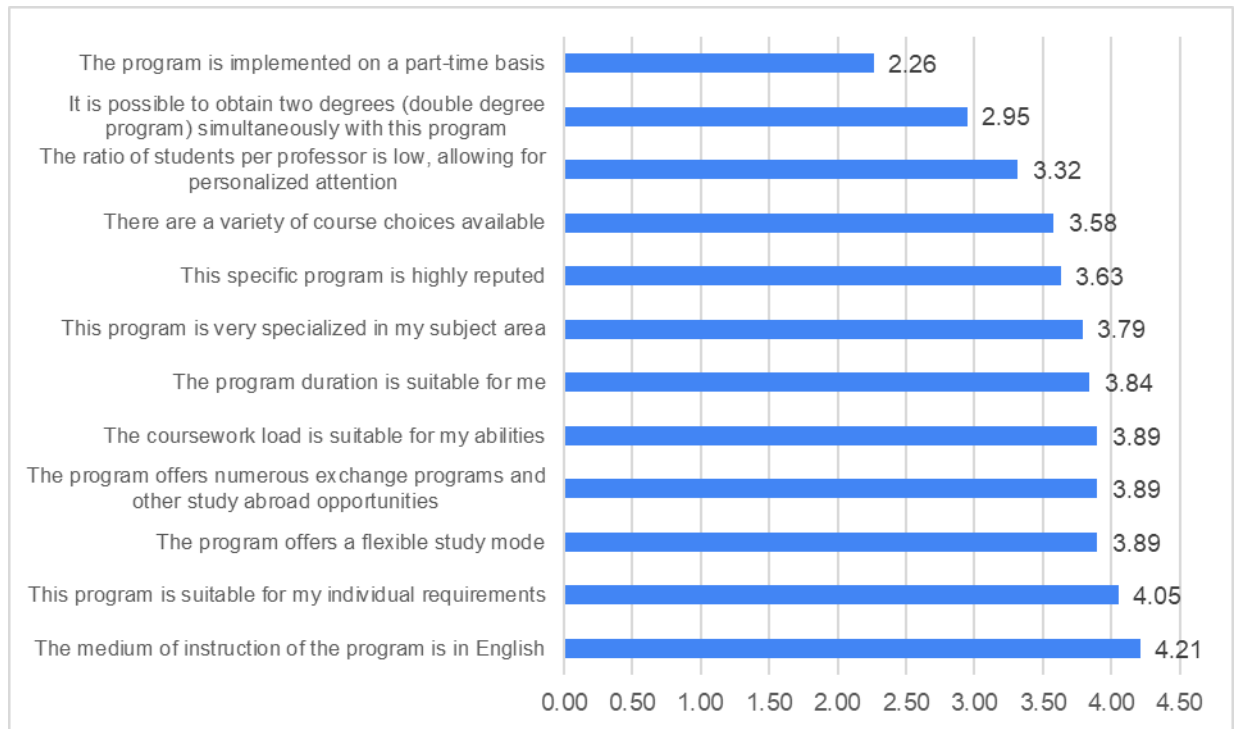


Figure 14. Program specific factors in student's decision-making

4.1.7 Financial status as a factor in student's decision making

To assess the effect of their financial status on their decision-making, the participants were asked a series of questions. 6 out of 19 participants mentioned that tuition fee is not an issue and would rather prioritise the best program over other financial factors. 3 out of these 6 also added that they would choose the country first before considering the program cost. Meanwhile 5 out of the remaining 13 said their priority will be the country they want regardless of the program cost; however, they are not in the race for best program but the cheapest program in the country they want. Similarly, 3 out of the 13 said they would consider the continent first regardless of the tuition fees but would choose a country with the lowest tuition fees. Hence, it is clear that the majority (i.e., 68.42%) are more financially conscious when making their international studies' decision.

On them being financially conscious, further probing showed that 12 of the 19 participants are self-financing; although 4 out of these 12 still receive support

from their parents while 1 receives scholarship from his current school and another one from multiple sources such as state financial aid, bank loan and employer. Meanwhile, the remaining 7 participants are fully sponsored by their parents except for one who also received a scholarship from his present institution.

4.1.8 Academic challenges faced by international students

It is factual that there will be a number of things that would be done differently in the host country compared to the participant's home country and the academic system is one of them. While accessing the academic system difficulty level, 42.11% responded that it is neither easy nor difficult but since this is the neutral point judging from the two extreme sides (as depicted in Figure 15) showed that 36.84% find it somewhat easy compared to 21.05% who find it somewhat difficult to adapt to the academic style.

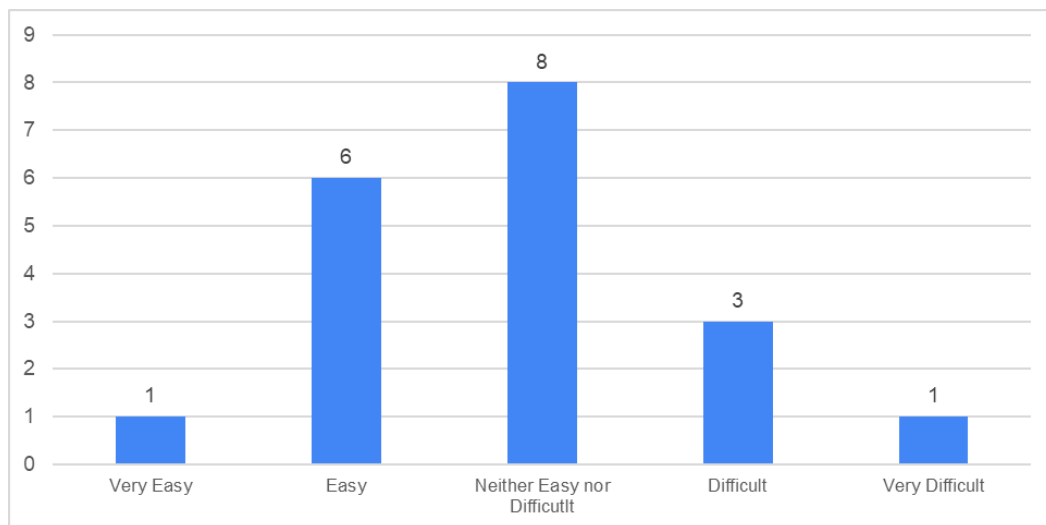


Figure 15. Adaptation to the academic system in the host country

Moreover, as shown in Table 2, 78.95% listed language barrier as their major challenge while others mentioned understanding course materials, difficulty in asking questions in class and keeping up with coursework as other challenges they are faced with, etc.

