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What Drives Student Recommendations? An Empirical Investigation of the Learning Experiences of International Students in Australia, the UK, and the US

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ABSTRACT

Insights into how student learning experiences impact university recommendation can be critical for higher education institutions as they seek to optimize enrollment and retention efforts in an increasingly competitive and highly unpredictable global market. This comparative study examines the extent to which satisfaction with various aspects of the academic environment influences recommendation for over 23,000 international undergraduate students at universities in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Five key implications for the quality of teaching and learning, English language support, career development and readiness, access to information and communication technologies, and assessment and benchmarking are discussed. Results from a factor analysis reveal an underlying structure to the learning variables used in this research and provide empirical support for its application in future investigations of the academic experiences of international students in higher education.

Keywords: international students, learning experience, recommendation, satisfaction, support services

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, international student mobility has been a prominent theme and priority for many institutions of higher education around the world (de Wit, 2020; Teichler, 2017). International students make invaluable intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions to their host institution and country, and they are critical in advancing the diversity and internationalization goals on campus and in the local community (Lee & Rice, 2007; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Pandit, 2013). As such, institutions have adopted strategic recruitment and enrollment plans, some more aggressive than others, to compete in the global market and attract talented international students to their programs (Gopal, 2016).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020), over 5.6 million international students were enrolled at higher education institutions worldwide in 2018. This number is expected to increase by another 2.3 million by the time we reach 2030 (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018). Or at least, that was the prediction before the COVID-19 outbreak, which has brought unprecedented challenges to the field of international higher education. This global pandemic has rattled the future of international exchange and student mobility, with substantial disruptions caused by campus closures, travel restrictions, suspension in visa issuance, and remote learning because of health and safety concerns (Brammer & Clark, 2020).

With many universities are yet to fully resume traditional, face-to-face class offerings, significant declines in international student enrollment are expected to continue globally. Higher education associations and advocacy organizations in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia point to a significant loss in international student enrollment. For example, in the US, projections by the American Council on Education point to a 25% drop in international student numbers, along with a loss of US$10 billion and 114,000 jobs to the national economy (Marklein, 2020). In the UK, Universities UK has warned that the British higher education finances could see a hit of £7 billion by the end of this academic year (O'Malley, 2020). Similarly, in Australia, a loss of A$4.8 billion in revenue has been projected for higher education institutions because of the downturn in international student fees, with a long-lasting impact of A$16 billion in deficit by the time we reach 2023 (Universities Australia, 2020).

The current situation has undoubtedly triggered a major rethink on student mobility, and the standard practices to international student recruitment, retention, and engagement have become a more complex issue (Marmolejo, 2020). It is expected that the global market for highly-skilled

students will become increasingly competitive whenever institutions can fully resume their academic operations, or when internationally-mobile students can—and decide to—travel openly again. With the uncertainty surrounding future destination trends, it is even more critical now that institutions remain attentive to the views, perceptions, and preferences of their new and continuing international students, and regularly assess their satisfaction ratings with various aspects of their institution.

A growing body of literature over the years has been dedicated to exploring the experiences of international students, and many of these studies have highlighted the importance of a strong support system in both the curricular and co-curricular settings to ensure the retention and success of these students (Akanwa, 2015; Choudaha, 2016). Yet, it is somewhat surprising that little attention has been drawn to specifically understanding the impact of international students' learning experiences on the propensity to recommend their institution, given the significant implications it has on admissions and enrollment efforts (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014; Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016). The university experience not only influences students' overall satisfaction with the university but also the recommendation of their institution to prospective applicants (Ammigan, 2019; Lee, 2010). Invariably, satisfied students are more likely to share their experiences and engage in word-of-mouth communication with potential and future students, which could, in turn, influence their decision about institutional choice or destination country (Mavondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004). Of the various aspects of the university setting (such as arrival, living, learning, and support services), there is evidence that satisfaction with the learning environment, particularly for international students, impacts institutional recommendation the most (Ammigan, 2019).

The present study investigates the learning experiences of international students and identifies the factors within the learning environment (i.e., teaching factors such as "Quality of lectures," study factors such as "Employability skills," and facilities factors such as "Quality of classrooms") that significantly predict institutional recommendation. In the process, it examines the influence that several demographic variables, such as student nationality, study area, and study type, have on students' willingness to recommend their institution. Using data from the International Student Barometer (ISB) (i-graduate, 2021), this research analyzes responses from over 23,000 undergraduate, degree-seeking international students at 96 institutions in three of the top destination countries worldwide: the US, the UK, and Australia. Implications for international educators, university administrators, and enrollment management professionals are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Mobility

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.) defines internationally mobile students as students who have crossed a national or territorial border for education and are enrolled outside their country of origin. International student mobility is an indicator that shows the percentage of enrolled international students to local student body at the host institution or in the destination country (Kahanec & Králiková, 2011). For institutions of higher education, international student enrollment is a key aspect of the Internationalization at Home process, which is defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students, within domestic learning environments" (p. 69). The presence of international students on university campuses can represent a great opportunity for helping all students, faculty, and staff engage across cultures and acquire global perspectives in the classroom and in other non-academic settings (Irina, Gregg, & Martha, 2017).

