Student recruitment strategies for students originating from Balkan countries

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AFFIDAVIT

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ABSTRACT

In the age of international student mobility, student recruitment has become a crucial component in the management strategy of universities. Higher education institutions implement different recruitment strategies in order to target the most bright and motivated students and retain them. Nevertheless, it can be seen that the general recruitment strategies do not have the same success in different regions around the world.

This master thesis aims to investigate the need for different recruitment strategies in the Balkan region within the private university sector. The paper compares undergraduate Balkan and Western European students and the link between dimensions such as socio-economic factors, cultural aspects, nationality characteristics, and family background and the decision regarding further education. This decision appears to be different based on the nationality and origin of the student.

In addition, the study shows that there are different stakeholders shaping the Balkan students' decisions regarding their further education. They are strongly influenced by parents, friends and university representatives. Therefore, a personalized relationship with the university representative and the student-centered approach is one of the main factors in the decision-making process. Furthermore, factors such as geographic location, university ranking, and financial background are explored.

The thesis follows a qualitative research approach. Therefore, 31 qualitative semistructured interviews with 16 students, 13 parents, and 2 educational agents have been conducted. Moreover, the author's experience as a recruiter is presented. The students and their parents are a sample group representing Modul University Vienna.

Overall, the master thesis aims to answer the research question whether there any specific recruitment strategies needed for students coming from Balkan countries and how do they differentiate from strategies for Western European countries. The results of the study can be implemented in the universities' management strategy, which are specifically targeting students from the Balkan regions and developing these emerging markets.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background information

International student mobility is rapidly expanding, leading to globalization and new migration patterns. According to QS (2017) the OECD foresees that by 2025, eight million students will study abroad. Nonetheless, student mobility and the demographic distribution of these students looking for an international experience are regularly reshaped.

In addition, it is an undeniable fact that higher education plays a crucial role in the social life of countries nowadays than it did in the past. Higher education is vital for the economic development of countries, public health, and social wellbeing. Therefore, governments focus more on higher education due to its essential role in economic and social development (QS, 2017). It is a fact that the workforce in higher education has also changed. If, in the past, academic professionals were the key stakeholders in higher education, these days, administration, management, marketing, and recruitment play a vital role as well. This is with regards to internationalization, digitalization, and the developing of institutional functions in the Higher Education sector.

In the light of globalization and international opportunities, one important aim of this thesis is to investigate the development of the Balkan countries. Zgaga, Klemencic, & Komljjenovic (2013) argue that conflicts, the successive reconstruction of societies and delayed economic and institutional transition influenced higher education in the Balkan countries in the past years. However, Balkan countries were willing to follow the European example and refer to successful cases of other countries, copying reformation ideas from abroad and policy solutions in order to ensure the future and the post- conflict recovery. Western European practices and systems served as a role model to Balkan countries, as well as the belief that following the Western example will lead to reestablishing the post- conflict society and economy. Furthermore, after signing the Bologna process, the European Commission initiated the flow of students from the Balkan countries who spend one semester abroad or pursue higher education in a foreign country. This initiative aimed to encourage the mobility between students from the Balkan countries with the students from the European Union (Bosnjovic & Trivun, 2013). Since then, student

mobility in the Balkan region has inevitably grown in the past couple of years. As the number of students going abroad to obtain a higher education degree increases, the Balkan region is becoming a potentially interesting market for higher education institutions. However, studies show that students' decisions are based on various background factors such as the countries' social, economic, and culture characteristics. For universities to be successful and their recruitment and marketing strategies, they need to investigate the factors based on which students make decisions when it comes to their higher education. In this way institutions can tailor their recruitment and marketing strategies to increase the enrollment of Balkan students in their universities.

Based on higher education´s importance, it can be seen that the private higher education scene is very competitive, and universities are trying to stay on top of their recruitment and marketing strategies. Universities are facing fierce competition in attracting new students as the number of tertiary- level education options have increased tremendously (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014). According to the QS (2019), a prospective student will apply to four universities on average, resulting in fierce competition during the decision-making process. Obtaining more information about the current international students can lead to finding out more about the prospective students and respectively build the right student profiles. This would inevitably lead to better recruitment strategies and higher conversion rates. Understanding who the target students and the factors that trigger their decisions are, can inevitably lead to a long-lasting relationship. Providing the student with a positive student journey from the moment they identified the university until enrollment is crucial in the application process.

1.2   Research question

Taking these important factors into consideration, this master thesis aims to identify the differences between Balkan students and Western European students and to evaluate whether there is a need for specific recruitment strategies in the Balkan countries compared to Western European countries. This assumption is based on the author´s experience as a recruiter, as well as on secondary research. The differences between the two regions can be seen in destination and institution choice, study motivations, and external

influence during the decision- making process. The research leads to a better understanding of the student profiles and motivations, thus creating successful recruitment strategies.

In order to follow the assumption that there is a need for a different approach for recruiting Balkan students, semistructured interviews were conducted. Balkan and Western European students were interviewed with the aim of differentiating these two groups. Different topics such as study motivation, destination choice, main sources of influence, first point of contact, COVID-19 concerns were covered. In the pursuance of a better understanding of this segment group, the participants were guided through a standardized student journey which includes the following four phases:

- Pre-decision phase
- First point of contact
- Decision-making phase
- Post decision phase

In the pre- decision phase prospects search for the future study destination, universities, programs that are offered, and career opportunities after graduation. This is the phase where they evaluate various of options through different modes- physical, online, recommendations and word of mouth.

This phase is followed by the first point of contact with the desired institution. Students find out a university that matches their interests, and they show interest in what the university offers. This is the phase where students show a sign of engagement. The first point of contact can be from various channels- meeting with a university representative at a fair, researching online, clicking on an ad, attending a virtual event, talking to a current student and many more (Patel, 2020).

In the third phase, decision- making, the student is in an active engagement with university representatives- recruiters, admissions officers, current students, alumni. This is the phase where the potential students evaluate the different options they have and try to collect as much information for their decision as possible. This is a crucial point where the university has to provide a tailored student-centered approach.