Table 2. Academic challenges faced by Nigerian students in the host country

Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers			
Language barriers	Different grading system		
Language barriers	Different grading system	Difficulty in asking questions in class	
Language barriers	Different grading system		
Language barriers	Understanding course materials	Keeping up with coursework	
Language barriers	Understanding course materials	Keeping up with coursework	
Understanding course materials	Different grading system		
Understanding course materials	Keeping up with coursework	Difficulty in asking questions in class	Lack of study resources
Difficulty in asking questions in class	Different grading system		
Keeping up with coursework			

Consequently, the major challenge they face is not how the courses are delivered, as English is used. However, it appears Finnish is still used in some instances making it difficult to participate actively in class, and this, according to already reviewed literature, could negatively impact their performance. Hence, a more inclusive way for class interaction could assist in addressing this issue making time in class more fun and worthwhile for all students.

4.1.9 Socio-cultural challenges

To assess the socio-cultural challenges, participants were asked a series of questions. Regarding cultural shock since they got to Finland, 63.16% mentioned that they have experienced cultural shock and this is based on weather (such as extreme cold), habit (such as drinking directly from the tap), first name culture in classroom (which is different from their home country where salutation such as sir/ma is used), not being considered for a job on grounds of language barrier and prioritising of personal space. On the contrary, only 36.84% of the participants have experienced issue socialising or making friends with local or international students as depicted in Figure 16. However, two of those who mentioned that they have challenges making friends or socialising since they got to Finland said Finns find it difficult to socialise or make friends. Two others said the challenge is due to the language barrier while the last person who gave a

reason mentioned that it is personal because it is overwhelming to have friends from different cultural backgrounds.

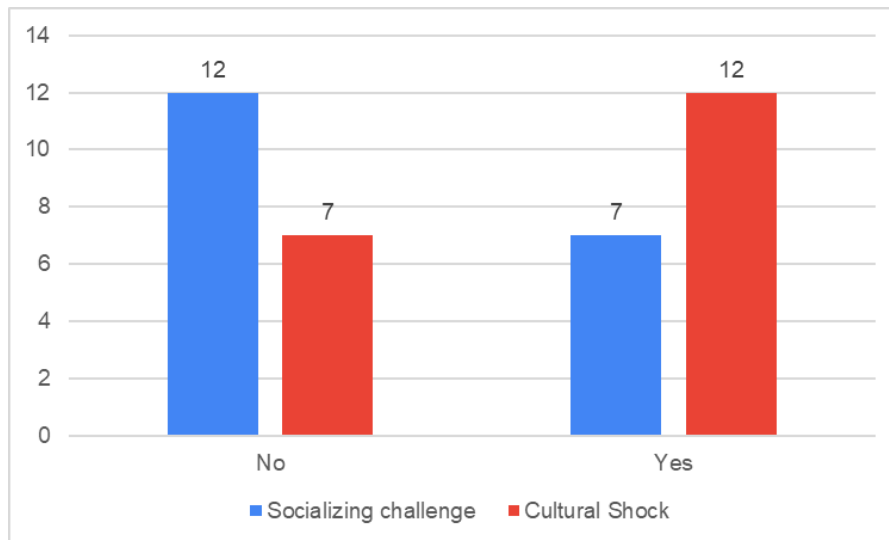


Figure 16. Cultural shock and socialization challenge experienced by Nigerian students in the host country

While it would be great to have social and cultural settings just like the home country, it is just impossible as people differ in the way they do things. Meanwhile, many of the participants struggle with a language barrier which can be made less significant if a common language is encouraged more from the school setting. Many of the participants came to Finland because of the multi-cultural experience offered and schools can further develop this by sponsoring some social gatherings that bring students together for fun activities.

4.1.10 Financial challenge

On financial challenges, 73.68% of the participants said they have not had difficulty with their finances since they commenced their study in Finland. However, out of the 26.32% who have experienced financial challenges 3 mentioned one of these reasons: tuition fee payment, high standard of living, and limited time to work as a student. Meanwhile, on the affordability of living, the average of their responses tends towards it being expensive (with the illustration in Figure 17) as a mean of 3.26 was obtained after finding the average of the collected responses.

