

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding the Experiences of Mauritian Students at Institutions of Higher Education Overseas

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Abstract

Each year, a significant number of students from the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius seek higher education opportunities abroad. Yet, limited research exists on these students' expectations, preferences, and experiences in their academic and non-academic university settings overseas. This quantitative study investigates the experiences of Mauritian degree-seeking students at universities in Australia and the United Kingdom, which have been two of the most preferred destination countries for these students over the years. Precisely, this research examines associations between overall university satisfaction and various aspects of the student experience in the arrival, learning, living, and support services environment. Analyses reveal that a number of satisfaction variables were important to students, namely the opportunity to make friends on campus, the availability of social activities and facilities, internet access and IT support, and chaplaincy or multi-faith provision. Implications for international educators, university administrators, and guidance counsellors are discussed.

Keywords

international students, Mauritius, student experience, student satisfaction

Introduction

Mauritius, a small island state located off the southeast coast of Africa, is home to about 1.3 million inhabitants (World Bank, n.d.). As one of the continent's success stories in terms of political stability, cultural diversity, and economic development, Mauritius has over the years remained closely associated and engaged with the global community, partly due to its remoteness, limited natural resources, and the size of its economy (Auty, 2017; Ramtohul, 2016). Having invested heavily in the education and well-being of its population, the island is considered to be Africa's most developed country and is now positioned at the top of the Human Development Index for the region (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Mauritius is classified as an upper middle-income economy, holds one of the highest GDP per capita incomes on the continent, and has a literacy rate of 91.3% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). Most Mauritians are multilingual and are fluent in English, French, and Creole, which is the majority language and lingua franca of the country (T. Ammigan, 1989; Jugnauth, 2021).

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In the late 1990s, the Mauritian government identified internationalization of higher education as a key strategic initiative in order to keep its nation aligned with global educational trends and increase access to tertiary education (Motala-Timol & Kinser, 2017). As such, there has been an intentional increase in cross-border education and international collaborations with institutions overseas, as well as a surge in international programme and provider mobility as the education sector opened up and invited foreign institutions to set up academic hubs and satellite campuses on the island (Knight & Motala-Timol, 2020).

From an outbound mobility standpoint, thousands of Mauritian students choose to study abroad each year. While enrolment reports show a declining trend in Mauritian international students over the past four years, 34% of all Mauritian nationals still opted to start their university education overseas in 2019 (Higher Education Commission, 2019). In that context, it is important for institutions to gain better insights into the educational expectations, preferences, and experiences of these internationally mobile students, from both a recruitment and support services standpoint. This study sheds some light on this topic by investigating the satisfaction levels of Mauritian undergraduate students with their institutions of higher education in Australia and the UK, which have been two of the most preferred destination countries for Mauritian students over the years. It specifically examines associations between overall university satisfaction and various aspects of the student experience in their *arrival, learning, living, and support services* environment, before discussing implications for host university educators and administrators, as well as for those who actively prepare students to engage in studies abroad.

Literature Review

International students

The number of international students enrolled at institutions of higher education around the world has increased dramatically over the past two decades. In 2017, 5.3 million internationally mobile students were engaged in tertiary education worldwide, representing a growth of 165% in enrolment since 1998 (OECD, 2019). International students, defined as students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are enrolled outside their country of origin (UNESCO, n.d.), make invaluable intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions to their host institution and country, and so serve key roles in advancing internationalization, inclusivity, and diversity efforts on campus (Smith, 2020; Urban & Palmer, 2014).

According to the Higher Education Commission (2019), a total of 8 079 Mauritian students studied overseas in 2019, compared to 15 677 students who decided to remain on the island and enrol in public or private post-secondary educational institutions locally. This is a significant statistic, considering that over a third of all Mauritian students decided to pursue their tertiary education abroad. While France emerged as the most preferred destination for Mauritian international students, Australia and the United Kingdom have consistently featured among top host countries for higher education since 2008. The

most popular fields of study for Mauritians studying abroad were Medicine, Engineering, Administration and Management, Business, Commerce, and Marketing, and Law.

The international student experience

The student experience, which is usually measured by satisfaction ratings, is comprised of three key elements, namely academic and intellectual (teaching and learning), social and emotional activities and networking (extra-curricular opportunities and facilities), and welfare and support services (access to campus resources and services) (Tribal Group, n.d.). There is an extensive body of literature that explores the experiences of international students across the world, and many of these studies have stressed the need for a strong support system, in both the curricular and co-curricular settings, to ensure the success of these students (Akanwa, 2015; Choudaha, 2016).

