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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN STUDYING IN POLAND

Summary

The article aims at presenting the research results concerning specific requirements and preferences of international students studying in Poland. It starts with a short theoretical overview of the cultural aspect in marketing, which is important with respect to successful selling the offer to international students also regarding their individual (related to each culture) preferences. It further presents the research results paying also some attention to the issue of specific needs of international students related to personal agents' competences.

Key words: cultural differences, students, preferences, personal selling.

JEL codes: I2

Services, due to their specificity (intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability, inseparability and temporary ownership) especially the ones addressed to demanding customer or requiring a lot of explanations, often require the usage of personal selling as a key promotion tool. In such cases, personal contact, ability to answer all questions or dispel doubts is crucial. This allows to establish a stronger relationship built on trust and professionalism (a lot depends on the agent / personal seller skills and competences). Establishing such relations and ability to use specific (particular) skills and competences (which may be different in each phase) is important at every stage of the personal selling process, namely: attracting buyers, conducting a meeting (conversation), presentation of the product, convincing about the reasons to purchase, transaction itself and maintaining the contact. If conducted in a proper way, these actions should lead to building or enhancing customer's loyalty.

While dealing with international environment in business, one has to take into consideration cultural differences, especially the following components of culture: communication, religion, education, aesthetics, social organizations, technology, time and values and norms (Honeycutt, Ford, Simintiras 2003). With respect to communication, it is crucial to pay attention to the very manner of speaking (e.g. speaking without raising the voice and slower than usual if the conversation is conducted in a non-native language for the customer unless recognized the client is fluent in the language, but without exaggeration so as the

customer does not feel underestimated), choice of words and phrases (avoiding jargon, slang, idioms, proverbs or sophisticated terms). Equally important is the non-verbal communication, which can work in our favor or against us and it is often this element of communication which plays the key role and determines the overall success. It is closely connected with building trust, confidence and establishing the overall relationship, which has to be performed with patience and caution. Another issue which is important in building relationships with the customer, thus also significant in the personal selling process is approach to time. Time, by broadly perceived Western cultures is perceived as a tangible commodity (Usunier, Lee 2009), which means it is economized (the approach of "time is money"). Nevertheless, time is perceived differently in various other parts of the world. It is not so precisely measured and hurry or time-pushing seems offensive.

Macquin, Rouziès and Prime's (2000) research shows that very important elements of cultural diversity, such as attitude towards individualism, uncertainty avoidance, time, masculinity and power distance have substantial influence on the quality of relations built between the salesperson and the customer. It clearly indicates that customers from different cultures will require diversified approaches, which in turn implies that the salesperson needs to possess distinctive features, skills and competences to be successful and effective.

The most critical challenges in the global selling process are: the impact of culture on the salesperson and the customer, the influence of global sales environment on business practices and etiquette as well as the effect of technology (differences in technological advancement) on the sales process globally (Johnston, Marshall 2016). Taking into consideration cultural differences, norms, beliefs, values, moral standards, etc., standardization is not the best approach, especially in the personal selling process. Language, not as a conveyor of the message (communicate) itself, but as a broader provider of the cultural context, also plays a very important role. Understanding properly the meaning of the words, their context and differences in their perception may affect the final sales effect (successful or not). Therefore, language plays one of crucial roles while dealing with international relationship selling – necessity of finding mutually understood context for the meaning of words which would be set up culturally for both – the seller and the customer.

Education sector is a specific service area where personal contact between the service provider's representative and the customer is crucial. Education is a life-time investment, which is why people choose carefully. From the promotional activities point of view, the greatest challenge is the proper presentation of the future outcome and benefits, as education is the most intangible service of all. Additional difficulties relate to cultural differences if educational product is designed to be sold cross-culturally, as it is not only about the necessity to provide different product presentation strategy, methods and

tools, and “culturally personalized” communication schema, but also adaptation or at least flexibility of the service offered.

Interaction with the customer is the easier, the less culturally distant the two persons are. Thus, it is crucial to be acquainted with many aspects of business and cultural etiquette (e.g. eye-to-eye contact – may be perceived as aggressive or lack of such contact may be perceived as dishonesty; personal relationship before business negotiation in some cultures is required in others – not very well perceived, etc.). All aspects of national and cultural characteristics have to be taken into consideration (individualism versus collectivism, distance, attitude to time and manners, elements of femininity and masculinity etc.) as well as organizational contexts. These can be either low context when cultures use formal, direct communication that is verbally expressed or high context when cultures use extensive nonverbal information to convey the message. All the above implies that cultural sensitivity is crucial for successful personal selling, which is why companies often rely on local representatives or agents, equipping them with proper product knowledge. However, in case of complicated services (e.g. education), this process is very long-lasting and not always effective.