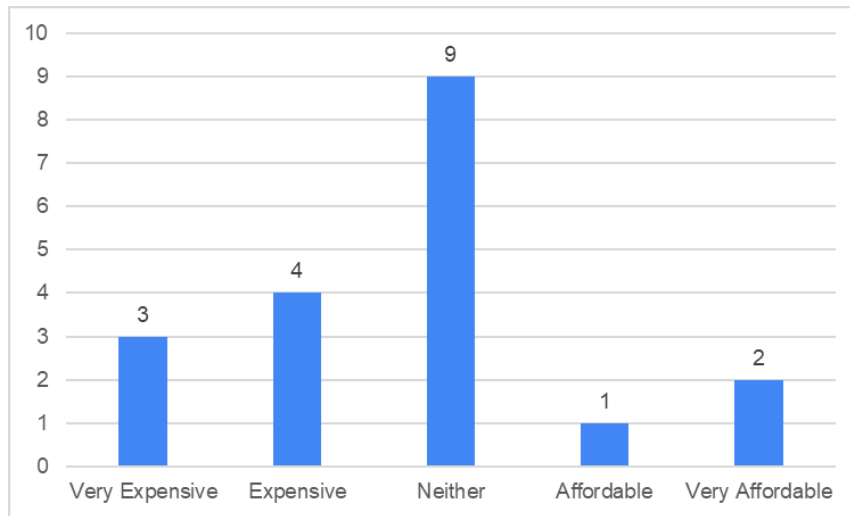


Figure 17. Financial challenges experienced by Nigerian students in the host country

Meanwhile, the fact with urban centers is that life is relatively expensive, but the majority of the participants are self-financing their education. However, with easy access to a part-time job with less language barrier clause, the students may find it less expensive since they can make enough to pay their bills. So, in summary, their financial challenge is based on what they can earn to finance their bills and not necessarily the cost of living in their respective choice location.

4.1.11 Housing challenge

Figure 18 showed that the majority of the participants are satisfied with the current housing situation in Finland with 17 out of 19 stating they have not experienced issues with accommodation since they arrived in Finland. Although, one of the other 2 participants said there is house scarcity, this could either be a personal approach towards searching for it.

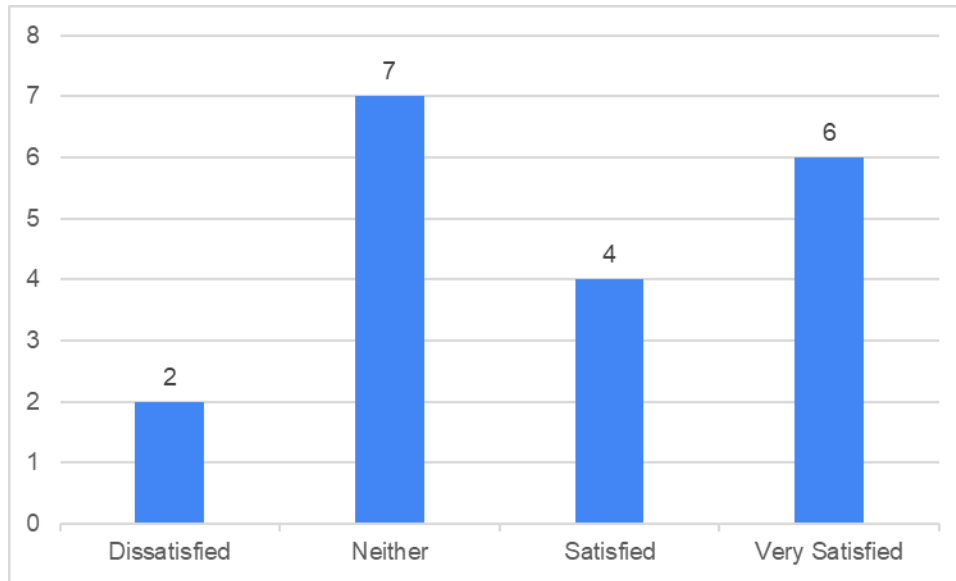


Figure 18. Housing challenges experienced by Nigerian students in the host country

4.1.12 Access to healthcare challenge

A healthcare facility is one of many facilities that is important in every society. Access to this ensures that any health challenges can be addressed before it becomes critical. When these participants were asked to rate how accessible this is, the mean of their response (which is 2.58) tends towards it being neither accessible nor inaccessible as depicted in Figure 19. But to further probe this, participants were asked if they have had any health-related challenges since they moved to Finland to determine if they have had the course to use the facility or not; but their response showed that only 10.53% of them have. This implies that although participants gave their responses on the facility's accessibility, no conclusion can be derived as only 2 out of the 19 participants have had a first-hand experience.

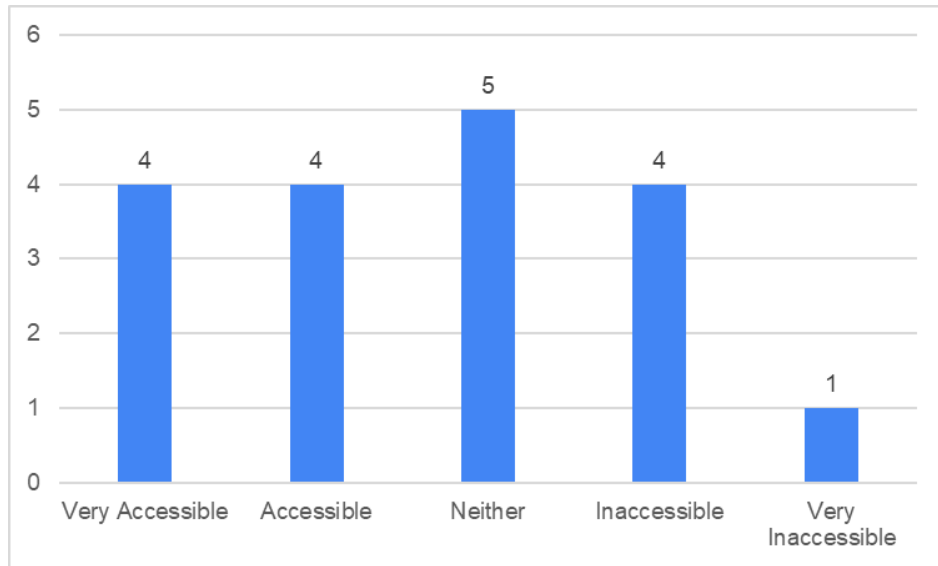


Figure 19. Healthcare center accessibility to Nigerian students in the host country

4.1.13 Participant assessment of Finland and their current schools

Recommendations go a long way in convincing people to make certain decisions and the same applies to an institution winning the heart of prospective students with little or no effort. Before someone who has experience with something will encourage others to do the same, such must have had a good experience. In lieu of this, participants were asked to share their level of satisfaction with their stay in Finland. As depicted in Figure 20, most of the respondents seem satisfied with the mean of the responses tending towards 2.32, a satisfactory score.