The latest OECD report (2020) indicates that there has been a steady increase in international student mobility in the past 20 years, with the number of international students growing on average by 4.8% per year between 1998 and 2018. English-speaking countries remain the most attractive destination choice for international students. The US accounts for 18% of the global education market share, followed by the UK (8%) and Australia (8%). Students from Asia form the largest group of international students enrolled in tertiary education programs at all levels of study. In total across OECD countries, the most popular fields or areas of study among international students are business, administration and law, and engineering (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

Learning Experiences of International Students

University students often struggle to adapt to their new life on campus. International students, however, are subject to some unique challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, visa and employment restrictions, and a lack of social support (Baron & Hartwig, 2020; Smith & Demjanenko, 2011). While in the present study student satisfaction is defined as 'a short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of a student's educational experience' (Elliott & Healy, 2001, p. 2), previous research has demonstrated that several factors can directly influence the experiences of students in their academic, living, and social settings. Arambewela and Hall (2009) propose seven constructs that are significant predictors of student satisfaction, namely: education, social, technology, economic, accommodation, safety, prestige, and image. The learning

construct, which was established by the ISB and is the focus of this current study, is defined as the experiences of international students within the academic setting at their respective institutions (Garrett, 2014). The learning experience variables within the construct are grouped into three distinct categories, namely: 1) teaching, 2) studies and 3) facilities (see Table 1 for a list of learning experience variables under each category). Our study, therefore, examines whether student experiences within the learning environment can significantly predict institutional recommendation.

Other studies have found that the most common learning issues experienced by international students in the classroom environment relate to group work and class participation, communication with faculty, interactions with peers, and differences in teaching and learning styles (Li, 2019; Vyas & Yu, 2018). Butt and Rehman (2010) found that teacher expertise, quality of courses offered, and classroom facilities were key determinants of student satisfaction while Asare-Nuamah (2017) concluded that library services, teacher contact, class size, among other factors, all enhanced student experiences as part of the learning environment. A comparative study that examined the experiences of over 45,000 international students at institutions in Australia, the UK, and the US found that the learning dimension of the university experience was the most significant predictor of overall satisfaction (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). The quality of lectures and the expertise of the teaching faculty were among the most important factors that impact students' institutional experience. In more recent research, Ammigan et al. (2021) examined the difference between the learning experience variables that differentially influence recommendation and satisfaction for over 30,000 international students from the 10 most frequent home nationalities and 10 most frequent destination countries. They found that learning experience variables such as "Program organization" and "Quality of lectures" influenced satisfaction while study variables like "English language support" and "Employability skills" influenced institutional recommendation.

Ammigan et al. (2021) indicate the significant predictive power of "Employability skills" and "English language support," which represent an important element of employability, on institutional recommendation – thus demonstrating a connection between recommendation and post-graduate employment plans. These results correspond with Cubillo et al.'s (2006) findings, indicating that career prospects and opportunities to work during a program of study were significant factors in influencing international student decision-making during university selection.

International Students and Institutional Recommendation

The decision to study overseas and to select a university of choice can be a significant and expensive undertaking for students. Many factors impact the decision-making process of international students searching for higher

education abroad. These contributing "push-pull" factors include academic reputation, the amount and quality of course offerings, research opportunities, scholarship opportunities, tuition costs and fees, health and safety, employment options, and the opinion of others (Banjong & Olson, 2016; María Cubillo et al., 2006; Nicholls, 2018).

While there is limited research on the specific association between the learning experiences of international students and the willingness to recommend their institutions, some studies have confirmed that international student satisfaction can impact recommendation and future enrollment trends. In earlier research, Lee (2010) examined international students' experiences at a U.S university and how these might influence them to recommend their institution to others from their home country. Among other findings, the study revealed that students who were satisfied with the academic and non-academic services on campus were positively associated with recommending the university and that students from East Asia were less likely to recommend the institution.

In a large-scale, empirical study, Ammigan (2019) found that the learning dimension of experience was the most significant predictor of institutional recommendation, with some of the most important academic aspects being the opportunity to study with people from other cultures, the organization of the course, work experience during studies, and quality of lectures. Brett's (2013) report on the ISB found several aspects of the learning experience of international students to be positively correlated with recommendation, namely faculty subject-matter expertise, academic content, ability to understand faculty English, lecture quality, access to faculty support, and English Language skills.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in models of consumer evaluations and behavioral intentions. Research from Cronin, Brady, and Hult (2000) demonstrates that the core constructs of consumer evaluations (quality, value, and satisfaction) directly influence consumer behavioral intentions (i.e., recommendation). They provide evidence that quality (the relationship between expectations and performance) and value (the relationship between what was received and what was given) lead to satisfaction (whether something met or exceeded expectations) which in the end can lead to recommendations. Recommendations, in our conceptual framework, are the behavioral intentions that are often crucially important when making purchasing decisions (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016; Lobo, Maritz, & Mehta, 2007), and the consumer evaluation of satisfaction with learning experiences form the building blocks for making those behavioral intention decisions. Within this framework, we build on previous research and propose that for international higher education, satisfaction with

