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Expectation as a key determinant of international students' satisfaction

International students' satisfaction

A case study of business school MSc students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore international postgraduate students' expectations of UK university education, covering various aspects of student expectation at a leading business school in Scotland. The authors present in this paper the findings from the qualitative stage of this study, offering a fresh insight into the factors that influence students' expectations of postgraduate university education and the impact this has on the students' satisfaction with their courses.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative inquiry was adopted, collecting primary data by means of semi-structured interviews of business school international students enrolled in different taught 12-month MSc courses.

Findings – International students are found to have high expectations of improved job prospects after graduating from their chosen UK university, underlined mainly by the university's reputation for improving student employability. The most significant *a priori* factors that form students' expectations are word of mouth, recommendations and the students' belief in the calibre of lecturers and the quality of the facilities.

Research limitations/implications – The students are universities' most important customers in an increasingly competitive and financially constrained UK higher education environment. Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing literature in this challenging environment not only by identifying the components of international postgraduate students' expectations but also by exploring how the expectations can be met or exceeded to improve students' satisfaction. Future research can also replicate this study to other subject areas and draw the similarities and differences that may exist in the expectations of non-business international MSc students.

Practical implications – Practically, this study's findings should help university students' recruitment and engagement services develop tailored marketing strategies to better manage international students' expectations, for example, by being more proactive in embedding employability into postgraduate education provision. Moreover, the findings can also be drawn upon to improve the design and delivery of taught MSc courses in order to meet and exceed the expectations of prospective international postgraduate students.

Originality/value – This research offers a fresh insight and contributes to the understanding of international students' expectations and their satisfaction of university education services.

Keywords Satisfaction, International postgraduate students, Students' expectations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate international students' expectations of UK university postgraduate business education. The study covers various aspects of student experience and offers a fresh insight into the factors that influence those expectations and the impact this has on the students' satisfaction with their courses in a rapidly changing and challenging sector.



The services sector, including the higher education sector, is vital for the UK economy, accounting for 79 per cent of the gross domestic product (Office for National Statistics, 2017). In 2017, higher education institutions in the UK employed 410,130 staff (Universities UK, 2017b). The UK higher education is considered of critical importance in the creation and transfer of knowledge to the economy through its main activities of teaching and research. Universities are a significant part of the UK economy because, as the UK's economic competitiveness becomes increasingly dependent on leadership within knowledge-intensive industries, world-class research universities have a critically important role to play in driving future growth and prosperity (Russell International Excellence Group, 2010). UK universities rank 1st as destinations of choice for international students (Universities UK, 2017a) with their relative numbers steadily increasing from 14 per cent in 2006–2007 to 19 per cent in 2015–2016 and contributing £10.8bn to UK export earnings, as well as an estimated 206,600 jobs (Universities UK, 2017b, pp. 2–3).

The core value provided by the service industry to consumers resides not only in the uniqueness of its products, but also in the various factors involved in the process of service delivery to customers, such as physical facilities, company image and quality of the service delivery. All these influence the expectations of the customer (Lin, 2007). The most important customer of the modern university is the student (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009) and what influences their expectations is a key theme in the present study. Many existing studies have looked at what influences student satisfaction. For instance, gender, learning experience, learning style, course curriculum, students–staff interaction, guidance, staff passion and knowledge, employability, resources, students' success rate, etc., have all been identified as significant predictors of student satisfaction (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Stokes, 2001; Porter and Umbach, 2001). Institutional factors such as instructor teaching style, quality of instruction, research emphasis, quality and promptness of feedback from instructor, clarity of expectations from instructor and class size have also been identified as influencers of student satisfaction levels (Chen and Hoshower, 2010; Cardone-Riportella *et al.*, 2001; Porter and Umbach, 2001; Grudnitski and Krentler, 2004; Douglas *et al.*, 2006). For instance, student perception of instructor fairness—as a combination of instructor actions and personal characteristics of students—can drive student satisfaction (Desai *et al.*, 2001). Overall, the evidence from the literature (e.g. Knapp-Appleton and Krentler, 2006) highlights the importance of understanding and managing student expectations as this may play a crucial role in the level of student satisfaction with their courses and institutions.

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) defined customers' expectations as:

The reference points customers have coming in to a service experience: perceptions reflect the service as actually received (p. 32).

In other words, customers' expectations are premeditated beliefs about a product or service that serve as standards for judging product performance or service quality. This implies that a customer's assessment of service quality results from a comparison of service expectations with actual performance. Therefore, post-purchase satisfaction is a function of the gap between expectation and perceived performance, implying that firms need to close this gap between what is expected and what is received in order to satisfy their customers and build sustainable long-term relationships (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Knapp-Appleton and Krentler, 2006; Voss *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, if the services rendered fall short of customers' expectations, this leads to disappointment and dissatisfaction. If the services meet or exceed their expectations, they are delighted (Kotler and Keller, 2012). This study suggests a framework (Figure 1) based on predictive expectations, an approach common in customer satisfaction empirical literature (e.g. Walker and Baker, 2000; Rodriguez Del Bosque *et al.*, 2006).