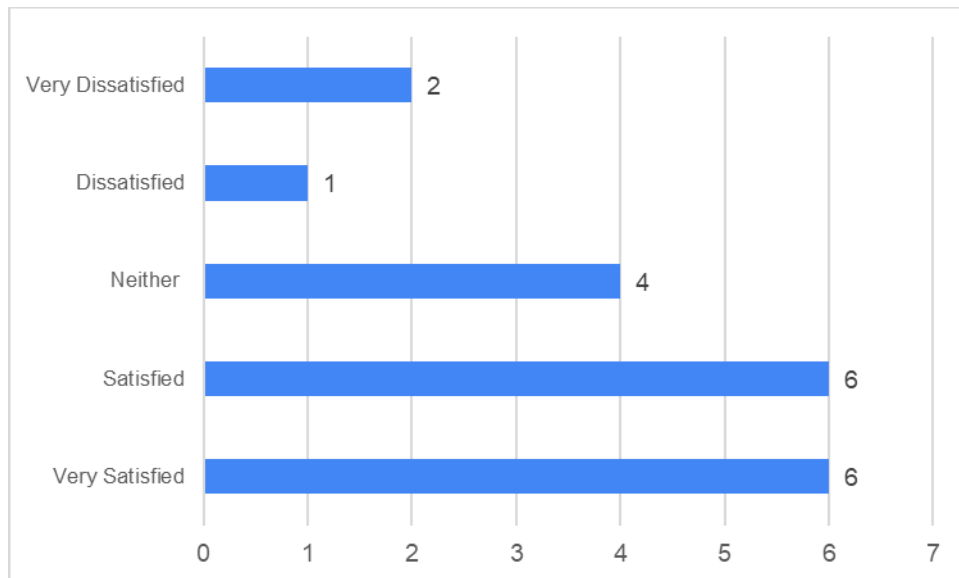


Figure 20. Participant's perception of the host country

Also, regarding their overall experience studying at their current school, the mean of their responses, 4.32, showed that the majority of them have had good experiences. Although, there are about 21.05% who said it is neither of the two extremes, but it is clear that some gave the rating they did at the time based on the number of times they have spent in the institution as one mentioned that he/she is new.

4.2 Interview responses

The interview featured 5 respondents who are Nigerian students studying in XAMK. The interview started with each respondent being asked to introduce themselves and as such featured Tega, Abiodun, and Ramat who are third-year students; Christopher who is a second-year student; and Edekeh who is a first-year student. Tega, Ramat, and Edekeh are female while Christopher and Abiodun are male based on gender classification. So, unlike the survey respondents, there are more female to male respondents for the interview.

About their background, four of the respondents have completed a bachelor's degree in their home country before coming to Finland, and as such they are not new to the bachelor's level of education. Moreover, they all enrolled in Digital International business because of its uniqueness and for its relevance to the career they choose to pursue as in the case of Ramat and Christopher, who planned to one day start their own business and whose parent owns a business respectively.

Regarding their motivation to study in Finland, all respondents have something in common which is an experience in a multi-cultural environment. Meanwhile, each respondent has other unique reasons, as Ramat's was Finland being the happiest country in the world, besides the recommendation she had received from her friends who were already in Finland. Christopher's, on the other hand, was based on the possibility of being able to further pursue his career in tech since Finland is recognised for its position in the tech space, globally. Tega's, was personal, as her parent resides in Finland already. Abiodun's, was to get the best education, as Finland education is one of "the best in the world". Lastly,

Edekeh's, was based on the best education she could get, and because a move to Finland is a relatively "cheap option" for her to relocate from her home country.

Moreover, the majority of them, except for Christopher and Tega, chose XAMK because of the availability of scholarship since they are self-sponsored, or parent sponsored. Meanwhile, Tega who would have chosen XAMK for the reason did not get to know about the scholarship until the point of making the payment, but she mentioned that it would have also been a motivation if she had been aware before applying. Consequently, the offering of a multicultural experience, the status of the country and its educational system, the relatively low education cost, and scholarships serve as motivation to most of these respondents.

On their study's sponsorship, Edekeh is self-sponsored as she said her parents have been "supporting with prayers". Tega was supported by her parent who sponsored her relocation and was responsible for her tuition fees (for the first two years) and her basic necessities (such as rent, phone bills, etc.) for the first five months after relocation. Abiodun and Ramat were also sponsored by their respective parents; and Christopher said he could self-sponsor but still received financial assistance from his family. Moreover, the respondents were encouraged to share a little about their parents' background. While most of them mentioned that their parents had bachelor's degrees, Tega mentioned that her mother had an "upper secondary school" education while Christopher mentioned that his father has a master's degree in business (a degree he obtained from a UK university).

Assessing why they chose to study in XAMK, their response showed that all of them applied to several schools after choosing the country to study. For the likes of Tega, studying in XAMK is because of how easy the admission process was as she mentioned that "XAMK exam was well conducted" compared to other entrance exams she wrote. While pressing further, she mentioned that the pre-reading material that was not provided by other schools for the essay part of the exam affected her performance in the overall exam, but with the provision of these materials to prospective student by XAMK, made it easy to ace the

entrance exam. Others such as Edekeh, Abiodun, Ramat, and Christopher chose XAMK based on testimonials which were mostly from the XAMK website and news about the achievement of XAMK alumni as in the case of Christopher.