learning experiences are core evaluations that influence institutional recommendation (Ammigan et al., 2021; Ammigan & Jones, 2018), and those recommendations can play a pivotal role in developing successful strategies for recruiting and enrolling students (Beneke & Human, 2010; Lapina, Roga, & Müürsepp, 2016). This study, therefore, takes a closer look at demographic and learning experience variables that can influence recommendations for international students.

RESEARCH METHOD

We analyzed quantitative data obtained from the International Student Barometer (ISB) to investigate the relationship between the international students' learning experience, demographic variables, and their willingness to recommend their institution. We chose to include international students at higher education institutions in Australia, the UK, and the US because of two main reasons. First, these three destination countries were the top OECD, English-speaking destinations for international students at the time the survey was conducted. Second, they constitute the largest sample in the ISB data set with nearly 100 institutions. This research uses nonidentifiable, pre-existing data and was declared exempt from the requirements of human subject protection by the Institutional Review Board.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study is the ISB, which tracks and compares the decision-making, expectations, satisfaction, and recommendation of international students from application to graduation (i-graduate, 2021). Since its inception in 2005, the ISB has collected feedback from over three million students in more than 1,400 institutions across 33 different countries. The full questionnaire consists of 256 closed and open-ended questions and has been periodically tested for validity and reliability through eighteen cycles (Brett, 2013). It uses four constructs (arrival, learning, living, and support services) to measure satisfaction, and respondents are asked to rate their satisfaction level with multiple aspects within each of these dimensions of experience. Within the learning construct, questions were grouped into three categories – i.e., teaching, studies, and facilities (see Table 1). The instrument includes a summary behavioral intention question – i.e., "Based on your impressions at this stage of the year, would you recommend your university to other students thinking of applying here?" – which is the ISB's Institutional Recommendation question.

Table 1: Study Variables

Type	Variables
Independent Variable	Destination country: Australia, UK, US
Covariate Learning Experience Variables	Teaching: Quality of lectures, Expertise of faculty, Teaching ability of faculty, Academic and program content, Program organization, Level of research activity, English of academic staff, Learning support, Performance feedback, Grading criteria, Assessment of coursework Studies: Career guidance and advice, Employability skills, Work experience during studies, Multicultural study environment, English language support, Class size Facilities: Quality of classrooms, Physical library, Online library, Classroom technology, Virtual learning
Covariate Demographic Variables	Student nationality, Gender, Age, Program status, Study type, Study area, Study stage

Variables

Twenty-two continuous covariate learning experience variables were grouped into three categories (see Table 1): teaching-related (eleven in total); studies-related (six in total); and facilities-related (five in total). One variable - "Satisfaction with laboratories" - was removed from the analysis as it had over 41% missing values. See below subsection, "Data Analysis Plan" for further discussion of this issue. These variables were on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = satisfied, and 4 = very satisfied. In addition, demographic variables included in this study were: student nationality, gender, age, program status, student type, study area, and study stage. Every model included a continuous dependent variable – i.e., institutional recommendation was included - set to five-point Likert scales, where 1 = actively discourage, 2 = discourage, 3 = neither encourage or discourage, 4 = encourage, and 5 = actively encourage. one categorical independent variable, i.e., destination country, at 3 levels each – i.e., Australia, the UK, and the US were included.

Participants

A total of 23,380 international undergraduate students from 96 institutions across Australia (n = 34), the UK (n = 42), and the US (n = 20) were included - See Table 2. Over 54% of the respondents were from Australia (n = 12,755), 37% were from the UK (n = 8,660), and 8.4% were from the US (n = 1,965). Since we wanted to concentrate our analysis on the top student nationalities, we included 10 of the most frequent student nationalities, with 36.1% from China, 16.3% from Malaysia, and 7.9% from the US. The average age of student participants was 22 years, and 62% were female compared to 38% who were male across all three destination countries. Business and Administrative Studies (26.4%), and Engineering (12.6%) were the top two study areas. Most students were enrolled full-time in their program (program status), were on campus (study type), and were studying in a year other than the first or last (study stage). Respondents completed the online ISB questionnaire via email from September to December 2016. Table 2 indicates the demographic characteristics of students who were included in our model, including a breakdown by destination country.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis occurred in successive steps. Before and after the imputation, the generalized ESD (Extreme Studentized Deviate) test was used to detect for outliers (Rosner, 1983), Bartlett's test was used to test for homoscedasticity (Snedecor & Cochran, 1989), and Shapiro-Wilk's test was used to test for normality (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965) and none were significant. Since this analysis focused on the three most frequent destination countries and the top 10 student nationalities, our sample was reduced from 66,272 to 23,380. The twenty-three learning variables as well as the overall institutional recommendation question were optional questions. Therefore, the items in our dataset had on average 16.57% missing values but "satisfaction with laboratories" was found to have over 41% missing values and was therefore removed from the future analysis, reducing the number of learning variables to twenty-two. A Missing Values Analysis (MVA) was performed on the remaining 22 learning variables, and the results of Little's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test (1988) were significant, $X2(50613, N = 23308) = 64010.19$, $p < .001$. To accommodate for non-random missing values, an Approximate Bayesian Bootstrap (ABB) hot-deck nearest neighbor imputation method (Andridge & Little, 2010) was performed such that missing values are replaced with observed values that reflect similar response characteristics. The analysis included herein was completed using the imputed data derived from this method.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents by Destination Country