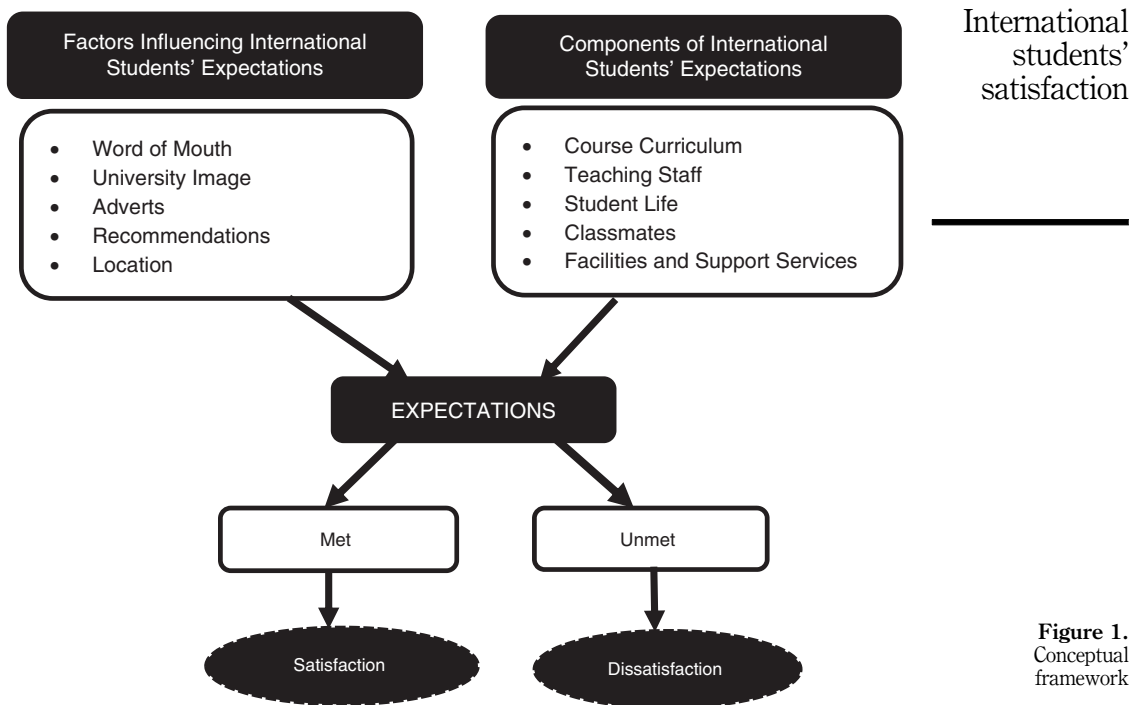


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

Literature review

Service expectations

The existing literature has attempted to explain the concept of service expectations, with early writers elaborating on the definition and antecedents of service expectations (e.g. Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Webster, 1991; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1991; Boulding *et al.*, 1993). However, most researchers seem to concur with Zeithaml *et al.*'s (1993) definition of customer expectations as being:

Pre-trial beliefs about a product that serve as standards or reference points against which product performance is judged (p. 1).

From this definition, one can deduce that customers' assessments of service quality result from a comparison of service expectations with actual product performance (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003), service expectations are:

Beliefs about service delivery that function as standards or reference points against which judgement is formed (p. 60).

In other words, customers' expectations of services form the criteria for measuring their satisfaction levels of service delivery. If a marketer raises expectations too high, the buyer is likely to be disappointed. On the other hand, if expectations are set too low, it would not attract enough buyers (Kotler and Keller, 2012). It is therefore important to have thorough knowledge about what the customer expects and design services in a way that meets or exceeds those expectations (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Dibb *et al.*, 2012). As Hamer *et al.* (1999) rightly put it:

The most important variable for managers to control is customer expectations (p. 288).

Levels of customer service expectations

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) identified five main levels of customer service expectations, ranging from as high as ideal expectations or desires to as low as minimum tolerable expectations. The ideal level of expectations is the service level the customer hopes to receive or wishes to receive. It reflects the hopes and wishes of the customers (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). However, this may not always be the case. A customer may recognise that his/her ideal expectations may not always be met, hence they would settle for an acceptable level of performance which is termed the adequate service level (Dibb *et al.*, 2012). The difference between these two levels of expectations is called the customers' zone of tolerance (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Dibb *et al.*, 2012).