Now that they have been in XAMK for a few weeks to more than two years, they were asked if their expectations have been met so far and virtually all of them have the same thing in common except Edekeh who is still new to the school system. Abiodun, Tega, and Ramat mentioned that, unlike their home country, the academic style in XAMK has been awesome, referencing what they can do now, which they could not while studying in their home country. Ramat and Abiodun mentioned being shy and having difficulty expressing themselves as part of what XAMK helped them overcome through constant presentations. Tega, on the other hand, mentioned the ability to make presentation slides, a skill that she did not have before moving to Finland. Overall, all the participants said their expectations have not been cut short when it comes to studying in XAMK, although they mentioned some challenges which will be discussed shortly.

On possible academic challenges, Abiodun said that studying at XAMK has been "smooth and still not smooth in some areas". When asked to buttress it, he explained that it is smooth in areas where students are allowed to bring some courses, they have completed from their home country to get some credits and reduce the workload of courses needed to be taken. Also, he mentioned that it is also smooth in areas where individuals can design a study plan to accommodate other personal activities and work. However, he mentioned that the coursework and assignments seem to be extensive and as such make it almost impossible to do anything else such as socialise. Furthermore, he added that while some lectures are delivered greatly, requiring little/no reading after attending such classes, others are not well delivered making it difficult to understand and perform exceptionally in such areas. From Ramat's perspective, she feels everything is okay and that her lecturers make themselves available to answer her questions, thus making the academic journey easy. Meanwhile, others like Tega did not have issues with lecturers or how the lectures are delivered but with

colleagues who are passive in group work and who would like to benefit from the final output; the colleagues like that were tagged as "free riders".

Based on their responses to the academic challenges, a follow-up question was asked on general challenges regarding the language barrier. All respondents complained that this is a major challenge while residing in Finland as there are several restrictions on opportunities that can be accessed by international students who are not fluent in the Finnish language. For example, Edekeh shared her ordeal about not being able to secure a part-time job since she arrived in Finland (more than 3 weeks ago) and Tega and Abiodun shared their story on the difficulty in securing a part-time job (down to the menial jobs) because of fluency in Finnish language being a requirement.

On other challenges, Abiodun mentioned he sometimes have financial challenges and he always depend on friends and relative during that period, as the cost of living is quite expensive. Others such as Christopher said he was prepared to live in Finland for at least 10 months even without a job. However, he mentioned that the accommodation is expensive when trying to get an accommodation with similar standard to what he had in Nigeria. This, he said, is because rent "is outrageous". Meanwhile, on the accessibility of housing, Tega said it is not difficult to access when the appropriate process is followed. That is, filling in an application with the organisation in charge of housing and waiting till the application is approved. However, Abiodun said that it is quite difficult if the person in need of the house is not already in Finland as he had to get someone who is already in Finland to physically go to the organisation's physical office. Nonetheless, the account of Christopher and Ramat aligns with that of Tega stating that accommodation is not difficult to get so far as the individual can afford it.

Some other challenges that were assessed include access to healthcare services. Regarding this, some shared their personal experiences. According to Tega, who has had a need to be treated at one of the healthcare facilities said that the facilities are accessible. Although she clarified that the accessibility is

relative, as the student healthcare (YTHS) is more accessible compared to the public healthcare. Christopher who had attempted to use the public healthcare facility for a regular check-up mentioned that, the fact that individuals cannot visit hospitals at will for checks makes it difficult. He added that, the requirement to contact the hospital first before being booked for an appointment makes the public healthcare facility more difficult to use. Others, such as Abiodun, also mentioned that although it is allowed to call in for emergencies, the timing may not be right sometimes because of the need to book an appointment which might be scheduled for a week. Consequently, it can be deduced that student healthcare facilities are more accessible to these students compared to public healthcare facility in the home country.

4.3 Answers to research questions

What are the main factors influencing Nigerian students' decision to study abroad, specifically at XAMK?

In line with the "pull-push" framework, Nigerian students are motivated to study abroad because of some factors that are pushing them from their home country and other factors pulling them to another country abroad. From the qualitative point of view, the push factors include the low quality of education in their home country, the cost of the program they are interested in relative to what they earn being on the high side, the impossibility of combining work and study to cater for their finances, unavailability of programs they are interested in their home country and the toughness of admission criteria. On the pull factors, the majority of them are drawn to studying in Finland because of the offering of the multi-cultural experience beside a wonderful educational system. Others made Finland their study destination because it offers solutions to the issue in the push factors and because of its recognition as one of the happiest countries in the world with fewer events of racism or unrest. Additionally, it offers one of the relatively cheap options to migrate to the European continent.

Moreover, on what influenced their decision to study at XAMK over other schools in Finland, their responses showed the school's global ranking, the school's

alumni success on the world stage, and what other international students have to say about the school through testimonial greatly influenced their decision.

Although some got recommendations from friends, these were secondary to what these individuals independently found themselves on the school websites. Also, XAMK style from the point where a prospective student takes the entrance exam to the point where they accept the offer convinced some of the students that it is their study destination before they eventually decided to accept the offer.

Additionally, other factors such as scholarship, and delivery of courses in English are also great influencers based on the responses received from the participants. Consequently, prospective students, based on this study, are more interested in a study destination that solves the push factors and have other incentive which in the case of Finland include the offer of a multi-cultural experience and breeding of an atmosphere that is peaceful such that everyone is welcome regardless of where they come from. This found support in Nikou et al. (2023) who conducted a similar study on international students in Finland and concluded that the best way to attract international students is "focusing on the factors that matter most to international students".

What strategies can be developed to attract more Nigerian students to study at XAMK?