In the last post- decision phase, the student has already made the decision about the future university and evaluates the overall student journey experience form the moment he/she found out about the institution to the moment of enrollment.

In addition, the literature highlights student mobility trends and student recruitment strategies and activities. Moreover, a comparison between the factors shaping students' decisions in Balkan and Western European regions is provided. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the different stakeholders involved in the decisions making process, as well explanation of student personas and successful student journeys.

1.3   Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured along five sections starting with an introduction to the topic, reviewing of existing literature on student mobility patterns in Balkan and Western European countries, the European Higher Education Area, and the Bologna process. In addition, the literature focuses on student recruitment, student journey to enrollment, student personas and sources of influence. It concludes with a comparison between Balkan and Western European students evaluating various factors such as study motivations, sources of influence, preferred study disciplines and industries, and top study destinations.

The methodology gives an overview of the research approach, demonstrating the research methods used to collect the necessary data, the sampling, and the research ethics. Chapter 4 introduces the results of the study demonstrating the comparison between Balkan and Western European students and parents. In addition, the chapter presents the results from the interviews with the Balkan agents.

The final chapter includes the conclusion, recommendations for adapting the recruitment strategies of universities that would like to recruit students from the Balkan countries, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The literature review investigates global student mobility trends in order to better understand the importance of recruitment strategies. In addition, it explores the reforms, developments, and trends in higher education in Balkan countries and compares the student mobility patterns among Western European and Eastern European students. Moreover, it provides a definition for a student recruitment and lists recruitment strategies and activities. Lastly, the different stages in the student journey and the importance of student personas are presented.

2.2 Student Mobility

Universities build their political, cultural, social, and economic relationships based on various factors such as student and staff mobility, research cooperations, and exchange programs for students and faculty. It is undeniable fact that fostering collaborations between different countries will lead to understanding of cultural differences, thus leading to stability and progress. Higher education and research play a crucial role in encouraging the collaboration between the members of the European Union and its neighbors (European Universities Association, n.d.).

According to the UNESCO (2019, p.97) "The internalization of higher education concerns more countries than ever and has major implications for the flow and exchange of ideas and knowledge."

International student mobility influences moving students and faculty, programs and courses, institutions, and education at home and abroad. Referring to UNESCO (2019), most international students seek higher education in English- speaking countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. However, it can be seen that there is an increase of international students in non-English speaking countries such as Germany and France because of the growing number of study programs offered in English. Altogether, Europe holds second place for sending students abroad;

however, 23% of the total European students in 2016 decided to seek further education within the region.

The main factors determining students' education choices are the availability of universities in the home country, finances and affordability, and quality of education. In addition, an essential factor is the job opportunities in the preferred country after graduation. The most compelling evidence of this trend is that international student numbers in the United Kingdom significantly dropped after changing policies concerning work visas after graduation. Consequently, international student numbers grew crucially in Australia and the United States as these countries provide job opportunities after graduation. Furthermore, Germany, for example, tries to keep their international students to fill the labor market (UNESCO, 2019).

A report by the British Council (2018) suggests that student mobility is mainly determined by demographic and economic changes. These changes are crucial for internationalization, mobility, recruitment, and enrollments. Referring to the economic changes, factors such as national growth, wealth distribution and household income are of key importance. According to Dr. Rahul Choudaha, Executive Vice President of Global Engagement and Research at StudyPortals "The international higher education sector, over the next 10-20 years, will grow, but look different in terms of its offerings and students. (QS, 2017, p.5). "

Equally important is that higher institutions reach students from all around the world through their online courses. In addition, branch campuses, cross-border programs, exchange programs enable the empowerment of international education. In order to increase student mobility, institutions take part in different corporations and agreements such as credit transfers, strategic partnerships, exchange programs, dual degrees. Furthermore, countries tend to have common degree standards, quality assurance, and qualification recognition which led to establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010 (UNESCO, 2019).

2.2.1 The European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aims to give the opportunity to students, teachers, administrative staff, and researches to freely study or gain experience abroad based on equally accredited and quality assured study programs (Federal Ministry Republic of Austria, n.d.).

"It is a unique international collaboration on higher education and the result of the political will of 48 countries with different political, cultural and academic traditions, which, step by step during the last twenty years, built an area implementing a common set of commitments: structural reforms and shared tools. (EHEA, n.d. p.1) "

These 49 countries share common values such as freedom of speech, free movement of students and academic staff, independence for institutions, student unions, and academic freedom. However, all these countries need to adapt their systems in order to ensure quality assurance and make them more compatible. The EHEA collaboration aims to enlarge student and staff mobility across countries.

One interesting fact is that countries participate on voluntary basis, accepting that they will reform their national higher education systems based on EHEA requirements and guidelines. Therefore, EHEA does not only stand for three cycle education such as Bachelor, Master, Doctoral, but also improving the quality of teaching, the recognition of achievements while studying, as well as recognition of nationally and internationally acquired degrees (Federal Ministry Republic of Austria, n.d.).

2.2.2   The Bologna Process

Since the introduction of the Erasmus program 30 years ago, the need for more structured collaboration between the higher education institutions, governments, and different stakeholders increased. As student mobility rapidly grew over the years, governments and policymakers concluded that it is challenging to evaluate the various study programs across different countries and regions (European Comission, n.d.).

Henceforth, the Bologna process, launched in 1998-1999, was established by the national governments of 48 European countries in order to foster cooperation and tackle the

challenges related to student mobility in higher education. The Bologna process aims to make higher education more accessible and comprehensive, enhance the quality of European higher education and foster the exchange and cooperation opportunities between countries. All countries part of the European Higher Education Area agreed to the following requirements:

- Incorporate a three-level education: Bachelor, Master, Doctoral
- Acknowledge and accept qualifications and study periods completed in other universities
- Apply a system for the quality of assurance to ensure the quality of education
- Transferable credits from one institution to another and the ability to continue the education in another university

The development of the Bologna process is impressive, having 47 countries participating by 2012. The implementation report (EACEA/Eurydice, 2012) presents that the implementation of the three- cycle degree is the most significant accomplishment of the process. Another key evident of the successful implementation are the European Credit Transfer (ECTS), the diploma supplement, the European Quality Assurance, and the increased student mobility (Crosier & Pavreva, 2013).