The zone of tolerance

This expresses the extent to which customers recognise and are willing to accept variations from their desired service expectations and adequate service expectations. If service drops below adequate service (that is the minimum level of service expected), the customer then becomes frustrated and their satisfaction with the company will be undermined (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). The factors that influence the size of the tolerance zone include customer and service dimensions. These are the elements that cause the zone of tolerance to expand or contract (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). Customers with narrower zones of tolerance require a tighter range of service, whereas customers with wider zones of tolerance allow a greater range of service (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). A customer's zone of tolerance may increase or decrease due to company-controlled factors including price. When price increases, customers tend to be less tolerant of poor service. In this case, the zone of tolerance decreases because the adequate service level shifts upwards.

Factors influencing customer service expectations

It is well documented in the literature that "the most important variable for managers to control is customer expectations" (Hamer *et al.*, 1999, p. 288). This is because it accounts for all the information present before, during and or after a service experience. With services, quality occurs during service delivery and consumers' expectations can change over the experience period. Given the evolving makeup of expectations, understanding the factors that influence the updating process is thus critical for marketing managers and researchers alike (Boulding *et al.*, 1993). From a purely theoretical perspective, the guidelines for managing customers' expectations have been ambiguous amongst academic researchers and can be grouped into three strands: decreasing expectations (Davidow and Uttal, 1989), increase expectations (Boulding *et al.*, 1993) or maintaining them stable (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1993).

Despite the disparity in the literature and calls for further research in the area (e.g. Parasuraman *et al.*, 1993; Kalamas *et al.*, 2002), some scholars have specifically examined the determinants of service expectations (Bell, 2016; Nilsson, 2016; Fontaine, 2014; Universities UK, 2016; Rodriguez Del Bosque *et al.*, 2006; Buckley *et al.*, 2004; James, 2002; Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). Very few, however, have linked expectations to satisfaction (e.g. Knapp-Appleton and Krentler, 2006). To date, several scholars have developed and tested customer satisfaction models that integrate service expectations (Webster, 1991; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1993; Clow *et al.*, 1998; Dion *et al.*, 1998; Kalamas *et al.*, 2002; Rodriguez Del Bosque *et al.*, 2006). Table I presents a summary of some of these studies. Each model is unique in terms of the identified antecedents for service expectations. Robledo (2001) found that models that measure service quality considering expectations are superior to models that measure service quality as a function of performance only. His survey-based study of commercial airline customers in Europe shows that service expectations were influenced by word-of-mouth communications, promotion, price, corporate image, personal needs and past experiences.

Research	Factors influencing customer expectations	Location
Gronroos (1984)	Firm image, word of mouth, tangibles, price, explicit service promises, and adverts, past experience, satisfaction, service quality, personal needs and enduring service intensifiers	Theoretical research
Webster (1991)	Word of mouth, opinion leadership, sales promotion, advertising and past experience	USA
Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> (1993)	Word of mouth, tangibles, price, implicit service promises, adverts, past experience, third parties, transitory service intensifiers, perceived service alternatives, self-perceived service role, situational factors, personal needs and enduring service intensifiers	USA
Clow <i>et al.</i> (1998)	Price, tangibles, product, image, implicit service promises, time, service quality, appearance of staff, word of mouth, past experience	USA
Dion <i>et al.</i> (1998)	Enduring service intensifiers, perceived service alternatives, explicit and implicit service promises, word of mouth, past experience and transitory service intensifiers	USA
Kalamas <i>et al.</i> (2002)	Word of mouth, tangibles, implicit service promises, adverts, effort, satisfaction, ease of recall, values, involvement, need for cognition, past experience and third parties	Canada

Table I.
Customer service
expectations studies
(1984-2002)

Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) divided the antecedent of service expectations into four segments (i.e. expected, predicted, desired and adequate service). They also identified antecedents under each segment even though not empirically tested in its entirety. Dion *et al.* (1998) attempted an empirical test on a more simplified version of the Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) model and regarded service quality perceptions as antecedents of the degree of tolerance for service performance. Clow *et al.* (1998) also attempted to empirically test only the antecedents of predictive expectations in their model (i.e. advertising, implicit and explicit promise, word of mouth and past experience). However, they treat service quality and satisfaction as distinct antecedents of expectations whereas Parasuraman *et al.* (1993) considered them as outcome variables.

Kalamas *et al.* (2002) presented a comprehensive conceptual framework for antecedents of service expectations by dividing them into five main segments: internal sources of information, external sources of information, personal needs and values, level of involvement and need for cognition. Using both interviews and questionnaire, Voss *et al.* (2007) examined constructs underlying students' expectations of the teaching qualities of effective lecturers. They found that teaching skills, teaching methods, communication skills, approachability, enthusiasm, expertise, humour and friendliness were the most critical attributes students expect from lecturers and that the presence of these attributes in a lecturer contributes to fulfilling students' goals of preparing themselves for their profession.