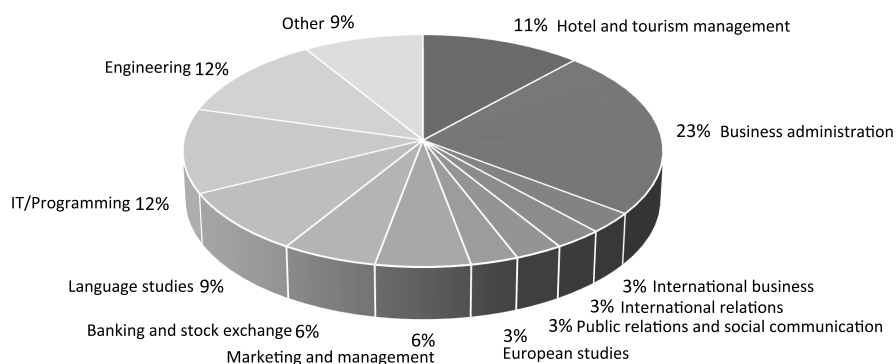
Many universities nowadays, in order to follow international standards, but also in order to survive at the market and to develop, they need a strategy for internationalization with respect to the curricula as well as the student body and faculty. The offer needs also to be properly presented and sold, thus these is a necessity to train agents properly with respect to potential students’ preferences and requirements also related to agents’ knowledge, skills and competences. This article aims at presenting research results related to students’ experience connected with studying abroad also with reference to agents’ competences during the personal selling of higher education offer process.

The survey was conducted by the means of a questionnaire which was divided into parts. The first one was devoted to the questions related to the reasons of studying abroad and studying preferences. The second was supposed to determine the role of the agent in personal selling process with respect to the higher education offer. Personal details constituted independent variables, while groups of agents’ competences were dependent variables subjected to scales (five-point scale rating from “very high” through “high”, “average” and “low” to “very low” assessment possibilities).

The research was conducted among 250 students (60% of them were female and 40% male) from five universities in Warsaw which provide studies in English for foreigners. The students originated from Asia (Tajikistan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan as well as Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan) and Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus). Most respondents were aged between 18 and 21 (72%) and 27% constituted a group above 21 years old. Thus, the focus group was mainly represented by young people who have just graduated from the secondary school.

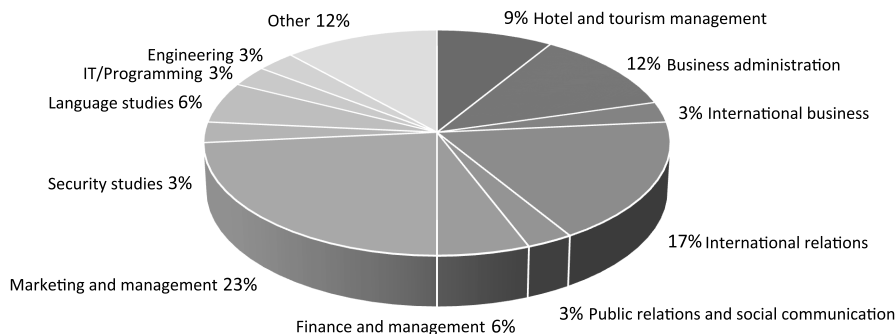
Young people, especially from Asia or Africa decide to study abroad as they perceive it as their chance for better life in the future. They chose European Union countries or the United States, Canada or Australia. Nevertheless, a lot of the prefer Europe and the main reason is that a EU diploma seems to be very valuable for them (possibility to work in Europe as well as high value of such diploma at the home labor market). Next two most popular reasons are possibilities to obtain better education and in consequence – a better job. Such students mostly look for a cheap opportunity to get a European diploma, which is why they chose countries like Poland to study in and then try to move West to continue studies on graduate level or to find job opportunities. Charts 1 and 2 present students’ preferences related to study profiles. Analysis of the research results suggest that students are entrepreneurial-oriented and want to study at business-related profiles or the ones connected with tourism, languages or IT.