In addition, the ministries of these 48 countries embraced the Paris Communique focusing on activities with high priority in the upcoming years. The Paris Communique prioritizes innovative approach in learning and teaching, consolidated collaboration between higher education, research, and innovation, and implementing sustainability in the future. Furthermore, the Paris Communique focuses on the need for support in countries that are underrepresented or at risk. These priorities are in line with the European Union and aim to create a European Education Area by 2025. The European Education Area unlike the Bologna Process is limited to European Union member countries and focuses on different aspects such as gender equality, green and sustainable transformations, student mobility, recognition of qualifications, and quality and inclusiveness of national education systems among the European Union Member states (European Commission, n.d).

According to Crosier & Pavreva (2013), the Bologna process had impact not only on the European education, but globally. For instance, in Latin America, the Inter- American

Organization for Higher Education introduced a program aiming to create a Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area. Likewise, in Southeast Asia the Ministers of Education initiate to create a common study framework based on the Bologna process. Furthermore, in West Africa, fifteen countries agreed to promote student mobility and internalization. Another key evidence is the attempt of CIS countries to adapt their university standards with the universities in the West.

The examples provided above show the importance of the Bologna process in reforming higher education not only in Europe, but on a global scale. Undoubtedly, the internalization and the common framework for higher education institutions has many advantages. Nowadays, institutors and policy makers realize the crucial important of international mobility of students, researchers, and workers.

2.3 Reforms, developments, and trends in higher education in Balkan countries

2.3.1 Reformation waves

There are three important reformation waves that shaped higher education in the Balkan region presented by Zgaga, Klemencic & Komljenovic (2013). To begin with, the first wave was the transition where the non- budget or self- paying students and the budget-funded students were presented to public universities. In addition, private universities were legally permitted in some Balkan countries. However, this general framework was continually challenged by the political and economic conditions of the Balkan countries. The second wave of transformation was with regards to signing the Bologna process where the efforts were directed towards the "reintegration into Europe". The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) laid out a conceptual framework for modernization of higher education, which was lacking before in the Balkan countries. This was the foundation for developing cooperation between institutions, updating the governance policies and study curriculums. The third wave was the political pressure and the problems in the policy making processes after more revisions were adopted by the Balkan countries. The gap between the new changes because of the Bologna process and the old system was

increasing. The governments had the urge to change the previous liberal legislation which led to stagnation influencing the long- term goals and regional interpretations of the Bologna process. It is an interesting fact that the Bologna process is seen as a mandatory adjustment in order to achieve the political project. Nonetheless, the ministries understood the important role of higher education on a national and global level.

Zgaga et al. (2013) state that Balkan governments and policy makers believe that higher education leads to economic development. They see the urge to increase graduate employability where graduates gain specific skills that would allow them to find jobs. In addition, other policy reformations are the increased collaboration with the industry, promoting excellence of education, research projects, and improving innovation. Another interesting fact is that Balkan countries believe that higher education is one of the main drivers of the economy, however the research reveals that Balkan countries that had serious political conflicts, higher education was seen more as a tool to re-establish the society rather than as an economic driver (Zgaga et al. 2013).

Furthermore, in contrast to Western Europe where internalisation is seen as an important tool for developing the economies, internalization in Balkan countries is seen as a tool to "support national reforms" and in "institutional capacity building". (Zgaga et al. 2013, p.40). The internalisation activities in the Balkan region have been financed by different European organisations and programmes. "The term internalisation has been often used parallel to harmonisation, and modernisation of higher education. (Zgaga et al. 2013, p. 61)."

Research results from Besic (2009) show that in 2009 a very low percentage of Balkan students had experience in studying abroad. The reason behind this was the lack of facilities and information about opportunities abroad, lack of support and encouragement by the local intuitions, and difficulties with obtaining visa. In addition, the research shows that there was a lack of information regarding scholarships and financial aid provided by the European union. Furthermore, mobility opportunities, exchange semester were not introduced to Balkan students, staff, professors, and researchers. This could be one of the reasons, why the idea of pursing education abroad was implemented at a later stage in this region. Another issue was the long administrative processes, and the financial insecurities which were concerning the students. Interestingly, in the past the idea of studying abroad led to anxieties and doubts about the fact that students will be far away from their

families and friends. Frequently, Balkan students were also worried about the academic qualifications, specifically the concern that their international degrees will not be recognized in their home country. Another key worry among Balkan students was about the social integration in the foreign country and keeping up with the high academic requirements. Besic (2009), concludes that before 2009 the gap between the Balkan students willing to study abroad and the ones that managed to do it is crucial.

2.3.2 Student mobility patterns in the Balkan countries

It is crucial to understand the immigration patterns in the Balkan countries. These patterns are based on searching for a better quality of life and career opportunities. In this thesis, when referring to Balkan countries, four countries are considered- Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. Using UNESCO Global Flow of Tertiary- Level Students data tool on the mobility of students, it is possible to see a shifting demand for higher education among Balkan students (UNESCO, Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students, n.d.).

To begin with, as it can be seen in Figure 1, there are 18,181 total Albanian students abroad. The top country is Italy, with 10,267 Albanian students, followed by Greece (1,297) and Germany (1,105). Thus, there is a significant gap between the first and the second country of choice.

Albania

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Italy	705	Italy	10,267	Students abroad:	
Serbia	219	Greece	1,297	Total number of mobile students abroad	18,181
Montenegro	206	Germany	1,105	(% of total mobile students)	0.3
Greece	199	Turkey	1,084	Outbound mobility ratio	13.8
North Macedonia	131	United States	910	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
Turkey	97	Ecuador	614	Students hosted:	
Bulgaria	n	France	547	Total number of mobile students hosted	2,244
Algeria	n	Austria	402	(% of total mobile students)	0.0
Angola	n	Romania	349	Inbound mobility rate	1.6
Benin	n	United Kingdom	290		

FIGURE 1: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS ALBANIA (SOURCE: UNESCO)

Romania is the leading country having most mobile students abroad. As Figure 2 shows, similarly to Albania, Italy (9,607) is taking first place in the ranking, followed by the United Kingdom (8,642) and Germany (2,649). However, in contrast to Albania, there is

no significant gap between the first two countries of choice. The total number of Romanian mobile students abroad is 37 534, more than two times more than in Albania.