International students' expectations

Recalling Zeithaml and Bitner (2003), service expectations are defined as:

Beliefs about service delivery that function as standards or reference points against which judgement is formed (p. 60).

With regard to student expectations, very few studies have discussed them as a determinant of student satisfaction. Dunkel and Davy (1989) found that there are significant differences between the expectations of American students and their international peers regarding note-taking. They also reported that most international students from the Far East, the Middle East and Latin America were not used to taking notes in English, but expected note-taking to be an important part of the teaching and learning process in the university. Table II provides a summary of the key factors that influence international students' expectations.

Research study	Factors	Location
Dunkel and Davy (1989)	Increased note-taking	USA
East (2001)	More interactive teaching and learning style, more responsibility for independent learning, organised lecturers and handouts	Australia
Niehoff <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Mandatory class attendance, theory- and research-based teaching and learning, low group activities	USA
Li <i>et al.</i> (2002)	Knowledge transmission through textbooks, focussed teaching and learning materials, improvement in English proficiency, one answer questions, standardised tests	New Zealand
Sherry <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Good learning support services, high-quality teaching, good staff–student communications, prompt feedback, high levels of responsiveness and empathy	New Zealand
Tricker (2003)	Flexibility and choice in the delivery of education, access to cutting edge technology, a two-way communication process between themselves and with the university, to be consulted about the learning experience, accurate information about their courses, assessment procedures, complaints process, etc., honesty with respect to whether their needs can be met or not, quality and professionalism in the provision of services, access to suitably qualified teachers and appropriate learning support, value of study to career prospects	UK
DalGLISH and Chan (2005)	A totally Australian experience, good social facilities and directed learning regime	Australia
Ransom <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Improvement in English proficiency, top one-third grades, high institutional support	Australia
Ahmad (2006)	Independent hard work, high standard of teaching, more interactivity in class, more industry exposure, in-depth knowledge of subject, practical training, lectures skilled in making classes interesting and intellectually stimulating, knowledgeable lecturers, intelligence in classmates, high-quality on-campus facilities	Australia
Kingston and Forland (2008)	Interactive teaching methods, note-taking	UK
Yoon and Jepsen (2008)	Unattractive counselling format, more directed study	USA
Zhang and Zhou (2010)	Making new friends, different learning methods	Canada
Evans and Stevenson (2011)	Adjusting to a new country and culture, new pedagogical approaches, structure programme of study, a strong emphasis on research, approaches to supervision, a good supervision relationship	UK
Ramachandran (2011)	English-language proficiency, financial stress, cultural shock, academic engagement in a UK environment, academic support systems, university administrative procedure and issues of transitional student	UK
Huang (2012)	Cultural shock, unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, learning process of new subject, unfamiliar with learning clues, learning materials and content of lectures, insufficient knowledge of learning environment	USA
Kandiko and Mawer (2013)	Student perceptions of value, clear benchmarks, future-focus, evaluation, feedback and feed-forward, personalisation vs standardisation	UK
Lillyman and Bennett (2014)	Culture shock, cultural differences, physical environment, English proficiency, teacher support, peer support, homesickness	UK
Bell (2016)	Accommodation, integrating into the host country's culture, different communication, teaching and assessment styles	UK
Ding (2016)	Language and economic factors, academic and support service, quality of education	China
Nilsson (2016)	Student mobility, a learning experience, employability and career	The Netherlands
Mitchell <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Clash of cultures, lack of knowledge about race and racism, racism, discrimination	USA

Table II.
Factors that influence international students' expectations

We can safely add information technology, particularly the internet, to those factors given its pervasiveness in the modern learning environment as is documented in a number of fairly recent studies (e.g. Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Bell, 2016).

Byon *et al.* (1999) found that Korean international students in the University of Wisconsin (USA) had low expectations in term of attractiveness of counselling programmes in the university. They expected to discuss their problems with their peers and would drop out of counselling sessions quickly if the process was deemed unpleasant or did not seem immediately helpful. The Korean students expected to approach counselling as a classroom learning situation in which they could present problems, ask questions and work on problem solving assignments. This supports findings by Yoon and Jepsen (2008) indicating that Asian international students, in comparison with US students, have less exposure and self-perceived need for counselling. Instead, they express a discomfort/shame, less openness, a greater preference for a directive style and a greater preference for a flexible counselling format. Moreover, language and cultural concerns are identified as barriers to seeking counselling.

East (2001) examined what determine the expectations and perceptions of international students at La Trobe University in Australia. She found that international students anticipated a different teaching and learning style (interactive and more responsibility for their own learning) from what they are used to. It is found that most respondents were disappointed with the lack of interaction with local students and students reported feeling excluded from class activities.