Chart 1. Study preferences of the first choice



Source: Own elaboration based on the research results.

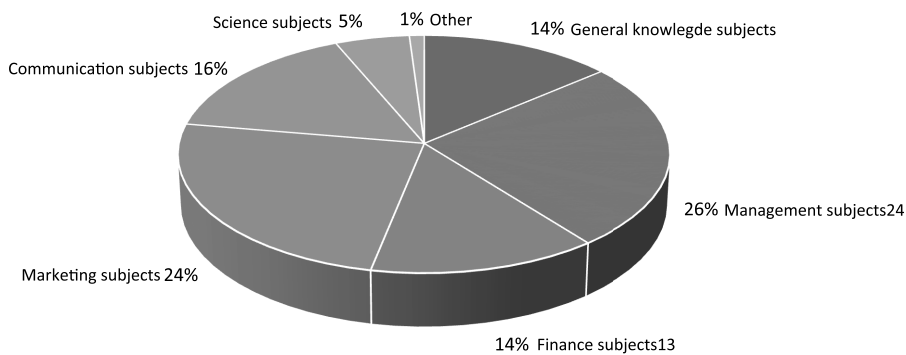
Chart 2. Study preferences of the second choice



Source: as in Chart 1.

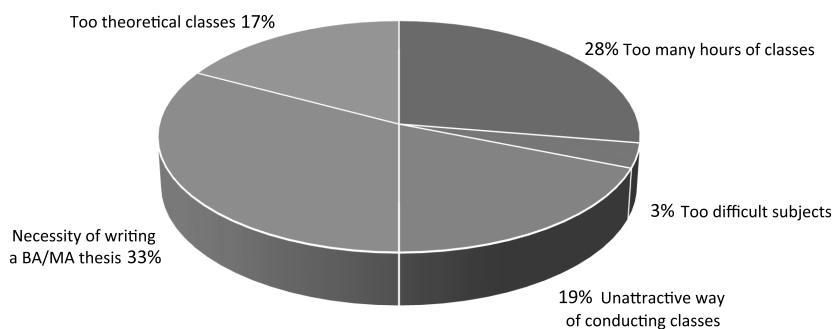
International students prefer an equal combination of theoretical (strictly academic) and practical classes (75%), but some of them would prefer greater emphasis on practical issues (over 20%). They perceive management and marketing-related subjects as being most important (chart 3). These results show that young people would rather work in corporations or start their own business, they are characterized by entrepreneurial spirit and interests. They appreciate practical skills and knowledge which would be based on solid theoretical grounds. This gives them better opportunity to find a desired job and be more valuable for future employers.

Chart 3. Usefulness of subject areas



Source: as in Chart 1.

The greatest difficulty for international students (Chart 4) seems to be related with the necessity of spending too many hours in classes, which a lot of especially Asian students are not used to. The purely academic way of delivering knowledge (lecture) seems to be unattractive to international students who seek more interaction and practical analysis during classes (case studies, problem solving tasks, group exercises, etc.). Another problematic issue is the condition for graduation, namely writing the Bachelor's or Master's thesis. Often, this is the first time they have to write a longer academic paper, which is equally difficult in terms of analytical approach and formal requirements.

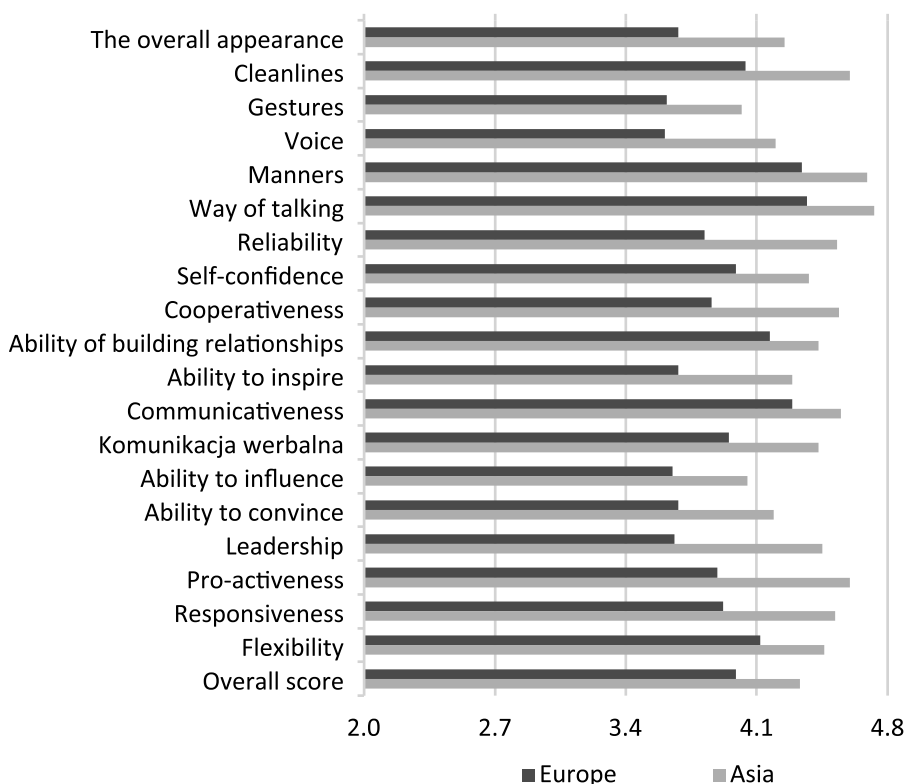
Chart 4. The greatest difficulty for international students during the study process