Romania

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Republic of Moldova	9,223	Italy	9,607	Students abroad:	
Israel	3,184	United Kingdom	8,642	Total number of mobile students abroad	37,534
France	2,350	Germany	2,649	(% of total mobile students)	0.7
Italy	1,652	France	2,574	Outbound mobility ratio	7.0
Germany	1,296	Netherlands	2,389	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
Tunisia	1,152	Hungary	2,141	Students hosted:	
Morocco	999	Denmark	1,992	Total number of mobile students hosted	29,112
Greece	876	Republic of Moldova	1,989	(% of total mobile students)	0.5
Serbia	766	Austria	1,214	Inbound mobility rate	5.4
Hungary	614	Spain	1,086		

FIGURE 2: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS ROMANIA (SOURCE: UNESCO)

The second country with the most students abroad after Romania is Bulgaria, having 25,093 mobile students abroad. The top country where most of the Bulgarian students go to is Germany (6,435), followed by United Kingdom (6,307) and the Netherlands (2,592). See Figure 3.

Bulgaria

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Greece	3,792	Germany	6,435	Students abroad:	
United Kingdom	2,094	United Kingdom	6,037	Total number of mobile students abroad	25,093
Turkey	1,592	Netherlands	2,592	(% of total mobile students)	0.5
Germany	1,253	Turkey	2,510	Outbound mobility ratio	10.6
Ukraine	850	Austria	1,500	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
North Macedonia	751	Denmark	982	Students hosted:	
Serbia	593	France	970	Total number of mobile students hosted	15,155
Italy	499	Italy	919	(% of total mobile students)	0.3
Cyprus	312	United States	730	Inbound mobility rate	6.4
Russian Federation	309	Greece	314		

FIGURE 3: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS BULGARIA (SOURCE: UNESCO)

The country with the minor student abroad is Serbia having 15,749 mobile students, shown in Figure 4. For Serbian students, Austria (2,295) holds first place, followed by Hungary (1,931) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1,604)

Serbia

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Bosnia/Herzegovina	6,189	Austria	2,295	Students abroad:	
Montenegro	2,987	Hungary	1,931	Total number of mobile students abroad	15,749
Croatia	545	Bosnia/Herzegovina	1,604	(% of total mobile students)	0.3
Libya	226	United States	1,105	Outbound mobility ratio	6.2
North Macedonia	139	Italy	1,026	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
Russian Federation	130	Germany	932	Students hosted:	
Slovenia	104	Romania	766	Total number of mobile students hosted	11,505
Greece	101	Turkey	756	(% of total mobile students)	0.2
Germany	62	Slovakia	742	Inbound mobility rate	4.6
Hungary	62	Bulgaria	593		

FIGURE 4: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS SERBIA (SOURCE: UNESCO)

As seen above, student mobility in the Balkan countries is emerging, where thousands of students are looking for education abroad. It is important to realize that international student mobility is one of the main triggers for higher institutions' revenues. That is why institutions are progressively focusing on the internalization and diversity of their student body. According to UNESCO (2019), some countries believe that international student mobility enhances cultural diplomacy and development aid. Moreover, universities recruit international students to have a diverse student body, support the country's development plans, and enhance their university rankings. However, the main goal of internationalization is income-raising. It is said that in 2016 international students brought US$39.4 billion approximately to the US economy (UNESCO, 2019).

2.3.3 Student mobility patterns in the Western European countries

It is important to understand the difference between Balkan students and Western European students. Using UNESCO Global Flow of Tertiary- Level Students tool, some Western- European countries and their mobility patterns are presented. The countries shown are Austria, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The decision for these particular countries is based on where the participants in the interviews come from.

To begin with, as it can be seen in Figure 5, the total number of students abroad is 21, 514, where 12, 549 students go to Germany, 1, 943 to the United Kingdom and 1, 476 to Switzerland. There is a significant difference between the top country and the following two.

Austria

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Germany	28,932	Germany	12,549	Students abroad:	
Italy	8,809	United Kingdom	1,943	Total number of mobile students abroad	21,514
Bosnia/Herzegovina	3,139	Switzerland	1,476	(% of total mobile students)	0.4
Serbia	2,295	United States	845	Outbound mobility ratio	5.0
Hungary	2,246	Netherlands	680	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
Turkey	2,220	Turkey	419	Students hosted:	
Bulgaria	1,500	France	318	Total number of mobile students hosted	75,259
Iran, Islamic Rep.	1,483	Liechtenstein	309	(% of total mobile students)	1.4
Russian Federation	1,447	Australia	285	Inbound mobility rate	17.5
Ukraine	1,426	Italy	236		

FIGURE 5: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS AUSTRIA (SOURCE: UNESCO)

As can be seen on Figure 6, the majority of French students that would like to study abroad go to Canada (17,030), followed by Belgium (14,885) and the United Kingdom (13, 265). In contrast to Austria, the differences between the three top countries are not significant. The total amount of mobile students abroad is more than four times in comparison to the total amount of Austrian mobile students.

France

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Morocco	28,431	Canada	17,030	Students abroad:	
Algeria	24,094	Belgium	14,885	Total number of mobile students abroad	99,488
China	23,494	United Kingdom	13,265	(% of total mobile students)	1.8
Tunisia	9,499	Switzerland	10,447	Outbound mobility ratio	3.8
Senegal	8,898	Germany	8,605	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
Italy	7,479	Spain	8,220	Students hosted:	
Côte d'Ivoire	5,835	United States	6,324	Total number of mobile students hosted	229,623
Lebanon	4,468	Netherlands	2,426	(% of total mobile students)	4.1
Cameroon	4,214	Romania	2,350	Inbound mobility rate	8.8
Viet Nam	4,093	Italy	1,797		

FIGURE 6: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS FRANCE (SOURCE: UNESCO)

Germany holds the top place with 122, 538 total number of mobile students abroad. Interestingly, it can be seen that most of the students go to Austria (28,932), followed by the Netherland (22, 598) and the United Kingdom (13, 067). Please refer to Figure 7.