Niehoff *et al.* (2001) found that Taiwanese students expected mandatory class attendance, theory- and research-based information in terms of learning processes and had low preferences for group activities in class. On the other hand, Li *et al.* (2002) discovered that Asian students in two New Zealand universities expected the learning process to involve knowledge transmission through textbooks. Their findings reveal that Asian students expect some level of focus with regard to lecture materials and course materials are too general and too loose. They expect to improve their English and cultural knowledge rather than contribute ideas and solve problems through group work. Some students also expect certain courses to be easy because of the course name. They expect one definite answer to questions and standardised tests. Sherry *et al.* (2004) found that international students at the New Zealand Tertiary Institute had certain expectations of what they thought a tertiary institution should fulfil such as good learning support services, high-quality teaching, good staff–student communications, prompt feedback from tutors and high levels of responsiveness and empathy in terms of service quality.

At Sheffield Hallam University in England, Tricker (2003) postulated that international students' expectations were high and they included: flexibility and choice in the delivery of education, access to cutting edge technology, a two-way communication process between themselves and the university, consultation about the learning experience, accurate information about courses, assessment procedures, complaints process, honesty with respect to whether their needs can be met or not, quality and professionalism in the provision of services, access to suitably qualified teachers and appropriate learning support, and value of study to career prospects.

DalGLISH and Chan (2005) examined international students' expectations and their reflections on studying in Australia. They reported that Indian students' choice of university was mainly driven by the affordability of tuition fees. Recommendations from agents, location in Brisbane, the reputation of the institution and receiving an offer quickly also played a significant role in the students' choice. In contrast, they also found that African students expected a totally Australian experience but felt that having other international students on their course was a bonus. Other international students such as Thai students appeared to have great expectations of the social facilities availability.

Ransom *et al.* (2005) reported that international students with English as a second language at the University of Melbourne expected to improve their English proficiency. Generally, those students expected their results to be in the top one-third of their class and high institutional support to improve upon their English proficiency. Ahmad (2006) found that for Indian students at the University of Melbourne, ranking and reputation of the university were the key influencing factors in their choice of university. The majority of those students expected high standards and interactive classes and that their course would involve a lot of hard work and be challenging. Generally, Indian students expect their lecturers to have in-depth knowledge of their fields and possess the ability to make the class interesting and intellectually stimulating. Most participants expect the student life to be fun. Postgraduate respondents expect their classmates to be of the same calibre in terms of work experience, intelligence, smartness and maturity. On-campus facilities are expected to be available and of high quality. Moreover, they expected their course to offer them in-depth knowledge and practical training and more industry exposure as a preparation for employment.

Kingston and Forland (2008) discovered that East-Asian students at a London university expected teaching methods to nurture their personal opinions. These international students had language difficulties that made note-taking and assessments (particularly examinations) more challenging for them than they had envisaged.

Zhang and Zhou (2010) concluded that learning differences were the most important element in determining the kind of experience international Chinese students had at the University of Windsor (Canada). Academically, most of the Chinese students found it difficult to communicate with instructors and peers in class. Most also found it difficult to write papers especially for those enrolled in humanities or social science courses. Those who made friends with native English speakers tended to be more satisfied with their study experience and had a higher level of confidence to successfully complete their courses. With regard to reasons for choosing the university, the majority of those students chose that university because the colleges in China already had a relationship with the University of Windsor. Also, most of the students faced challenges with getting used to the public transportation system in Canada, finding their way on campus after arrival, and the food served on campus. Moreover, culture shock was a major challenge for those students with regard to conversation topics with new friends and residential life, some describing their experience as boring. In terms of social life, most thought they would make a lot of Canadian friends easily but found it very hard because of cultural differences.

Student satisfaction

Weerasinghe *et al.* (2017) defined students' satisfaction as:

A short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of students' educational experience, services and facilities (p. 534).

Knapp-Appleton and Krentler (2006) stated that understanding how student expectations affect satisfaction is valuable for educators because they can exert some control in correctly informing expectations about a course. Asare-Nuamah (2017) argued that student satisfaction should be given much attention to have impact on retention and financial stability. Research also shows that satisfaction may be related to how well the classroom environment matches student preferences (Taylor *et al.*, 1997). For instance, students preferring a classroom with a high level of student-teacher interaction and personalisation should have higher levels of satisfaction in a classroom that provides this personalisation than one that does not (Elliot and Shin, 2002). Using both interviews and a questionnaire survey, Voss *et al.* (2007) looked at the constructs underlying students' expectations of the teaching qualities of effective lecturers. They found that teaching skills, teaching methods, communication skills, approachability,

enthusiasm, expertise, humour and friendliness were the most critical attributes students expect from lecturers and that the presence of these attributes in a lecturer contributes to fulfilling students' goals of preparing themselves for their profession.