Source: as in Chart 1.

The other aim of the research was to figure out how important are agents' competences and what is their role in the personal selling process with respect to higher education market. The research aim was to determine whether there are important differences in agents' perception between students from different cultures (Chart 5). Taking into consideration quite significant cultural differences with respect to the models of behavior, the region of origin should play a key role in determining the significance of competences of personal sellers. European respondents were expected to pay more attention to the content of the offer while Asian to the way how it is delivered, to agents' behavior, manners and appearance. The results indicate that respondents from Asia rate higher some of the important elements influencing an agent's activity. With respect to appearance: the overall appearance and cleanliness; with respect to behavior: gestures, voice, manners, way of talking; and with respect to personality: reliability, self-confidence, cooperativeness, ability of building relationships and inspire, communicativeness, verbal communication, influence and persuasion skills, leadership, pro-activeness, responsiveness and flexibility. Moreover, the overall result of an agent's characteristics importance evaluation was higher among the respondents from Asia than Europe. For both groups, however most important features were: the way of answering the questions, knowledge about the offer and ability to answer all questions with the overall attitude to customer being the winner among the Europeans, which should not be surprising. The results also imply that all respondents, regardless of the region, perceive so called soft competences as being less important than knowledge, hard skills or offer-related abilities which were pointed out as most important by everybody. However, Asian respondents paid also much attention to cleanliness, manners and way of talking as well as pro-activeness. This means

that respondents from Asia are more vulnerable to behavior-related elements than their European counterparts, which was expected due to the cultural model they belong to. The only surprising difference is how pro-activeness is perceived by Asian respondents. Being more restrained than Europeans, they were not expected to evaluate pro-activeness that high. The only explanation here is that pro-activeness is related to entrepreneurship which is perceived as a virtue.

Chart 5. Average results for the importance of certain elements of an agent's activity among the Asian and European respondents



Source: as in Chart 1.

The research (Chart 6) also proved that for all respondents, the possibility of talking to a person who knows the university was more important than the way the offer was presented regardless of the respondents' region of origin. This result should not be surprising, the agents' role in choosing the university seems to be huge. This person provides crucial information, can answer all questions related to the studying process and conditions, program contents, but also the country (customs, culture, tradition, living conditions, accommodation possibilities, etc.). It also implies that the respondents are self- and goal-

aware customers who are more interested in gaining answers to their concrete questions rather than in a “nice package”. This is an important clue for personal sellers – they have to pay more attention to being well prepared, knowing the offer and anticipating probable questions to be able to answer them reliably. At this point, there is bigger difference between personal selling of goods and services and even between typical services and specific, sensitive services, whose choice has long-lasting effects and consequences.