Germany

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
China	30,023	Austria	28,932	Students abroad:	
India	15,473	Netherlands	22,598	Total number of mobile students abroad	122,538
Austria	12,549	United Kingdom	13,067	(% of total mobile students)	2.2
Russian Federation	10,121	Switzerland	10,996	Outbound mobility ratio	3.9
France	8,605	United States	7,040	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
Syrian Arab Republic	8,122	France	4,052	Students hosted:	
Italy	8,056	Turkey	4,019	Total number of mobile students hosted	311,738
Turkey	7,625	Denmark	3,578	(% of total mobile students)	5.6
Cameroon	7,373	Hungary	3,258	Inbound mobility rate	10.0
United States	7,293	Sweden	1,950		

FIGURE 7: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS GERMANY (SOURCE: UNESCO)

Lastly, in comparison to the other Western- European countries Switzerland sends least students abroad having 16, 470 total mobility students. Their top choice is Germany (4, 724), followed by the United Kingdom (3,718) and the United States (1,188) as shown in Figure 8.

Switzerland

Country of origin		Destination country		Key Indicators	
Germany	10,996	Germany	4,724	Students abroad:	
France	10,447	United Kingdom	3,718	Total number of mobile students abroad	16,470
Italy	5,584	United States	1,188	(% of total mobile students)	0.3
China	1,902	France	1,089	Outbound mobility ratio	5.4
Austria	1,476	Austria	1,021	Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...
United States	1,154	Italy	854	Students hosted:	
Spain	1,091	Netherlands	465	Total number of mobile students hosted	54,279
Russian Federation	934	Canada	401	(% of total mobile students)	1.0
Liechtenstein	811	Spain	377	Inbound mobility rate	17.7

FIGURE 8: UNESCO GLOBAL FLOW OF TERTIARY- LEVEL STUDENTS SWITZERLAND (SOURCE: UNESCO)

As stated, by the UNESCO (2019), 10% of natives and 19% of foreign- born people aged 18 to 24 in the European Union left school in 2017. In other words, immigrants usually start their education abroad at a very young age. The reports states that the education status of these immigrants improves significantly in comparison to natives of the host country. For instance, comparing an immigrant in Germany to a native coming from a family background with below average education, the first one progresses more quickly in education.

In conclusion, according to the UNESCO (2019), half of all international students move to five English- speaking countries- Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. As shown in the results, the United Kingdom is among the

top three destinations choices among Balkan and Western European students. In addition, report depicts that France experiences 8% increase in international students, followed by Germany with 6%. The reason for that is that the programs they offer in English grow. With this in mind, it is important to understand the reasons behind student mobility. As reported by UNESCO (2019), some of the main factors which determine students' decisions where to continue with their further education are the availability of places and quality of education in the home country, the financial ability to study abroad and the opportunities after graduation.

2.4   Student recruitment

Student mobility is growing rapidly, thus competition between universities to attract the best qualified students is increasing correspondingly. Nowadays the traditional recruitment and marketing ways of communication are changing rapidly. There are various channels of communication available to prospects, increased influence by different stakeholders and the desire to have prompt, reliable and personalized approach (Johnston, 2010). It is a fact that the growing competition between universities is changing student's life. In comparison to the past where universities were promoting actively shortly before the start of the academic year, these days, the marketing, and recruitment activities are ongoing and constant (the Economist, 2017). Universities compete for prospective students as this is the biggest revenue generator. According to David Willets, governments believe that the competition between institutions would lead to increasing the accessibility to higher education and raising academic standards (the Economist, 2017). In addition, in the last decades, universities are not only competing when it comes to students, but also competing for professors and budgets. Growing competition among universities lead to adopting competitive strategies and behaviors (Musselin, 2018). Moreover, Forbes (2010) declares that competition is important for universities as it boost the generation of new ideas and providing best quality service to the students. In this way universities keep track of the emerging trends and the teaching quality they provide.

Considering the fact that recruitment strategies are crucial for attracting prospective students and gaining competitive advantage, it is important to understand the definition of student recruitment.

Student recruitment consists of different marketing and recruitment strategies carried out by educational institutions in order to attract, convert and retain potential students. The main goal of student recruitment is to search for bright prospective students and encourage them to apply and enroll in any of the programs offered by the represented institution. In other words, recruiters aim to convince prospective students of the benefits of enrolling at their institution. Successful student recruitment determines the profitability of the organization, as well as the student journey (Vargas, 2021). This thesis focuses specifically on student recruitment in private universities.

According to UniBuddy (2020) attracting students nowadays is more than difficult than ever taken the fact the competition among universities. Therefore, institutions need to implement different strategies in order to attract and retain the students they are targeting. There are different approaches that can be adopted.

- Physical and Virtual events: The goal of these events is to connect the university representative with the potential candidate- this is where relationships are built. In the past years, most of the events were in a physical form, however nowadays due to the COVID- 19 pandemic the virtual events were introduced. Virtual events replace many of the physical events due to the advantage of reaching more people within one event and markets that are further away Unibuddy (2020).

- Student- generated content: According to Trend (2019), 70% of the students trust recommendations and reviews from current students rather than professionals or administrative staff. In addition, nowadays students trust more the content that comes from current students than the professional social media profiles of the institution. In this way, universities need to focus on the overall satisfaction of their current students. Thus, their own students provide content which can engage prospective students. One way to do that is by writing blogs.

- Student Ambassadors: The student ambassadors act as a link between the institution and the outside world. They share their experience at the university and serve as the best brand ambassadors. For example, Stuip (2019) shares that Erasmus School of Economics discovered that 90% of the accepted students are likely to enroll in the university after being connected with student ambassadors.