	Australia (*N* = 12,755)		UK (*N* = 8,660)		US (*N* = 1,965)	
Variables	*Categories*	*%*	*Categories*	*%*	*Categories*	*%*
Student Nationality (Top 5)	China	39.7	China	24.8	China	61.9
	Malaysia	19.4	Malaysia	13.6	South Korea	11.5
	Singapore	10.4	US	12.8	India	10.7
	Hong Kong	9.4	Germany	10	Malaysia	8.6
	India	7.7	Italy	9.5	Hong Kong	2
Program Status	Full-time	97.9	Full-time	99.3	Full-time	99.4
	Part-time	2.1	Part-time	0.7	Part-time	0.6
Study Type	On-campus (full-time)	82.7	On-campus (full-time)	88.1	On-campus (full-time)	91.5
	Exchange/Erasmus	3.7	Exchange/Erasmus	5.8	Exchange/Erasmus	3.2
	Study Abroad Course	5.9	Study Abroad Course	3	Study Abroad Course	2.7
	Gap year	0	Gap year	1.4	Gap year	1.7
	On-campus (part-time)	1.7	On-campus (part-time)	1.1	On-campus (part-time)	0.4
	Placement	0	Placement	0.5	Placement	0.1
	Other	0	Other	0.1	Other	0.4
Study Area (Top 5)	Business/Admin. studies	28	Business/Admin. studies	19.2	Business/Admin. studies	47.9
	Engineering	14.6	Engineering	10.9	Math/Computer Sciences	8

	Medicine Subjects	10.6	Social studies	9.9	Other	7.6
	Other	7.6	Biological Sciences	8.4	Engineering	7.3
	Biological Sciences	7.4	Math/Computer Sciences	6	Biological Sciences	5.4
Study Stage	First/single year	30.8	First/single year	39.1	First/single year	38.2
	Other year	39.5	Other year	35.7	Other year	39.5
	Last year	27.5	Last year	24.3	Last year	19
	No year (Short course)	2.1	No year (Short course)	1	No year (Short course)	3.3
Gender	Female	64.1	Female	60.6	Female	57.7
	Male	35.8	Male	39.3	Male	42.3
	Other	0.1	Other	0.1	Other	0
Age (Mean)	22.9 years		21.9 years		21.6 years	

Models

The goal for conducting a factor analysis was twofold: first, to determine if any of the learning experience variables could be eliminated from our future models, and second, to establish whether there was an underlying structure to the learning experience variables that differed from that established by the ISB. We then performed a stepwise Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to investigate whether institutional recommendation was differentially impacted for the top three destination countries, by the learning experience variables and demographic variables. As the learning experiences are predicted to covary with institutional recommendation, a stepwise ANCOVA model offers both simplicity (i.e., as few regressors as possible) and fit (i.e., as many regressors as needed). We set our parameters for adding variables at .05 and removing them at .10. We also ran a multiple linear regression analysis to determine the differential influences of the learning experience variables and demographic variables on institutional recommendation for the top three destination countries. A stepwise multiple linear regression model was used to develop this model with parameters set at .05 for adding variables at .10 for removing them.

RESULTS

Factor Analysis

The learning experience variables were screened for univariate outliers and none were found. All learning experience variables had very high correlations, and in fact, none of them were less than .3 with all the other items – suggesting very high factorability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .959, which is well above the commonly recommended value of .6. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant $X^2(253) = 257913.236$, $p < .0001$. Initial Eigenvalues indicated that the first five factors explained 41.98%, 6.54%, 5.53%, 4.4%, and 3.94% of the variance respectively. Since every item cross-loaded with the first factor above .3, the data was, therefore, best explained by a single factor structure. This was confirmed by a close examination of the squared cosines, as all the learning experience variables had the largest squared cosine in the first factor.