In the present study, we focus on exploring expectation as a key determinant of international postgraduate students' satisfaction as depicted in the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1). It is beyond the scope of this research to measure the level of satisfaction.

International
students'
satisfaction

Method

Our study is guided by an overall qualitative approach in order to gain, as explained by Lapan *et al.* (2012), a sufficient level of detail and depth in exploring social and organisational characteristics as well as individual behaviours and meanings. We focus on international postgraduate students in a leading business school in Scotland and we believe that the qualitative approach enables us to gain a proper insight into their expectations of their chosen university and what influences these expectations, understand their perceptions of service quality and draw the practical lessons therein. In this study, the term "International students" refers to foreign nationals (i.e. non-EU and non-UK domiciled) who come to study at a UK university on a student visa.

International postgraduate students were approached in the business school few weeks into the start of the academic year to take part in the present study. The students who enrolled in different taught 12-month MSc courses used the same facilities and had access to the same services (e.g. teaching rooms, computer labs, library, etc.). The purpose of the study, the interview process as well as the university's research ethical policy were explained to the target participants. Participants were guaranteed total anonymity and confidentiality, were asked to sign a consent form and informed that they could unconditionally withdraw from the study at any time. Table III summarises the profiles of the students who took part in interviews.

Most of the interviews were conducted by one of this paper's authors in the convivial environment of the business school's atrium where postgraduate students usually hang around during their free time. The interviews were sequenced in a way to collect and collate opinions, starting with general views relating to university education and its benefits, followed by questions on expectations (e.g. reason for choosing a UK university/Scottish business school, course content, teaching style, teaching staff, facilities, classmates,

Participants	Age	Course of study	Country of origin
P01	22	MSc Project Management	St Vincent and the Grenadines
P02	29	MSc Purchasing and Supply Chain Management	Nigeria
P03	26	MSc International Business	Ghana
P04	25	MSc International Business	Kazakhstan
P05	34	MSc Oil and Gas law	Nigeria
P06	24	MSc International Business	Algeria
P07	22	MSc International Business	Nigeria
P08	23	MSc International Business	Nigeria
P09	25	MSc Oil and Gas Accounting	Ghana
P10	21	MSc International Business	Cameron
P11	25	MSc International Business	Kazakhstan
P12	26	MSc Project Management	Jordan
P13	23	MSc International Business	Turkey
P14	25	MSc Management	Bangladesh
P15	23	MSc Management	India

Table III.
Participants' profiles

student–lecturer relationship and social life). The interviews concluded with questions on student satisfaction, essentially comparing experience thus far with expectations prior to coming to joining their course.

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were successfully conducted on a “one-to-one basis” four weeks into the start of their MSc course, by which time students were deemed reasonably settled in and familiar with their new learning environment. Each interview lasted between 30–50 min, sometimes after re-arranging an interview if the initially agreed date and time were no longer suitable for the participant. As advocated by Saunders *et al.* (2015), the exploratory nature of this research guided the interviews as it provides some degree of focus and lets participants describe freely the reasons for the behaviours and perceptions towards their university/school. In addition to making notes during the interviews, each interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The stories and comments recorded during the interviews provide an insight into the expectations’ phenomenon. Some of them are used as anecdotal evidence in our analysis which is informed by the key themes identified from our review of relevant literature. As researchers in this type of study are interested in a highly inductive approach, issues and factors are allowed to emerge (Miles, 1979). In order to validate factors identified in the literature as well as emerging factors from the fieldwork during the analysis and interpretation of the interview data, a four-stage cognitive process (Morse, 1994) was followed: comprehending (what is happening?); synthesising (bringing it together); theorising (does the data fit/make sense with the real world?); and recontextualising (is the theory applicable to other settings/situations?). Through the thematic analysis, the study uses mainly verbatim quotes from the interviewees to categorise their responses under the key categories/themes.

Results and discussion

Components of international postgraduate students’ expectations

Most of the elements identified in the literature on the expectations of international students concerning course content have been confirmed in the interviews (see Table IV). Students expect to be assessed through examinations (Dunkel and Davy, 1989; Ahmad, 2006), receive more practical training and less theory-based teaching and learning (Niehoff *et al.*, 2001) or as one MSc student from the Project Management course put it:

[...] Because the course is accredited by PMI* I thought the course would be more practical than it really is. I studied project management as a provisional certificate before coming here so I thought I would get some practical skills in project management as well [...] (*PMI = Project Management Institute).

While some students expected a fairly more manageable course curriculum, others—particularly those from Africa—expect a higher level of independent learning. In addition to well-organised lectures, practical training and consultancy projects, most participants in this study expect their course content to increase their future career options. This was summed up well by an MSc Purchasing and Supply Management student:

Postgraduation [...] I am proposing to work in a very good organisation [...] probably rise to manager or director level [...] after getting what I intend to get here.