- Visiting high schools: visiting high schools is one of the main recruitment activities. This is considered to be the best way to attract and bond with prospective students. Universities can target high schools that fit their profile. For example, a university that offers programs in English can target an international high school teaching in English. This not only creates a relationship with the students, but also with the high school counselors who play a crucial role in the decision- making process of students. By having a strong relationship with the university, the high school counselor can refer students to the institution on a regular basis (Patel, 2020).

- Marketing and social media campaigns: according to Tattersfield (n.d), a strong and consistent social media presence is crucial for universities nowadays. This can be achieved by informative, consistent and encouraging content that can attract students to make an enquiry. In addition, it is very important for universities to have an optimized SEO, optimized website and landing pages. In addition, nowadays videos are one of the most interactive ways to attract students. Therefore, universities´ need to focus on creating videos that maintain student´s attention and trigger them to make an enquiry. (Patel, 2020)

Furthermore, the author depicts the main recruitment online and offline recruitment activities based on her experience.

- Planning recruitment and marketing strategies
- Lead management
  - Online lead collection: website, portals, virtual fairs, webinars, platforms
  - Offline lead collection: fairs, school visits, inhouse events, external events

- Guiding and supporting the applicants throughout the application process
- Website updates
- E-mailing
- Social media input
- Support in getting a visa, residence permit, student welcoming, housing, internships, orientation week for accepted students, inhouse events
- Print and digital material, merchandise
- Communication with prospective applicants and personal follow-ups
- Fairs, school visits, conferences, webinars, inhouse events, external events, university tours

In addition, Sigler (2018) argues that in order for recruitment activities to be successful recruiters should have specific targets for success that can be tracked. For example, if a university organizes an Open Day, the recruitment team needs to set a number of students that have to participate in the event. This number has to justify the expenses and the time of the event. It is crucial for institutions to monitor these target numbers and to use metrics to quantitively measure success.

Referring to the recruiter, the main goal of this representative is to provide support and guidance and build long- lasting relationships with the students throughout the student journey. The recruiter is mainly involved in the process from the moment the student finds out about the institution to enrollment. However, some recruiters provide a 360-degree student journey where the recruiter acts as a student journey advisor and the relationship between student- recruiter lasts until graduation. Gyure & Arnold (2001) argue that the recruiter aims to lay the early phase foundation of the relationship between the prospective students, his/her family and the university and to convince the potential candidates to choose the specific institution. This usually happens during recruitment events, fairs, presentations, and the admission interviews. However, equally important to these persuasive techniques is that recruiters acknowledge whether the student is a "fit" for the university. Recognizing this, leads to satisfied students in the long- term, thus building long- lasting relationships.

Another interesting factor presented by Beckwith (2000) cited in Gyure & Arnold (2001) is the importance of sincere enthusiasm and passion about the organization while

presenting it to prospective applicants. According to him, this enthusiasm attracts and keeps customers. Additionally, honesty and creativity how to present the institution in an innovate and creative way.

Another important factor in the recruitment strategies is building long- lasting relationships with the students. According to Gyure & Arnold (2001, p.38), "Relationship marketing involves creating, maintaining, and enhancing strong relationships with customers and other stakeholders." Nowadays marketing is focusing on building long- lasting relationships with the customers. For this approach the long- term is more important than the short- term individual transactions. The measure of success of these activities is a long-term customer satisfaction. When an organization uses relationship marketing all departments need to be involved in the customer journey (Kotler and Armstrong, 1996, as cited in Gyure & Arnold 2001).

Another important definition is enrollment engagement provided by Hossler (1984), cited in Gyure & Arnold (2001, p.39), where the author explains that ''Enrollment management influences the size, the shape, and the characteristics of a student body by directing institutional efforts in marketing, recruitment, and admissions as well as pricing and financial aid. It is not simply an administrative process. Enrollment management involves the entire campus." Furthermore, the aim of enrollment management is to keep students once they enroll and decrease the dropout levels.

Furthermore, it is an undeniable fact that higher education started looking more to the service industry nowadays in comparison to the past years. Universities put more emphasis on the service management, trying to meet students´ needs and expectations. Student satisfaction is one of main goals of universities. Grossman (1999) cited in Eliott & Healy (2001) believes that trust is one of the crucial factors based on which students have positive experiences. Consequently, building trustworthy relationships and meeting applicants´ expectations would inevitably lead positive overall student journey. Thus, retaining current students who are willing to recommend the university to their network is another recruitment tool.

Furthermore, according to in Gyure & Arnold (2001), institutions need to adapt the "Service Concept". This concept aims to develop service- centered approach. Choosing a

university is a crucial point in young individual´s lives, therefore anxiety can arise among them. By providing student- centered service, accurate and valuable information, and supporting the students throughout their student journey to enrollment, recruiters can lay the foundation of the long- term relationships.

Therefore, student recruitment plays a crucial role in the management strategies of private universities due to the fact that recruiters attract the best- qualified candidates which correspondingly leads to higher revenues.

2.4.1   Factors in the decision- making process

In order for the recruitment strategies to be successful, university recruiters need to understand and examine the process that students are going through from the moment they start looking for universities to the moment when the applicant becomes a student. This process is also called a customer journey. There are various factors that influence students´ decisions during their student journey. In order to fully understand student´s decisions, it is important for universities to understand the factors that they take into consideration.

Becker & Kolster (2012) present two approaches when it comes to the student journey. The first one focuses on the decision- making process and the second on the reasons based on which students decide to study abroad. The decision- making process consists of different stages where students collect information, analyze, compare, and decide. Individuals can have different stages in their student journey, however Becker and & Kolster (2012) believe that the Chen´s synthesis model has most credibility. This model consists of three main stages:

- Disposition phase where students evaluate their preferences and needs, make the decision to study abroad and start their research.

- Exploration and Application phase where students investigate different universities, study programs and locations, compare them, select the best ones, and submit one or more applications.

- Decision phase which is after the student has been accepted in the preferred institution. Now the student has to decide in which university to enroll and once more compare the different options in terms of study costs, location, accommodation, program, etc.