Upon closer examination of the factor loadings (See Table 3), the following grouping was such that seven of the strictly academic-related "Teaching" variables loaded all above .669 on the first factor; all of the "Facilities" variables had factor loadings above .35 for the second factor; all three of the work-related "Studies" variables had factor loadings above .4 for the third factor; all three of the assessment-related "Teaching" variables had

factor loadings above .39 for the fourth fact; and all three "Teaching" and "Study" variables related to English language and multiculturalism had loadings above .32 for the fifth factor.

Overall, the analysis indicated that all learning experience variables loaded sufficiently onto the first factor and therefore all were entered into the below models that included the learning experience variables.

Table 3: Factor Analysis Loadings of Learning Experience Variables (Organized by Highest Positive Factor Loadings for Factors 2-5)

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
1. Teaching (Academic)					
Learning support	0.699				
Quality of lectures	0.696				
Academic and program content	0.694				
Program organization	0.693				
Teaching ability of faculty	0.692				
Expertise of faculty	0.686				
Level of research activity	0.669				
2. Facilities					
Online library		0.503			
Classroom technology		0.487			
Physical library		0.464			
Virtual learning		0.440			
Quality of classrooms		0.354			
3. Studies (Work)					
Work experience during studies			0.520		
Career guidance and advice			0.462		
Employability skills			0.432		
4. Teaching (Assessment)					
Grading criteria				0.497	
Performance feedback				0.438	
Assessment of coursework				0.390	
5. Studies (Culture)					
Multicultural study environment					0.522
English language support					0.442
English of academic staff					0.329

ANCOVA

For our overall model, a one-way stepwise ANCOVA was conducted to determine the effect of destination country on an institutional recommendation while controlling for the learning experience variables and

the demographic variables. The ANCOVA was significant, F(29, 23350) = 185.583, $p < .0001$. The Adjusted R^2 for the goodness of fit indicates that about 18.6% of the variance in the institutional recommendation is explained by our independent and covariate variables. Destination country was found to significantly influence the model $F(2, 23377) = 31.840$, $p < .0001$. A Tukey's post-hoc HSD revealed that the differences between institutions in the UK ($M = 3.994$) differed significantly from those in the US ($M = 3.882$) and those in Australia ($M = 3.910$) $p < .05$.

Table 4: Learning Experiences and Demographic Variables that Predict Institutional Recommendation Across Institutions in Australia, the UK, and the US

Learning Experience	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
English language support	0.150	14.351	<0.0001	0.129	0.170
Employability skills	0.109	11.400	<0.0001	0.091	0.128
Multicultural study environment	-0.092	-9.023	<0.0001	-0.112	-0.072
Academic and program content	0.097	8.362	<0.0001	0.074	0.120
Program organization	0.084	7.639	<0.0001	0.062	0.105
Quality of lectures	0.071	5.663	<0.0001	0.046	0.095
Virtual learning	0.055	4.701	<0.0001	0.032	0.079
Learning support	0.044	3.980	<0.0001	0.022	0.066
Expertise of faculty	0.049	3.871	0.000	0.024	0.073
Quality of classrooms	0.036	3.430	0.001	0.015	0.056
Classroom technology	0.035	3.233	0.001	0.014	0.056
Physical library	0.027	2.694	0.007	0.007	0.047
Assessment of coursework	0.029	2.616	0.009	0.007	0.051
Teaching ability of faculty	0.029	2.499	0.012	0.006	0.052
Performance feedback	-0.023	-2.179	0.029	-0.043	-0.002
Institution country	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
UK	0.112	5.144	<0.0001	0.069	0.155
Student Nationality	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
South Korea	-0.371	-11.195	<0.0001	-0.435	-0.306
Hong Kong	-0.352	-13.499	<0.0001	-0.403	-0.301
Singapore	-0.257	-10.234	<0.0001	-0.306	-0.208
Malaysia	-0.247	-11.362	<0.0001	-0.29	-0.205
China	-0.231	-11.131	<0.0001	-0.272	-0.191
Germany	-0.082	-2.869	0.004	-0.138	-0.026
India	-0.085	-3.289	0.001	-0.136	-0.034
Age	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
	-0.005	-2.462	0.014	-0.009	-0.001

The difference between the US and UK was not significant. For the learning experience covariates, 15 out of 22 were found to significantly influence recommendation. Based on the Type III sum of squares, "English language support" was the most influential, followed by "Employability skills" and "Multicultural study environment." Examining the model parameters "Multicultural study environment" was the only learning experience variable found to be negatively associated with institutional recommendation (see Table 4).

A further examination of the model parameters indicates that of the demographic variables, gender, and age significantly influenced the model with gender doing so positively and age doing so negatively. A Tukey's post-hoc HSD was performed to examine the differences between genders, and while the means between males (M = 4.064) and females (M = 4.060) were highly similar, the mean for the group "other" (M = 3.661) was less than these two, but the difference was not significant. In addition, several student nationalities (South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Germany, and India) were negatively associated with institutional recommendation (see Table 4), meaning that students from these nationalities were less likely than those from others to positively recommend their institution.