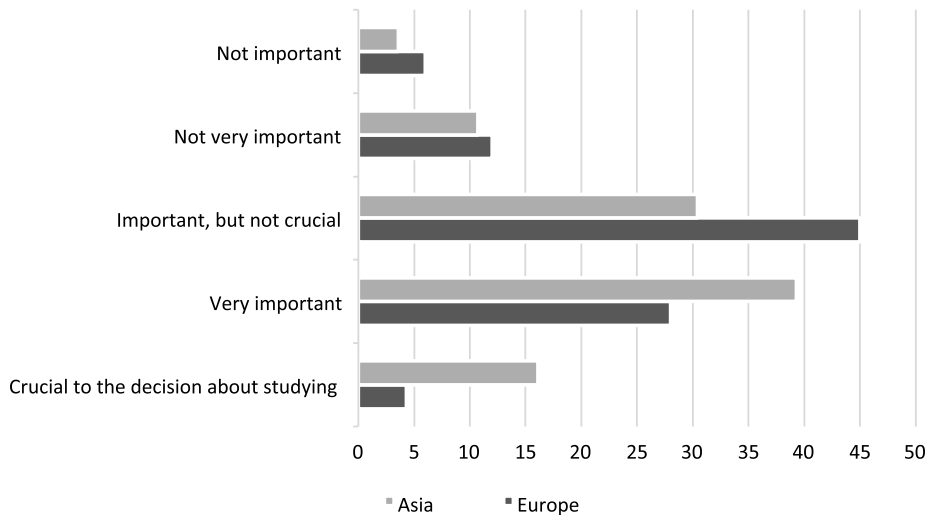
Chart 6. Opinions on factors influencing Asian and European respondents’ decisions about choosing the university (in %)



Source: as in Chart 1.

Chart 7 illustrates opinions of Asian and European respondents with respect to the importance of the first impression made by the agent or representative of the university. It appears that there are statistically important dependencies between the type of opinion on the importance of the first impression and respondents’ region of origin. Generally, respondents from Asia perceived the first impression as much more important than respondents from Europe. This is not surprising since Asians are more pro-partner and ceremonial (Gesteland 2012), thus perceive the first impression as crucial for establishing further relationship. European respondents were more likely to admit that the first impression is important, but not crucial. Nevertheless, this factor needs to be treated as one of the important ones.

Chart 7. Opinions of Asian and European respondents with respect to the importance of the first impression [%]



Source: as in Chart 1.

Summing up, international marketing has to deal with certain challenges resulting from the specificity of global markets (Antczak-Barzan, Antczak 2014). Adaptation and flexibility both in study profiles, program content and the very approach to students seems to be crucial. Education sector is a specific service area where personal contact between the service provider's representative and the customer is crucial. Education is a life-time investment, which is why people choose carefully. From the promotional activities point of view, the greatest challenge is the proper presentation of the future outcome and benefits, as education is the most intangible service of all. Additional difficulties relate to cultural differences if educational product is designed to be sold cross-culturally, as it is not only about the necessity to provide different product presentation strategy, methods and tools, and "culturally personalized" communication schema, but also adaptation or at least flexibility of the service offered (Antczak, Sypniewska 2017).

The most significant and desired agents' competences relate to the area of customer orientation, communication and adaptation abilities. With respect to customer orientation, this specific area of cross-cultural personal selling in the service sector is no different than in any other field. It is more about the agent's specific knowledge in the field of cultural differences and expectations of customers coming from various cultural backgrounds, thus having diverse needs or habits and require dissimilar approach than European customers (Western culture). Appropriate skills in verbal and non-verbal communication are extremely important. Proper choice of words, attitudes, gestures and

mimics may affect customers in a significant way. Ability of adaptation is a key competence for agents working with customers from culturally distant regions. They are simply forced to approach the client in a flexible manner (Antczak, Sypniewska 2017). Cultural differences determine the approach to customers, the manner of establishing customer relationships or adopting sales behaviours in the sales process. Even if the cultural differences are conspicuous, the use of methods and techniques that have worked in a given country should never be abandoned. Therefore, it can be worthwhile to adapt some good solutions from one culture to another.

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Doświadczenia studentów zagranicznych ze studiów w Polsce

Streszczenie

W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań dotyczące konkretnych wymagań i preferencji studentów zagranicznych studiujących w Polsce. Zaczyna się od od krótkiego teoretycznego przeglądu aspektu kulturowego w marketingu, co jest ważne z punktu widzenia udanej sprzedaży oferty dla studentów zza granicy również jeżeli chodzi o ich indywidualne (odnoszące się do każdej kultury) preferencji. W dalszej części przedstawiono wyniki badań, zwracając również pewną uwagę na zagadnienie konkretnych potrzeb zagranicznych studentów w odniesieniu do kompetencji agentów osobistych.

Słowa kluczowe: różnice kulturowe, studenci, preferencje, sprzedaż osobista.

Kody JEL: I2

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