On the other hand, it is important to analyze the approach regarding the study motivations why students decide to study abroad. Becker and & Kolster (2012) outline three "student choice" models presented by Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper (1999) which illustrate the factors that influence students´ decisions. The main difference between the models is that they focus on different factors:

- Sociological models – focusing on intrinsic factors such as personal development with regards to acquiring academic knowledge and skills, gaining knowledge in the field of interest, and mental and personal growth

- Economic models – focusing on extrinsic factors such as economic benefit of the education with regards to job opportunities, prestige, and higher status

- Information- processing models– combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors

2.4.1.1   Push and Pull Theory

Nonetheless, there are many more factors that student take into consideration in the decision- making process. However, according to Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), there are two forces that influence students´ decisions in regard to their further education. The authors present the push and pull theory which states that there are push and pull factors that trigger students. The push factors are based on the home country, and they initiate the idea of studying abroad. Push factors can be divided into personal and environmental. The personal push factors consist of intrinsic motivation, personal preferences and needs, talents, and career aspirations. Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), argue that there are six main

personal push factors when choosing a destination to study abroad. The first factor is the knowledge about the host country. The more knowledge students have, the better chances to choose the specific country. Obtaining information easily, the reputation and quality of the destination play crucial role in student´s decisions. The second most important factor are the personal recommendations from parents, friends, relatives in regard to the host country. In addition, another important factor is finance, whether the desired study destination is affordable, the study fees, the cost of living, the ability to work part- time while studying. Furthermore, another factor is the environment in terms of lifestyle, mentality, and climate. The fifth factor is destination proximity, in other words the desired country should be close to the home country. The final factor is social links, referring to whether there are any relatives who live or have lived in the desired country.

On the contrary, the environmental factors are for example economic or social. For example, one environmental factor why Balkan students pursue education abroad is because of the unstable economic situation in their countries. Becker and & Kolster (2012) argue that students evaluate whether the domestic degree would have the same value as the one from a university abroad. Most of the students believe that having an international degree have more benefits on the domestic market. Other factors are the demographic, economic, social, political which whether they perform low or high can have an influence on students´ decisions. For instance, if the economic and political situation in the home country are poor this inevitably leads to the desire for better opportunities abroad. In contrast, if the home country has a good and stable economic and political scene, thus the students will have more financial opportunities to experience student life abroad. Furthermore, another factor could be the poor reputation, low quality of universities in the home country and the unavailability or difficulty to access higher education.

On the other hand, the pull factors are based on the host country making the preferred destination appealing to choose for international students. For instance, international students choose Germany because of the career opportunities after graduation and the good quality of life. Consequently, if there are not many push factors in the home country, the number of students looking for education abroad would be relatively low. One of the main pull factors is the availability of information and recruitment and marketing activities in the desired destination. In addition, the quality of life in the country, the reputation, the safety. Furthermore, the recognition of study credits and the degree are of significant

importance which is a compelling evidence that the Bologna process is highly important in higher education. Another factor is the internationalization of the country- whether it welcomes foreigners, whether there are many international students, and the availability of international programs.

Therefore, universities need to fully understand the customer journey stages that students go through. These stages can be identified with customer journey maps.

2.4.2 Mapping the student journey to enrolment

There are two important phases in the student journey to enrollment. The first is pre-applicant stage where recruitment and marketing strategies are of significant importance- attracting potential students, converting them into leads and ideally ending the cycle with an application. From this moment on, the second stage starts once the applicant submits the application. In this stage there are different parties involved such as admissions team, deans, recruiters, current students, lecturers. In order to provide quality assurance, the Admissions team possibly in a cooperation with the Deans evaluates the applicants based on the specific university requirements and make the final decision. However, university recruiters acting as students' advisors are involved in this stage by making sure that the applicant completes the full cycle to enrollment. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that in some institutions university recruiters are as well qualified admissions officers, therefore they take the responsibility of the admissions decisions. In this case the university representative acts as a 360- degree student journey advisor from the moment of interest, through the admissions procedures, ending with enrollment in the study program.

2.4.2.1 Customer journey maps

Another important tool to track the student journey are the customer journey maps. According to StudyPortals (2018) customer journey maps examine the relationship between a potential customer (student) and the organization (university) during a period and all the channels they interact with. The customer journey map's primary goal is to provide the customer with a 360-degree successful and enjoyable experience.

The customer journey starts when the applicant finds out about an institution to enrolling in the program officially. This process could take from weeks, months to a couple of years. As this is a long process, the student recruiters have to ensure that they provide support, guidance, and engagement. The student journey is a timeline where the potential student has different touchpoints with the institution, as mentioned above. The applicants interact with the institution through different modes in order to make an informed decision. They gather information from the university representatives, from current students, from faculty and staff. In addition, during the application, they are interacting with the admissions team as well. In other words, in order to have a complete and successful journey, different departments have to be involved. Creating a student journey map is a crucial element in recruitment and marketing strategies. Understanding which touchpoints the students have with the institution and where the engagement happens can lead to successful conversions.

According to Study Portals (2018a), there are seven essential steps that students go through during their student journey. The steps are the following:

- Discover - the first step of the student journey where the applicant is looking for reliable sources of information, primarily online. Therefore, having an easy-to-navigate website is a crucial point.

- Explore- the student has narrowed down the options to the ones fitting his/her area of interest.

- Compare- nowadays there are many opportunities around the world. However, this is one of the most challenging steps for students to compare different universities.

- Apply - there are different application systems and methods. For example, some universities have their application platform, and others use general application platforms such as MaiaLearning, UCAS.

- Decide- after applying at several institutions and hopefully receiving positive answers, and the student has to decide which institution he/she would like to enroll.

- Match- after comparing the universities' different given, the applicant decided which one matches his/her interest the best.

- Enroll- is when the student signs the contract with the institution and officially enrolls in the program.

- Prepare- the students prepare the documents before the study starts.

- Refer- ideally, the applicant has had a successful student journey from beginning to enrollment, the applicant enrolled in the university, and he/she refers it to other applicants.