The transition to university life can be an intimidating process for all students as they seek to familiarise themselves with their new campus. In response, host institutions must organise orientation and transition programs to help them feel welcome and secure a sense of belonging, which can lead to long-term academic and personal success (Nadler et al., 1998). A number of factors can affect the experiences of international students with various aspects of their university environment. Intercultural perspectives and local friendships can be highly rewarding experiences in and outside of the classroom (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Walsworth et al., 2021). The expertise of faculty and personal support from academic staff are considered key determinants of international student satisfaction (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Yu et al., 2016). Classroom size and facilities, and library services can be crucial in the learning dimension of one's learning experience (Asare-Nuamah, 2017; Butt & Rehman, 2010). And a recent study by Ammigan and Jones (2018) found that campus eating options, visa services provided by the international office, and assistance from the finance department all influenced students' experiences with their university.

Few studies exist on the experiences of Mauritian students overseas. In a qualitative study by Khawaja and Stallman (2011), Mauritian students at an Australian institution were found to experience culture shock and difficulty interacting with local students due to different types of beliefs, styles, and value systems. A different study from the UK by Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) indicated that one of their respondents from Mauritius had a particularly bad experience sharing accommodation with local roommates, which seriously disturbed her study habits. The same student, however, spoke very positively about the support services provided by her university, such as welcome activities, orientation programs, opening bank accounts, and opportunities to make friends with students from different backgrounds.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study was drawn from Arambewela and Hall's (2009) model of international student satisfaction, in which they indicate the importance of service quality factors that are related to both the educational and non-educational aspects

of the student experience. The model identifies seven constructs as significant predictors of student satisfaction, namely education, social, technology, economic, accommodation, safety, and prestige and image. The authors found that the expectations and perceptions of international students in relation to key service quality variables, such as teaching quality, access to lecturers, social activities, friends/relationships, job opportunities, transportation, and accommodation, varied among nationality groups and had a differential impact on student satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). Therefore, because of the diversity of cultures, language and values, and expectations among international students, it is important that host institutions develop a diversified and adaptable service model that addresses the differential needs of students across nationalities and cultural contexts. This conceptual framework is in line with the *arrival, learning, living, and support services* constructs of the International Student Barometer, which is the instrument used in the present study. It also supports the main goal of this paper, which examines the experiences of international students from a specific sending country and discusses implications for university administrators and support staff on how to effectively serve foreign nationals from Mauritius.

Method

This quantitative study investigates associations between overall university satisfaction and various aspects of the student experience across four institutional settings (arrival, learning, living, and support services) for Mauritian international students at institutions in Australia and the UK. It uses anonymized, pre-existing data from the International Student Barometer (ISB) and was declared exempt from the requirements of human subject protection by the Institutional Review Board.

Participants

The participants of this study were 207 degree-seeking, undergraduate students from Mauritius, enrolled at 43 different institutions in Australia and the UK. At the time the survey was taken, there were 2 016 Mauritian students studying in Australia, and 1 458 studying in the UK (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016). The sample in this study is representative of 5.6% of all Mauritians studying in Australia that year, and 6.5% of all Mauritian students at UK institutions. The average age of respondents, across both destination countries, was 21.7 years, and 39.6% were female compared to 45.4% who were male. Business and Administrative Studies (21.3%), and Engineering (14%) were the top two study areas. A majority of students (43.5%) were enrolled in a year other than their first or last (in terms of study stage). All student participants completed the online ISB questionnaire through a hyperlink sent via email from September to December 2016. Table 1 details the demographic characteristics of respondents in this study.