Most of the study participants had high expectations of the qualification and ability of their lecturers to transfer knowledge in an interesting way. Here are some of the statements made by the students in this regard:

[...] I was expecting a very conducive environment to learn and yeah it’s very conducive to learn and academic resources.

Factors identified in the literature and confirmed by interview findings

Course content	Facilities
Increased note-taking	Cutting edge technology
Decreased responsibility for independent learning	Appropriate learning support materials
Theory-based teaching and learning	Good handouts
Assessment of students by examinations	Good social facilities
Well-organised lectures and handouts	High-quality on-campus facilities
Knowledge transmission through textbooks	A conducive environment for studying
Top one-third grades	
More industry exposure	
More practical training	
Teaching style	Classmates
Directed learning regime	Highly intelligent classmates
More interactive style of teaching	Few group activities
More group activities	Classmates who have business backgrounds
More practical training	Classmates who have work experience
Teaching staff	Student-lecturer relationships
Highly qualified and professional lecturers	Formal relationships with lecturers
Lecturers skilled in making the class interesting and intellectually stimulating	Easy access to suitably qualified lecturers
Lecturers who were highly knowledgeable in their fields	Prompt feedback from lecturers on course works
Lecturers with work experience	High levels of empathy from lecturers
Lecturers with good teaching ability	Social life
	To make many friends
	Improve upon English proficiency
	Learn from different people
	Have an entertaining social life

Table IV.
International students'
expectations

The lecturers too I expected the very best of them.

[...] Because the course is accredited by PMI I thought the course would be more practical than it really is. I studied project management as a provisional certificate before coming here so I thought I would get some practical skills in project management as well [...].

This result is consistent with extant literature (e.g. Tricker, 2003; Sherry *et al.*, 2004). With regard to social life, the interviews reveal that international postgraduate students expect to make many local friends and improve their English-language proficiency. As one student put it:

Social life, I had the idea that I am coming to a university to improve my English so I thought I would not see much international students around; I thought I would meet English people so I can speak more English.

In addition, most respondents also expect a fulfilling student social life, although they find it difficult to understand the Scottish accent. Some of them talk about a culture shock and barriers to make friends from different cultural backgrounds. International students also expect to have highly intelligent classmates as confirmed by previous studies (e.g. Ahmad, 2006), but were surprised to find that their classmates were from very varied academic and career backgrounds.

The interviews revealed that most of these students did not expect high-quality facilities before their arrival on site particularly. In fact, they seemed pleasantly surprised at the accessibility and quality of facilities in the business school. We surmised from our candid discussions with the students that these low expectations about the facilities were mainly influenced by the low quality of facilities at their previous home universities. Few students, however, did expect high-quality facilities because of their perception of the university as one of the most modern universities in the UK.

Contrary to previous studies (e.g. East, 2001; Li *et al.*, 2002), most respondents expect to have a very formal relationship and a more directed instead of a relaxed learning regime as typified by the following statements from two interviewees:

[...] well I was thinking as we do in Africa [...] or in my country though it was my first degree though [...] they teach you [...] they explain everything to you and then they give you notes on what has been taught but here they give you a point and then discuss just a point with you and then you have to go and build up on it so [...] it's different.

[...] I thought lecturer - student relationship will be very formal like it is at home [...] And what I admire is that the lecturers come down to student level more or less the same level even though they have a higher qualification [...] You know [...] they still come down to our level and interact with us [...] you can even call them by their first names.

Influencers of international postgraduate students' expectations

The marketing literature points out to a number of factors that influence a customer's expectations prior to experiencing a service. These factors include: word of mouth, image, tangibles, past experiences, advertising, implicit and explicit service promise, personal needs, recommendations, location and appearance of staff (Gronroos, 1984; Webster, 1991; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). In line with what has been previously reported in the literature, it was learnt from the interviews that international students' expectations are largely influenced by word of mouth.

The study participants also acknowledge that the business school's reputation significantly influenced their expectations, with the school's website playing a major part in advertising that reputation and shaping expectations. Other influencing factors include past experiences and recommendations from other people.

Other factors have also emerged during the interviews (see the list below). These are country of origin, personality traits, employability, weather and no expectations.

Emerging factors from interviews:

- (1) Country of origin (first degree).
- (2) Personality traits.
- (3) Employability:
 - increased job prospects; and
 - skills to do well in career.
- (4) Weather (climate).
- (5) No expectations (no idea what to expect).