Multiple Linear Regressions

Australia

A stepwise multiple linear regression was conducted to determine the impact of the learning experience and demographic variables on institutional recommendation in Australia. The model was significant, $F(46, 12708) = 71.975$, $p < .0001$. The Adjusted R^2 for the goodness of fit indicates that about 20.4% of the variance in institutional recommendation is explained by our independent and covariate variables. For the learning experience covariates, 13 out of 22 were found to significantly influence recommendation with "English language support" doing so the most, followed by "Multicultural study environment" and "Employability skills." Examining the model parameters "Multicultural study environment" was the only learning experience variable found to be negatively associated with institutional recommendation, (see Table 5). Both "Employability skills" and "Work experience during studies" were found to be positively associated with institutional recommendation for institutions in Australia, suggesting an association between recommendation and students' post-graduation plans, which is consistent with previous research by Ammigan et al. (2021) and Cubillo et al. (2006). Several student nationalities (South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, China, and India) were negatively associated with institutional recommendation (see Table 5), meaning that students from these

Table 5: Learning Experiences and Demographic Variables that Predict Institutional Recommendation at Australian Institutions

Learning Experience	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
English language support	0.178	12.785	<0.0001	0.151	0.205
Multicultural study environment	-0.147	-10.521	<0.0001	-0.175	-0.120
Employability skills	0.115	7.916	<0.0001	0.087	0.144
Virtual learning	0.095	5.931	<0.0001	0.064	0.127
Expertise of faculty	0.091	5.195	<0.0001	0.056	0.125
Program organization	0.088	5.832	<0.0001	0.058	0.117
Academic and program content	0.082	5.023	<0.0001	0.050	0.114
Quality of lectures	0.059	3.425	0.001	0.025	0.092
Learning support	0.048	3.255	0.001	0.019	0.076
Quality of classrooms	0.048	3.366	0.001	0.020	0.075
Classroom technology	0.036	2.527	0.012	0.008	0.064
Work experience during studies	0.030	2.384	0.017	0.005	0.056
Student Nationality	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
South Korea	-0.450	-9.345	<0.0001	-0.545	-0.356
Hong Kong	-0.386	-10.608	<0.0001	-0.458	-0.315
Singapore	-0.294	-8.444	<0.0001	-0.363	-0.226
Malaysia	-0.287	-8.843	<0.0001	-0.351	-0.224
China	-0.261	-8.336	<0.0001	-0.322	-0.200
India	-0.139	-3.649	0.000	-0.214	-0.064
Study Area	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
Joint Honors or Multi-Subject Degree	0.194	2.277	0.023	0.027	0.362
Mass Communications and Documentation	0.150	2.496	0.013	0.032	0.269
Technologies	0.134	2.112	0.035	0.010	0.258
Social studies	0.133	2.364	0.018	0.023	0.244
Biological Sciences	0.131	2.548	0.011	0.030	0.232
Business and Administrative studies	0.104	2.172	0.030	0.010	0.197
Engineering	0.100	2.012	0.044	0.003	0.197
Age	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
	-0.010	-4.055	<0.0001	-0.015	-0.005

nationalities were less likely than those from other nationalities to positively recommend their institution. In addition, the demographic variable age

negatively influenced the model, while several academic disciplines positively impacted students' propensity to recommend their institution, with "Joint Honors or Multi-Subject Degrees" and "Mass communications and Documentation" being the most influential.

United Kingdom

For the UK, the stepwise multiple linear regression model was significant, $F(41, 8618) = 41.623$, $p < .0001$. The Adjusted R^2 for the goodness of fit indicates that about 16.1% of the variance in institutional recommendation is explained by our independent and covariate variables. Among all the variables, based on the Type III sum of squares, 11 out of 22 were found to significantly influence recommendation with "Academic and program content" as the most influential, followed by "English language support" and "Employability skills." "English of academic staff" was the only learning experience variable found to be negatively associated with institutional recommendation (see Table 6).

Table 6: Learning Experiences and Demographic Variables that Predict Institutional Recommendation at UK Institutions

Learning Experience	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
Academic and program content	0.116	6.692	<0.0001	0.082	0.150
English language support	0.107	6.699	<0.0001	0.076	0.138
Employability skills	0.101	6.788	<0.0001	0.071	0.130
Program organization	0.089	5.438	<0.0001	0.057	0.121
Quality of lectures	0.084	4.406	<0.0001	0.047	0.122
Learning support	0.044	2.594	0.010	0.011	0.077
English of academic staff	-0.040	-2.537	0.011	-0.071	-0.009
Teaching ability of faculty	0.036	2.080	0.038	0.002	0.071
Online library	0.035	2.298	0.022	0.005	0.065
Quality of classrooms	0.034	2.188	0.029	0.004	0.064
Physical library	0.033	2.071	0.038	0.002	0.064
Student Nationality	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
Hong Kong	-0.307	-7.366	<0.0001	-0.388	-0.225
China	-0.186	-5.954	<0.0001	-0.247	-0.124
Malaysia	-0.183	-5.604	<0.0001	-0.248	-0.119
Singapore	-0.179	-4.201	<0.0001	-0.263	-0.096
South Korea	-0.177	-3.084	0.002	-0.290	-0.065
Study Area	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
Education	-0.210	-2.186	0.029	-0.398	-0.022