Table 1: Mauritian student demographics (N = 207)

Variable	Description	n	%
Age	18-22	137	66.2%
	23-27	32	15.5%
	28 and older	11	5.3%
Gender	Male	94	45.4%
	Female	82	39.6%
	Did not respond	31	15.0%
Top study area	Business/Admin. studies	44	21.3%
	Engineering	29	14.0%
	Biological Sciences	22	10.6%
	Law	22	10.6%
	Medicine (and related fields)	19	9.2%
Study stage	First year	80	38.6%
	Last year	37	17.9%
	Other	90	43.5%
Student totals	In Australia	112	54.1%
	In UK	95	45.9%
Host institutions	In Australia	21	54.1%
	In UK	22	45.9%

Instrument

The International Student Barometer (ISB) was the instrument used in this study to measure the satisfaction ratings of international students. The ISB tracks and compares the decision-making, expectations, and satisfaction of international students from application to graduation, and has gathered feedback from more than 3 million students in over 1 400 institutions across 33 countries since its inception in 2005 (i-graduate, 2021). Satisfaction items are organised in four main dimensions of experience: (1) *arrival* – students' first impressions and experiences upon arrival to campus (18 variables); (2) *learning* – students' academic environment and the aspects of teaching, studies, and facilities (33 variables); (3) *living* – student accommodation, social, and day-to-day life experiences (39 variables); and (4) *support services* – resources and services provided by the university's academic and non-academic units (22 variables). The online questionnaire, which has been periodically tested for validity and reliability through 18 cycles (Brett, 2013), uses a 4-point Likert scale to measure satisfaction, where 1=*very dissatisfied*, 2=*dissatisfied*, 3=*satisfied*, and 4=*very satisfied*.

Data analysis

All analyses were conducted on the unidentified responses using IBM's SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, in the form of percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarize and display demographics and students' level of satisfaction within each university environment. Paired-sample t-tests were used to compare overall satisfaction means between Australia and UK and determine whether the mean difference between the paired observations was statistically significant. Bivariate correlation analyses were performed to determine whether overall university satisfaction was associated with any of the satisfaction variables in the arrival, learning, living, and support service dimensions of the university experience.

Results

Associations between overall satisfaction and the dimensions of experience

To determine whether Mauritian students' overall university satisfaction was associated with their experiences in the *arrival*, *learning*, *living*, and *support services* dimensions of the institution setting, Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed. Results in Table 2 show significant positive correlations between overall satisfaction and each of the dimensions of experience, indicating the importance of the relationship among these five variables of the student experience. Overall university satisfaction had the strongest positive association with learning ($r = .401, p < .01$), followed by living ($r = .315, p < .01$), support services ($r = .245, p < .01$), and arrival ($r = .237, p < .05$).

Table 2: Correlations between overall satisfaction and dimensions of experience
($N = 207$)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Overall university experience	–				
2. Arrival experience	.237*	–			
3. Learning experience	.401**	.433**	–		
4. Living experience	.315**	.334**	.342**	–	
5. Support services	.245**	.252*	.265**	.312**	–
M	3.12	3.24	3.13	3.14	3.01
SD	.615	.544	.586	.668	.555
Range	1–4	1–4	1–4	1–4	1–4
Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$					

Student satisfaction in Australia versus UK

Mauritian students were generally satisfied with their university experience at institutions in Australia and the UK. As indicated in Table 3, students reported a slightly higher satisfaction level with their overall university experience in the UK than in Australia [$t(206) = -1.71, p < .005$]. Although the paired-sample t-tests revealed a statistically significant difference in *arrival*, *learning*, and *living* satisfaction mean scores between Australia and UK institutions, the differences were minimal. In other words, the experiences of Mauritian international students did not vary much by host or destination country.

Table 3: International student satisfaction in Australia versus UK (N = 207)

Satisfaction variables	Australia Mean (n = 112)	UK Mean (n = 95)	Mean Difference	Sig.
Overall university experience	3.05	3.20	-0.15	.021**
Arrival experience	3.23	3.26	-0.04	.063*
Learning experience	3.13	3.13	-0.01	.073*
Living experience	3.10	3.17	-0.07	.056*
Support services	3.00	3.01	-0.01	.737
<i>Note: ** p < .05, * p < .10</i>				

Correlates of overall satisfaction

A separate correlational analysis was performed to assess the relationship between Overall university experience and the satisfaction variables within each of the four dimensions of institutional experience, in both Australia and the UK combined. Table 4 summarizes the results of the analysis, indicating that several aspects of the institutional experience were positively associated with students' overall university satisfaction. In the *arrival* category, opportunities to make friends with others upon arrival to campus ($r = .311, p < .05$) was a key factor for Mauritian students. A number of variables in the learning environment were also important, including the expertise of lecturers ($r = .330, p < .01$), personal support from academic staff ($r = .325, p < .01$), and the academic staff's command of the English language ($r = .323, p < .05$). Making friends locally ($r = .415, p < .01$), social facilities ($r = .373, p < .01$), and internet access ($r = .359, p < .01$) were essential determinants of the overall university experience in the *living* setting. Of the four dimensions of experience, variables within *support services* were found to be the highest correlates of overall satisfaction. Chaplaincy or multi-faith provision ($r = .736, p < .01$), Disability support services ($r = .667, p < .01$), and Accounts/finance department ($r = .532, p < .01$) were variables with the most significant associations with Mauritian students' overall university satisfaction coefficient.