The ease of admission process, English-taught classes, scholarships, and opportunity to combine work with study are some of those things XAMK already put in place to attract international students including Nigerians. Meanwhile, certain improvement on some of these things and the implementation of some other things which will be recommended can yield a better result. The following are strategies that can be developed based on this study to attract more Nigerian students to study at XAMK:

1. Improved online presence: The majority of the students depended more on the information they could gather directly from the internet particularly the XAMK website with more focus on areas such as social network sites, student testimonials, university services, education consultancy services, etc. But before students are interested in visiting the XAMK website, the visibility of the

school in online searches depends on the school engagement and the marketing arm of the school has a lot to do in this area to ensure that more promotional content is pushed that will boost the school's online presence. Moreover, when these students eventually visit the school website, the study showed that there are some areas that they are more interested in, and more focus on these areas could lead to more attraction and yield better results.

2. Making the entrance exam even easier: The responses received showed that the XAMK entrance exam is relatively easy based on how it is conducted compared to some other schools in Finland; however, this could become easier. Requesting feedback from prospective students after their entrance exam could assist the school in determining what they found interesting and difficult about the entrance exam and could help identify and develop ways to make the entrance exam even easier for prospective students.
3. Integrate teaching of the Finnish language into the educational system such that it is easy to learn for international students: One of the major challenges that Nigerian international students face in Finland is the language barrier. Although, it is impossible to force the Finns to change this perspective; the school could incorporate teaching this language into the student's academic journey so that they earn more points for taking the course and this will also assist them in surmounting this challenge. A good knowledge of the language will assist them with getting a job easily with no concern about them being able to interact in the Finnish language.
4. Encourage more social events that will foster socialisation amongst international students and the Finns from the school environment: The majority of the students experienced cultural shock which is expected as they moved from one environment in which they have lived for more than 18 years of their lives to a completely new environment. The pattern in which things are done in the new environment may not necessarily fit how they have lived most of their lives, but adaptation is always the key. However, many of these students came to Finland to have a feel of what a multicultural environment is, but that is not easy with the Finns having difficulty at socialising, as the Finns love their space. Nevertheless, more like the introduction of groups to foster collaboration amongst students, the school can also encourage some social

gathering that brings the students together for fun activities outside of the classroom.

5. Scholarship: This used to be a selling point for some institutions, but it seems XAMK is not leveraging this yet. Some of the students are unaware that there is a scholarship program that allows them to get 50% off provided they can meet up with some academic parameters. The scholarship is another means to attract Nigerians and since this is already in place, the school should make the information readily available so that students who have no contact with the school can learn about this information even from the school website.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Key results and findings

The study investigated the perception and attraction factors of Nigerian students' choice to study at XAMK. Its aim was to acquire a better knowledge of Nigerian students' perceptions of XAMK and to determine the elements that impact their decision to study at XAMK in Finland. To achieve the aim of the study, the following objectives were set: to determine the factors influencing Nigerian students' decision to study abroad; to determine the factors that attracts Nigerian students to study at XAMK; and to determine challenges faced by Nigerian students in XAMK.

The study found that many Nigerian students in Finland selected Finland as their study region because it offers solutions to the push factors in their home country, and it is one of the cheapest options to migrate to Europe for study. Moreover, the multi-cultural experience and peaceful environment that the host country offers were other factors that influenced some of these students' choice on study destination. On the decision to study at XAMK, it was found that many of the students were motivated by the feedback they got from other international students on the school website; ease of the admission process; the university prestige & reputation in the world ranking; the delivery of their programs in English language; and the achievement of the alumni of the school on the world stage. However, there were some challenges highlighted by these students and

the first on their list is language barrier which is affecting them from learning effectively and taking advantage of available opportunities in terms of job. Other challenges include, the high cost of living, difficulties in socialising as the "Finns love their space".

5.2 Managerial Implications

XAMK is in the educational business for so many reasons, and one of that is profit, just like other businesses. To actualise this, the school needs to be attractive to prospective students, which will in turn influence their study destination's decision. Although, XAMK is already making concerted effort towards attracting prospective student who may have made the choice to study in Finland, hence, some of the things that might be discussed in this section is just to reinforce what has been put in place already.

The starting point for all prospective students is research which many of the respondents did just before they made their choice. This implies that the digital presence of the school on the internet is more important in the present age than the way it may have seemed some decades ago, hence, the reason for more work in this area. The students' focus is on the school reputation in the global ranking, what progress the alumni of the school are making on the global stage and what other international students like them have to say about their experience in the school. Many of these students used search engines and with a great digital presence the result will prompt the user to visit the school website or social media handles. Although, things such as testimonials have already been incorporated into the school website and social media handles, and so should other related topics that these students might be interested in, such as the alumni's achievement or success in the world stage. This is a key factor that the marketing team needs to intensify their work on to achieve optimal results.

After the student has been convinced that XAMK is a better choice for them, the next step would be the registration process. Although the educational consultancy service is expected to make this easier, but it is important to know how easy the students think the process is. Feedback could assist in evaluating

this to improve the students' experience. Moreover, the next stage will be the entrance exam which some described to be well organised compared to other schools in Finland. Meanwhile, this could become better if a post-exam survey is requested to determine what the students found interesting and what they found challenging during their entrance exam.

Moreover, improving the student adaptability to the new environment could draw more prospective students to XAMK. From the study, it is clear what most student find challenging is the language barrier, as it deprives them of opportunities that they should have been able to leverage while studying in Finland - especially work opportunities. By incorporating more teaching of Finnish language course into the student's academic journey so that they earn more points for taking the course could assist in surmounting this challenge and makes it easy for them to adapt in the new environment. This will not only solve the issue with the language barrier but will solve other challenges relating to their finances since they will be able to access those opportunities.

Consequently, XAMK has committed to doing a number of things that are attracting prospective students, but the result could be better. With the enhancement of its online presence, it will become more visible to the student. Moreover, with the constant request for feedback from prospective students, it could improve the students' experience (from the educational consultancy service and entrance exam perspective) during the admission processes. Lastly, XAMK could make a lot of international students want to come to Finland to study if they can develop a plan to address the language barrier challenge to ensure that these students can settle in easily.