"Employability skills" was found to be positively associated with institutional recommendation for institutions in the UK, suggesting an association between recommendation and students' post-graduation plans. Study area variable "Education" influenced the model negatively. In addition, several student nationalities (Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea) drew negative associations with institutional recommendation (see Table 6), meaning that students from these nationalities were less likely than those from other nationalities to positively recommend their institution.

United States

For the US, our regression model was also significant, $F(17, 1947) = 18.221$, $p < .0001$. The Adjusted R2 for the goodness of fit indicates that about 13% of the variance in institutional recommendation is explained by our independent and covariate variables. Nine learning experience covariates significantly influenced recommendation, with "English language support" as the most impactful, followed by "Multicultural study environment" and "Performance feedback."

Table 7: Learning Experiences and Demographic Variables that Predict Institutional Recommendation at US Institutions

Learning Experience	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
English language support	0.195	5.269	<0.0001	0.122	0.268
Multicultural study environment	-0.136	-3.525	0.000	-0.212	-0.060
Performance feedback	-0.118	-2.740	0.006	-0.202	-0.033
Quality of lectures	0.117	2.654	0.008	0.030	0.203
Assessment of coursework	0.112	2.444	0.015	0.022	0.202
Level of research activity	0.110	2.481	0.013	0.023	0.197
Physical library	0.096	2.349	0.019	0.016	0.177
Employability skills	0.088	2.391	0.017	0.016	0.160
Student Nationality	**β**	**t**	**Pr > |t|**	**95% CI**	
France	0.626	5.466	<0.0001	0.402	0.851
Singapore	0.525	2.611	0.009	0.131	0.919
India	0.457	5.927	<0.0001	0.306	0.608
Germany	0.282	2.033	0.042	0.010	0.554
Hong Kong	0.259	1.990	0.047	0.004	0.514
Malaysia	0.234	2.815	0.005	0.071	0.398
Italy	0.219	0.814	0.416	-0.308	0.746

Examining the model parameters, "Multicultural study environment" and "Performance feedback" were the only learning experience variables found to be negatively influenced institutional recommendation, (see Table 7). "Employability skills" was positively associated with institutional recommendation for institutions in the US, again suggesting an association between recommendation and students' post-graduation plans. A further examination of the model parameters indicated that seven student nationalities (France, Singapore, India, Germany, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Italy) were positively associated with institutional recommendation (see Table 7), meaning that students from these nationalities were more likely than those from other nationalities to positively recommend their institution.

DISCUSSION

Our sample of top ten nationalities for the top three destinations resulted in two core findings. First, we demonstrate with our factor analysis that the factor structure was best explained by a single factor, with all the learning experience variables loading on that factor. To the best of our knowledge, we believe this represents the first time that a factor analysis was done on learning experience variables within the ISB. From our analysis and resulting factor loadings groupings (see Table 3), we could see that factors 2-5 mapped on well with Academic, Facilities, Work, Assessment, and Culture variables. In other words, these findings reveal and recognize that there is an underlying structure and group difference, and provide empirical support for its use in investigating the learning experiences of international students using the ISB questionnaire.

Second, we examined students' learning experiences and their influence on institution recommendation. Our results revealed a recurring theme such that "English language support" was either the top or second positive influencer for institutional recommendation, while "multicultural study environment" was the top negative influencer. "Employability skills" and "Quality of lectures" also predicted institutional recommendation in each of the three destination countries.

International students valued learning experience variables in the 'studies' category the most (see Tables 5-7). "Employability skills" as a significant predictor of institutional recommendation aligns with research by Cubillo et al.'s (2006), who suggest that career prospects and opportunities to work during a program of study are key factors in influencing the students' decision in selecting their university. The predictive power of "English language support" further supports the important role that English language proficiency and communication skills can play in international student employability and workplace readiness (Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley, & Doughney, 2014; Clement, Murugavel, & Murugavel, 2015).

Two 'facilities' variables, "Virtual learning" and "Classroom technology," were found to significantly influence institutional recommendation. These findings could be explained by previous studies that have reported associations between success models and metrics on online learning, information systems, and classroom technology, and student satisfaction (Machado-da-Silva, Meirelles, Filenga, & Filho, 2014; Yilmaz, 2017). This also offers an important consideration in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the use of digital platforms and information and communication technologies have been instrumental modes of learning for students.