Table 4: Correlates of overall satisfaction (Australia and UK combined)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>r</i>
Arrival			
Making friends upon arrival	2.97	.803	.311*
Learning			
Expertise of lecturers	3.34	.579	.330**
Personal support from academic staff	3.14	.648	.325**
Academic staff grasp of English	3.19	.709	.323**
Courses that lead to a good job	3.05	.683	.304**
Online library facilities	3.30	.615	.303**
Living			
Making friends from this country	2.98	.796	.415**
Social facilities	3.01	.723	.373**
Internet access at my residence	3.04	.702	.359**
Social activities (organised events)	3.00	.722	.353**
Feeling safe and secure	3.28	.606	.341**
Cost of living	2.68	.657	.324**
Transportation on campus	3.17	.657	.324**
Eco-friendly attitude of institution	3.28	.598	.315**
Support services			
Chaplaincy or multi-faith provision	3.15	.745	.736**
Disability support services	3.20	.422	.667*
Accounts/finance department	3.05	.539	.532**
IT and systems support	3.20	.717	.508**
Personal tutors	3.38	.672	.448**
Career services	3.23	.633	.438**
Students' union/governance	3.18	.718	.416**
Immigration/visa advising	2.97	.718	.410**
Student advisory services	3.23	.538	.409**
<i>Note: **</i> $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Table shows .3 correlation coefficients and above.			

Discussion

The findings in this study show that Mauritian students at Australian and UK institutions were generally satisfied with various aspects of their university experience. There were no major differences in respondents' overall satisfaction between the two host countries, although students in the UK reported slightly higher satisfaction ratings than those in Australia. The *arrival* experience had the highest satisfaction mean score in both destination

countries, which is an indication that adequate resources and support were being provided to students upon arrival at their respective campuses.

Satisfaction with each of the four dimensions of institutional experience was found to be positively associated with Mauritian students' overall university experience. This aligns well with previous research by Ammigan and Jones (2018) and supports the understanding that a conducive arrival, learning, living, and support services environment is critical in ensuring students' overall satisfaction with the university. Another significant factor for consideration is that the learning environment exhibited the strongest correlation coefficient with overall university satisfaction, which highlights the importance for host institutions to prioritise a quality and well-supported academic environment for their international students. Additionally, the relationship between *support services* and the other dimensions of satisfaction draws key implications for administrators in the sense that universities must allocate sufficient resources and establish a robust support infrastructure in both the curricular and co-curricular setting to enhance the experience and success of their international students.

This study also found several satisfaction variables (within each of the four dimensions of experience) to be positively correlated with students' overall university experience. In other words, overall satisfaction with the institution was dependent on students' satisfaction with a number of variables within the *arrival*, *learning*, *living*, and *support services* settings. Results from this study, which echo some of the findings and recommendations from our conceptual framework, are discussed below along with implications for university staff and administration, as well as student advisors and guidance counsellors who advise and assist students on their study abroad plans.

Arrival

Upon arrival to campus, it was important for Mauritian students to find opportunities for making friends and developing personal networks within the local community. This is not surprising as several studies, noted in the literature review, have pointed to the positive impact that initial friendships and a local support system can have on international students' well-being and academic success at their university (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Walsworth et al., 2021). Host institutions must therefore be intentional and strategic at establishing initiatives that can assist new international students with acculturation, integration, and engagement in their new campus environment. Offering networking opportunities and organising social and cultural events during their first few days on campus and at orientation can make students feel welcome and forge a sense of belonging. Buddy and mentorship programmes that engage current student leaders with incoming students prior to their arrival to the university can initiate conversations early on and facilitate their transition to their new campus. Arrangements for airport pick up, transportation to campus, dormitories, and shopping centres, and welcome events in the initial days can spark opportunities for new students to connect with local members of the campus community. It is also key that international students are prepared for what to expect and how to access resources before they reach their institution so they can settle in quickly.