In spite of the fact that generally most of the study participants had some preconceived ideas before arriving at the business school to start their MSc courses, there were still some who claimed to have no expectations prior to their arrival. For instance, one stated:

Expectations? [...] nah [...] I didn't really have any. I wasn't expecting anything because I have already been to school in the UK so [...].

While another gave a rather surprising answer:

I would have had expectations if I apply to Oxford or Cambridge but here [...] nah nothing to expect [...] yeah [...].

During the interviews the weather emerged as a "hot" discussion point. Although these international students knew where the business school was located, a Scottish region that

sometimes experiences severely cold weather, most said they did not expect the weather to be that bad. Two of the students summed up their shock weather encounter like this:

[...] there were some things I wasn't expecting [...] for instance the weather [...] I got here and the weather is worse than I imagined [...].

[...] the weather, I was warned about the weather but I actually didn't expect it to be this cold so that is something is more of a shock to me [...] the weather is very very terrible here.

Interestingly, this study finds that a major factor that influences the expectations of students from African countries is the economic standing of their country of origin as compared with that of the UK. Additionally, the study identifies personality as an influencing factor in shaping expectation levels. In the words of one student:

For me naturally, I am a pessimistic person [...] I don't know why [...] but I think it influenced my having low expectations because I don't like to be disappointed [...].

Given the centrality of student employability to the UK higher education sector (Artess *et al.*, 2017), it is clear that studying abroad is viewed by international students as a long-term investment with an expected high future return, i.e., career benefits and what they believe foreign degrees will bring them. One student from the International Business course explains this as follows:

When I finished my first degree, it wasn't so good. And my friends were coming here to study and getting good jobs afterwards, so I thought this would be a good place to learn so that I too can get a good job afterwards.

Most participants in this study expect to gain a strong foundation from their UK postgraduate education experience for future career prospects, which is what they believe was promoted to them by the university at the recruitment fairs and reasoned by their recruitment agents. Others expect to gain an employment in a good company in a specific industry such as the oil and gas industry upon graduation. An International Business MSc student explained that:

Being located in the energy capital of Europe and all, I pretty much thought it would be easier getting recruited into the oil and gas industry but I have found recruitment is pretty much the same. It is just as tough and nothing easier.

It is apparent from the foregoing analysis that, despite the fact that UK universities top the study destinations list for international students and are ranked first by them for overall satisfaction (Universities UK, 2017a), an expectations gap on international postgraduate employability does exist and, as explained by Nilsson (2016), it may partly be due to the lack of (mutual) understanding how cultural differences can impact job hunting.

With regard to student satisfaction, it is obvious from the literature review that satisfaction models that take cognisance of customers' expectations prior to a service are deemed superior to models that do not inculcate customers' expectations. The majority of the international students interviewed in this study felt satisfied with their UK university experience as represented by the statements below:

Yeah am satisfied [...] because [...] they have basically addressed all the issues I have raised to them [...] so far I don't have any issues they have not resolved so [...] am satisfied.

I think my expectations have been met. I expected this school to be student-focused and it has been my experience so far [...] so far so good [...].

My expectations have been met [...] I am satisfied [...] I never had complaints. I can't really point out important stuff that would make me discourage people from coming here.

I am positively surprised [...] I am glad that I am here [...] I have learnt a lot [...] so it is a decision I will never regret [...] my expectations have been met [...].

Conclusion and implications

Acknowledging that “the Student is the most important customer of the university” (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009, p. 163), the significance of this study can be seen from two perspectives: theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the findings of this study contribute to a growing understanding of the international postgraduate students’ expectations. This study suggests we should focus on expectation as a key determinant for satisfying the needs of international students. Traditionally the research literature has concentrated on identifying the components of international postgraduate students’ expectations and the factors that influence those expectations. The present study has attempted to fill a vital research gap by exploring the issues around international students’ expectations and how to meet or exceed those expectations. However, future research can overcome some of the limitations of the current study by using larger samples of international students, and examining cultural differences and their impact on students’ expectations.

Practically, investigating international students’ expectations can provide valuable information for university marketers to develop marketing strategies. In order to ensure students are satisfied with services rendered, the university could use findings from this study to manage international students’ expectations to ensure they are met or exceeded.

Finally, it is important to note that what students appear to have in common are the high expectation and the emotional value attached to their postgraduate qualifications. Despite the fact that most of the participants in the current study expressed overall satisfaction in line with their expectations, some did not feel fulfilled when faced with difficulties in finding jobs in the host country. Our study highlights the need for further investigation into international students’ levels of satisfaction, particularly regarding employment opportunities. Given the centrality of employability to higher education, this requires a concerted effort to embed employability in the postgraduate curriculum and ensure that international students are able to make the necessary connection between their chosen courses, employability outcomes and career prospects. How then universities can help international students transition from “studenthood” to “employeehood”, is a further implication of this study’s findings that future research should consider.

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