5.3 Reliability of the study and future development

The researcher had a deep understanding of the relevant issues and a pre-understanding of the need for a comprehensive framework that addresses the unique needs and preferences of Nigerian students. This is because the researcher is a migrant student from Nigeria and has a first-hand understanding of the subject matter. Besides, the analysis of prior research on international

student mobility and the experiences of Nigerian students studying abroad coupled with interviews with some current Nigerian students at XAMK buttressed this.

On the study's credibility, a framework which has been rigorously tested and refined through a collaborative and iterative process, ensuring its credibility and authenticity was used. This is the "push-pull" framework which has been used for many related studies (Wilkins et al. 2013, 128).

Regarding transferability, the study used a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. The study considered the broader context of international student mobility and the unique challenges faced by Nigerian students studying abroad. The framework applies to other higher education institutions seeking to attract Nigerian students and can inform policy and practice in international education.

On the dependability of the study, the research process was transparent, with clear documentation of the data collection and analysis methods used. The researcher employed a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis, including peer review and member checking. The framework was evaluated for consistency and coherence across different data sources and perspectives.

The conformability of the study is equally important. The researcher took steps to minimise potential biases, such as using open-ended questions for the interviews and engaging in reflective practices. Multiple data sources and participant perspectives were included in the analysis to ensure objectivity. The researcher remained open to alternative interpretations of the data and engaged in ongoing dialogue with participants. Consequently, the interpretations offered by the study are the result of the participants and the phenomenon, rather than researcher biases.

This study was able to assess the motivation of Nigerian International students who chose XAMK as their preferred study destination. To improve on the study, it

is important to have a qualitative study most importantly to assess the motivation of other Nigerian students in other institutions in Finland to have a holistic view of what influenced their choice to study in their current institutions in Finland and the challenges they are faced with.

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Table 1. Students' study destination should they have a choice

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SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE:**A. Educational Status**

1. Enrollment status (choose all that apply):
 - Currently enrolled in a Bachelor's program
 - Currently enrolled in a Master's program
 - Planning to apply to a Bachelor's program
 - Planning to apply to a Master's program

2. Enrollment Type (choose all that apply):
 - Part-time student
 - Full-time student
 - Applying to a part-time program
 - Applying to a full-time program

3. How many years have you been at your current university?
 - 1 year or less
 - 2 years
 - 3 years
 - 4 years
 - 4+ years

4. Field of study (choose all that apply):
 - Business/Economics
 - Humanities
 - Sciences
 - Fine Arts
 - Social Sciences
 - Engineering
 - Health Sciences
 - Education
 - Others (please specify): _____

5. Rank your academic performance in your current program:
 - Among the top 15%
 - Among the top 40%
 - Below the top 40%

B. Personal & Family Background

6. Gender:
 - Male

- Female

7. Age:

- <20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- >51

8. Home Country: _____

9. Highest level of education achieved by your parent(s):

- Father:
 - Less than high school
 - Some high school
 - High school graduate
 - Vocational training/diploma
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Postgraduate degree (Ph.D.)
- Mother:
 - Less than high school
 - Some high school
 - High school graduate
 - Vocational training/diploma
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Postgraduate degree (Ph.D.)

10. Parent's Occupation:

- Father: _____
- Mother: _____

11. Household income per month (in Euros):

- <2000
- 2001-5000
- 5001-10000
- >10000

12. Do any family members attend or have attended the university/college you are currently enrolled in or planning to apply for further studies?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, please specify family members (Father, Mother, Brother(s), Sister(s)).

C. Early Decision Parameters

13. Main reasons for studying abroad (choose all that apply):

- The quality of education in my home country is low

- The program I'm interested in is unavailable in my home country
- The admission criteria for universities in my home country are tough
- The program I wanted to attend in my home country was very expensive
- I wanted to gain cross-cultural experience
- I wanted to work while studying, which was not possible in my home country
- Other (please specify): _____

14. If you had a choice, where else would you have gone to study (choose all that apply):

- USA
- UK
- Australia
- Canada
- New Zealand
- Ireland
- Own Country
- Finland is perfect
- Anywhere else but Finland
- Other (please specify): _____

15. Main reasons for choosing Finland for your studies (choose all that apply):

- Finland is known for high education standards
- The degree from Finland is recognized worldwide
- It is easy to get admission to Finnish universities
- It is easy to obtain a visa to Finland
- Tuition fees at Finnish universities are lower compared to other countries
- Finnish universities offer a multicultural environment
- Opportunity for part-time work is available while studying
- Finland is near to my home country
- The program I applied for is quite popular
- The environment in Finland is safe and friendly
- There is low racial discrimination in Finland
- The country's attitude towards international students is positive
- Other (please specify): _____

16. Rank the importance of information sources when choosing a university (0=Not important; 1=Low importance; 3=Moderate importance; 5=Highly important):

- Guidance counselors
- Teachers
- Parents
- Friends
- Relatives/siblings
- Alumni of the university you are applying to or attending
- College promotional materials
-

- University website
- University events

- [] Visits by university representatives
- [] Personal visit to the university
- [] Newspapers and magazines
- [] Education consultancy services
- [] Social network sites
- [] Student testimonials

D. Final Decision Influencers

17. Rank the importance of personal factors in your decision-making process (1=Strongly disagree; 5=Strongly agree):

- [] I want to understand a different culture
- [] I want to develop an international network
- [] I want to improve my language skills
- [] I want to improve future career prospects
- [] Friend(s) recommended it to me
- [] My family recommended it to me
- [] My professor recommended it to me
- [] The satisfaction rate of alumni for this college was higher