It was somewhat surprising to find that "Multicultural study environment" negatively predicted institutional recommendation in our overall model, and specifically for international students in Australia and the US. A possible explanation is that, while intercultural environments can be highly rewarding and appreciated experiences for students, they might find the adjustment process to a new culture and academic setting stressful, and are therefore less likely to recommend this experience to others. This finding is consistent with research by Ammigan et al. (2021) but would indeed benefit from further study.

Our results show variation by student nationality and destination country. Students from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore influenced recommendation at institutions across Australia, the UK, and the US. This suggests that students' views, values, and expectations can vary greatly and have an impact on their satisfaction and recommendation rating. Institutions must therefore keep their campus support mechanisms student-centered and adaptable as they attend to the differential needs of their students.

Implications and Recommendations

Results from this study point to several important implications for international educators and university administrators. With COVID-19 health and safety guidelines and travel restrictions still in effect, many universities are yet to fully resume in-person classes and operate within their traditional, pre-pandemic academic calendar. As expected, this situation has added another layer of complexity for attracting and retaining international students in an already competitive and aggressive global market due to new economic and geopolitical realities. While student mobility is expected to reach some level of normalcy in the near future, institutions must be prepared to carry out strategic and innovative admission practices for meeting their student enrollment goals, as they consider the changing societal, political, economic, and technological trends. Based on the findings of our research, we offer five recommendations below, from both a recruitment and support services standpoint.

Promote the Quality of Teaching and Learning

Aligned with previous research by Ammigan (2019) and Ammigan et al. (2021), our study confirms that several aspects of the learning experiences, such as academic and program content, the quality of lectures, and the expertise and teaching ability of faculty, are significant predictors of institutional recommendation. Universities must therefore remain intentional at leveraging their academic strengths in the form of student learning experiences, achievements, and narratives as part of their international recruitment strategies. This recommendation extends to faculty and academic staff who must be encouraged to design courses that are conducive for learners across cultures, apply inclusive teaching philosophies, and link to inclusive, supportive, and meaningful co-curricular opportunities for all students.

Provide English Language Support

A key determinant of whether international students would recommend their English-speaking institution to prospective students is based on the support they receive to improve their command of English. This is consistent with earlier research (Eze & Inegbedion, 2015; Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi, 2015) that supports the relationship between international students' English language proficiency (or self-perceived language proficiency) and academic performance, university satisfaction, and (as determined by this study) institutional recommendation. Universities must consider offering additional language support to their students through English as a Second Language programs, ESL-to degree pathways programs, or on-campus language learning and practice clubs. These opportunities and resources must be communicated and made available to both prospective and current students.

Support Students' Career Development and Readiness

For many international students, career outcomes and prospects are at the top of their priority list when deciding about their institution of choice. Coupled with the fact that international students are eligible to work while pursuing their studies in most of the top international study destinations—including the US, the UK, and Australia—(SEVP, 2021; Study in UK, 2020; Study Melbourne, 2021), this study reaffirms that employability skills, as part of the student learning experience, is fundamentally important for recommending their university to others. Institutions must ensure that adequate support and guidance are available to international students to facilitate their career exploration during and after graduation. Career services should be accessible to students before enrollment and throughout their program of study via workshops, webinars, and advising sessions on a wide range of topics such as career planning and decision-making, job search and

interviewing strategies, visa requirements, and networking with recruiters. Institutions must also incorporate statistics on career outcomes of graduates, such as job placement rates, average salaries, and work-related experiences, in their marketing materials.

Ensure Access to Learning Through ICTs

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to question whether the switch to virtual learning would remain as a crisis response measure in higher education or become part of the mode of learning and teaching in the future. As institutions grapple with this issue, they must continue to provide their students with access to effective and reliable Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the classroom environment. More importantly, these online solutions must be accompanied by adequate technical and administrative support so that students can fully benefit from the learning process (Leask, 2004). International students, in particular, may require additional assistance in adapting to new digital resources, which may be very different than what they used while in their home country (Chang & Gomes, 2017).

Assess and Benchmark the Student Experience

Improving the experience of students is a priority for many institutions as it helps support recruitment initiatives and increase retention rates. Due to the changing nature of student preferences and expectations, it is vital that institutions carry out regular assessments through departmental surveys, focus groups, and interviews to maintain and improve the quality of experiences in the academic setting. University administrators and staff can benefit from these data points to better understand students' needs and challenges, and in turn, promote key campus support services and resources to prospective students.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigated the learning experiences of over 23,000 international undergraduate students in Australia, the UK, and the US, and found that several learning experience and demographic variables had a significant influence on institutional recommendation in the three host countries. Implications from the findings were discussed and five key recommendations relevant to international educators and university administrators were proposed around the quality of teaching and learning, English language support, career development and readiness, access to Information and Communication Technologies, and assessment and benchmarking. As with most research, this study has its limitations. While the ISB offers a large dataset, it must be noted that it is a self-report questionnaire, for which

responses could be subject to social desirability and positivity bias. Generalizability for this study is also limited by the fact that it only focused on degree-seeking, undergraduate international students from institutions in only three destination countries.

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