Learning

A number of satisfaction variables in the learning environment were positively associated with Mauritian students' overall university experience. Significant factors, such as the expertise of lecturers and personal support from academic staff, indicate that the teaching aspects of the classroom environment must remain central to students' university experience as they are key determinants of international student satisfaction. This corresponds with the research of Butt and Rehman (2010) and Arthur (2017). The relationship between student employability and university satisfaction was somewhat predictable as many international students seek internship and post-graduation work opportunities to complement their academic credentials (Gribble et al., 2017). This stresses the importance of resources and guidance on career readiness and development offered by the university's Career Services Center and academic programme. Online library facilities was also found to be a vital aspect of the university experience as supported by the research of Asare-Nuamah (2017). In addition to the existing facilities, institutions must make sure that their international students know how to access and utilize their online academic resources through available tutorials and training materials. These findings also lead to important practical implications for international student recruitment professionals. As Ammigan (2019) found, the overall learning experience does not only influence university satisfaction but is the most significant predictor of international students' willingness to recommend their institution to prospective applicants.

Living

Students in this study conveyed the importance of being able to make friends locally within their living environment, as they did when they first arrived at their university. To address this need for socialization on campus, institutions must continue to provide opportunities for meaningful engagement and involvement among students – and between international and domestic students. Social and cultural initiatives, such as residential and campus life events, coffee hours, student leadership groups, and language and conversation programmes, can help students make new acquaintances, engage in cross-cultural dialogues, increase their awareness and understanding of different worldviews, and develop global competence. These co-curricular initiatives must be carefully designed and intentionally linked to the formal global learning curriculum in order to produce high quality experiences and enhance cultural diversity, inclusion, and engagement for all students (Leask & Carroll, 2011). Dedicated physical space and facilities must also be assigned for these inclusive programmes and events to foster a sense of belonging and build tradition and community. The other correlates of overall university satisfaction for the respondents in this study was internet access in their housing, safety and security on campus, the cost of living, transportation services, and the eco-friendly attitude of their institution.

Support services

A total of nine variables in the *support services* category were associated with overall university satisfaction, including six that held the strongest correlation coefficients of all variables across the four dimensions of institutional experience. This is indicative of the importance of these factors to Mauritian students overseas, as well as the significance of support services to international students from a holistic standpoint. In this context, it behoves host institutions to continue assessing the needs of their international student community and strengthen campus support services through a strategic and collaborative approach across student affairs, academic departments, and local community resources (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). For instance, the provision of chaplaincy or multi-faith services is dependent on a strong partnership with a wide variety of religious, cultural, and spiritual entities and support groups both on and off campus. Access to and effective usage of campus resources such as disability support services, the finance department, IT and systems support, student governance, and immigration and visa services requires a strong partnership between the International Student Office and various university support units to promote and customize services to the international community. Personal tutors, career services, and student advisory services hinge on close collaborations between academic departments and student affairs. The International Student Office in particular has direct access to the international community and can play a vital role in developing services for international students and getting the word out about key resources on campus (Ammigan & Laws, 2018). Foremost, the delivery of support services must remain student-centred and must be adaptable across nationalities and cultural contexts to maximize their impact, effectiveness, and satisfaction ratings, and address the differential needs of students (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Roberts et al., 2015).

Conclusion

To the author's knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to investigate the experiences of Mauritian students at institutions of higher education in Australia and the UK using data from the International Student Barometer. In exploring the associations between students' overall university satisfaction and their experiences with various aspects of the university environment, this research demonstrated that a number of satisfaction variables were significant in the arrival, learning, living, and support services contexts. Making friends upon arrival, organised social activities and facilities, internet access and IT support, and chaplaincy or multi-faith provision were some of the distinct correlates of Mauritian students' overall university experience. Although the results from this study are not meant to be generalizable, they merit consideration and serve as a point of reference for university educators and administrators, and for those preparing Mauritian students to engage in study abroad. One of the limitations of this research is that the ISB is a self-reporting instrument, and it is subject to social desirability and response bias. Future research should consider a larger sample of Mauritian international students, explore the experiences of

graduate students from a comparative perspective, and expand the scope to include more participating institutions and destination countries.

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Research Ethics

This research was declared exempt from the requirements of human subject protection by the Institutional Review Board.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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