18. Rank the importance of university-specific factors in your decision-making process (1=Strongly disagree; 5=Strongly agree):

- [] The reputation of the university is high
- [] The university ranks higher in the ranking system
- [] The size of the university is large
- [] The reputation and quality of academic faculty members in teaching and research is high
- [] The university has high-quality facilities available such as a well-equipped library
- [] There were a large number of foreign faculty members
- [] The entrance exam was available in my home country
- [] The entry requirements were easy
- [] Support staff such as the international affairs coordinator were very helpful
- [] It is highly connected with other international universities
- [] It is connected to my home country or my university in my home country

19. Rank the importance of program-specific factors in your decision-making process (1=Strongly disagree; 5=Strongly agree):

- [] The medium of instruction of the program is in English
- [] The program offers a flexible study mode
- [] The program is implemented on a part-time basis
- [] This specific program is highly reputed
- [] This program is suitable for my requirements
- [] This program is very specialized in my subject area
- [] The ratio of students per professor is low, allowing for personalized attention
- [] There are a variety of course choices available
- [] The program offers numerous exchange programs and other study-abroad opportunities
- [] The program duration is suitable for me

- It is possible to obtain two degrees (double degree program) simultaneously with this program
- The coursework load is suitable for my abilities

20. How does the tuition fee of the program influence your choice? (choose all that apply):

- I will go anywhere to get the lowest affordable tuition fees
- I will choose the continent first regardless of tuition fees but then I will choose the country with the lowest tuition fees
- I will choose the country I want to go to regardless of tuition fees but then I will try to find the cheapest program in that country
- Tuition fee is not an issue for me, and I will choose the best program for me

21. How are you financing your studies (choose all that apply):

- Self-financing
- Parental support
- Scholarships from my host institution
- State financial aid
- Bank loan
- Employer
- Other (please specify): _____

E. The Challenges

Academic Challenges:

23. How would you rate the level of difficulty in adapting to the academic system in your host country? (1 = Very Easy, 5 = Very Difficult)

24. What academic challenges have you encountered? (Select all that apply)

- Language barriers
- Understanding course materials
- Different grading system
- Keeping up with coursework
- Difficulty in asking questions in class
- Lack of study resources
- Other (please specify): _____

Cultural and Social Challenges:

25a. Have you experienced any cultural shock or adjustment issues? (Yes/No)

- Yes
- No

25b. If yes, please describe the aspects of cultural shock or adjustment issues you faced:

26a. Have you encountered any challenges related to making friends or socializing with local students or other international students? (Yes/No)

Yes

No

26b. If yes, please describe the challenges and difficulties:

Financial Challenges:

27. How would you rate the affordability of living in your host country? (1 = Very Affordable, 5 = Very Expensive)

28a. Have you faced any financial difficulties during your studies? (Yes/No)

Yes

No

28b. If yes, please describe the financial challenges you encountered:

Housing and Accommodation:

29. How satisfied are you with your current housing situation in your host country? (1 = Very Satisfied, 5 = Very Dissatisfied)

30. Have you experienced any issues with housing or accommodation arrangements? (Yes/No)

Yes

No

If yes, please describe the housing or accommodation challenges you faced:

Health and Well-being:

31. How would you rate the accessibility to healthcare services in your host country? (1 = Very Accessible, 5 = Very Inaccessible)

32a. Have you encountered any health-related challenges during your stay? (Yes/No)

Yes

No

32b. If yes, please describe the health-related challenges and how you addressed them:

Support Services:

33a. Are you aware of the support services offered to international students in your host country? (Yes/No)

Yes

No

33b. If yes, have you utilized any of these support services? (Yes/No)

Yes

No

33c. If you have utilized support services, please describe your experience and the help you received:

Overall Experience:

34. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very satisfied and 5 being very dissatisfied, how would you rate your overall experience as an international student in your host country?

35a. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your experience studying at XAMK to your friends and family

35b. If less than 5, what would make XAMK a 5-star institution from your perspective

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Brief About Themselves:

- a. Can you please introduce yourself briefly, including your name, nationality, and the program of study you are currently enrolled in?
- b. How long have you been studying in Finland? Could you share a bit about your academic journey here so far?
- c. What motivated you to pursue your studies abroad in Finland? Could you tell me a bit about your initial expectations before coming here?

2. Personal & Family Background:

- a. Can you share some insights into your family background, such as your parents' occupations and educational backgrounds?
- b. How did your family react to your decision to study abroad, and what kind of support have they provided throughout your academic journey?
- c. Has your family's financial situation influenced your choice of study destination and the challenges you've faced as an international student?

3. Early Decision Parameters:

- a. When you were considering studying abroad, what were the primary factors or motivations that led to your decision? (e.g., quality of education, program availability, cultural experiences)
- b. Did you face any challenges or obstacles when applying to universities in Finland? If so, how did you overcome them?
- c. How important was the availability of scholarships or financial aid in your decision-making process?

4. Final Decision Influencers:

- a. Can you identify the key influencers or sources of guidance that played a role in your final decision to study in Finland? (e.g., teachers, family, friends, alumni)
- b. Did you consider the reputation of universities or specific programs when making your decision? How influential were these factors?
- c. Were there any personal aspirations or career goals that influenced your choice of study destination?

5. The Challenges:

- a. Could you please share some of the specific challenges you have encountered as an international student in Finland?
- b. How have you coped with cultural differences or cultural shock during your time here?
- c. Have you faced any academic challenges, and if so, how did you address them? Were there support services that helped you overcome these challenges?
- d. In terms of financial challenges, what has been the most significant hurdle, and how have you managed your finances while studying abroad?
- e. Regarding accommodation and housing, have you experienced any difficulties, and how did you navigate them?
- f. Have health-related issues been a concern for you during your time as an international student? How accessible have healthcare services been?