Therefore, to have a successful 360-degree journey from the moment potential students find out about the institution to enrolling in one of the programs, organizations need to make sure that they know the touchpoints with their leads and the different departments involved in the process to enrollment. If needed, universities need to differentiate between the two stages in the student journey and involve the necessary departments. In this way they can provide maximum engagement and appropriate evaluation of the candidates which eventually lead to a conversion.

Another critical point is the pain- points. These are the stages where the student is experiencing a problem that has to be resolved. These problems usually lead to a level of dissatisfaction, stress, discomfort or friction (Shewan, 2020). For example, if the student cannot find the tuition fees easily on the website, this could be a pain point and lead to an unpleasant experience. Some of the main pain points that students experience are the following (Connect2, n.d.):

- Points where students feel confused what they are supposed to do
- Points where students cannot find the relevant information, they are looking for

- Points where students have the fear of "missing out", for example missing out a deadline, or missing out a document

- Problems with accessing resources

- Lack of clear and structured information

- Lack of informative and prompt replies from the institution

- Points where students feel confused which is the next step

One way to understand students´ pain points is to collect the repetitive questions and concerns students usually have. Based on this universities can spot the possible pain points that student are experiencing. Another way is to evaluate which are the main touch points with prospective students. For example, if one of the main touch points is the website- then universities should think from a student´s perspective and evaluate their website (Miller, 2020). For instance, questions such as what kind of information students are looking for when going to the website and is this information easy to find, what obstacles students might be facing when going to the website.

Another significant touch point is the application system. Is applying to the university explained step by step and easy to navigate, do students have an easy access to list with all required documents. Furthermore, when students are in touch with university representatives is another touch point, where poor communication, lack of informative and structured emails, lack of personalized or unfriendly approach can be undoubtedly considered as pain points (Miller, 2020).

Henceforth, collecting information about the pain points and removing them could lead to higher satisfaction among candidates. Universities should aim to provide student- centered and positive student journey for their prospective students. Recruiters´ main goal is to establish a trustful relationship with the prospective students by meeting their needs and guiding them through the different stages in the student journey.

2.4.3 Student personas

According to StudyPortals (2018b), another crucial element in Student Recruitment and Marketing is to develop student personas. In order to fully understand the target market

and students' preferences and needs, institutions need to create student personas. The student persona is a potential student sample, including their background information, geographics, financial background and resources, social background, interests, and decision-making processes. A persona represents a group of people sharing the same characteristics and pattern behaviors.

Nowadays, students are seeking a personalized and student-centered approach. In order to achieve that, institutions need to create and understand their student personas fully. Based on the student personas, universities can adapt their recruitment and marketing strategies. For example, if an institution knows that its student persona comes from a middle- class family and the tuition fees are a decision-making factor, they need to provide easily accessible financial information on the website or provide scholarships. Henceforth, universities need to analyze their target markets and the obstacles students might meet. These challenges can range from financial restraints, visa issues to finding accommodation. By understanding these challenges, institutions can build their websites based on the important topics and provide the most relevant information. Recognizing the pain points help universities include the must- have information on their websites.

Furthermore, well defined student personas contribute to the recruitment and marketing activities such as targeting and communicating the value proposition of the organization. In order to achieve higher conversion rates, universities need to show the potential students that their needs and goals are met. This conversion can only happen if institutions genuinely understand their target market (Study Portals, 2018b).

Usually, creating one persona is not enough, as institutions are trying to attract diverse students. The number of personas universities need depends on the different recruitment objectives and the different target markets and audiences. Therefore, having more than one student personas lead to better recruitment strategies (QS, n.d.). All student personas need to be matched with different recruitment plans and strategies. For example, if the university would like to develop the Balkan region, it should create a student persona of a Balkan student. In order to this, existing data from the current students should be collected and analyzed. Once the personas are identified, universities should build their messages, approach techniques, communication channels delivering the most efficient

outcomes. However, it is important for institutions not to have too many student personas as this will only weaken the recruitment strategies (QS, n.d.).

As can be seen, student personas can be different in terms of study interests, career goals, background education, attitude. Each of these students experiences an entirely different student journey. Therefore, the recruitment and marketing strategies need to be adapted accordingly for each target group. For instance, a student looking for a Bachelor's degree will have a completely different student journey experience than a student looking for an MBA degree.

According to Study Portals (2018b), five main factors shape the student personas. If institutions are looking for an even deeper understanding of their target market, considering the following five factors seem essential:

- **Academic Background Information:** degree level, private or public education, duration of courses (full-time, part-time)

- **Demographics and Geographics:** Age, Nationality, Country of residence, region

- **Study:** Degree of Interest

- **Decision-making:** Stakeholders/People involved in the decision (parents, agents, relatives, friends), independent.

- **Financial resources:** Financing on its own or seeking financial aid

Furthermore, if institutions are looking for an even deeper understanding of their target market, considering the following factors seems essential:

- **Obstacles:** Visa issues, housing, and accommodation, scholarships, whom they can contact

- **Goals and preferences:** what do they want to work after graduation, are they looking for a small size university or a big size one, priorities

- **Communication**: where do at a certain point these students get their information from (website, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn)? Do they prefer personal contact (university tours and fairs), current students recommendations, relative and friends recommendations, agents?

Another good example of segmenting students is presented by Choudaha, Orostz, & Chang (2012). For instance, they divide students into two dimensions- financial resources and academic preparation. The authors establish four types of student personas:

- Strivers: most of the students are employed full time or part- time during the application process because they need to financially support their studies. This type of students is most likely to look for information about financial aid, scholarships, and tuition fees. However, these students are academically prepared.

- Strugglers: these types of students need assistance not only from financial perspective but also from academic perspective. They have rather low academic performance. Consequently, this group is not highly selective when it comes to university reputation or rankings. These students are rather interested in Foundation programs or Preparatory courses.

- Explorers: they would like to study abroad but their main trigger is not academic achievements, but they are mostly interested in personal development, personal growth and having an international experience. Information about the student services offered on campus or the quality of living the country are of main importance for this segment.

- Highfliers: these students are academically well prepared, and they do not need any financial aid. Therefore, they are looking for prestigious universities and good rankings. These students are usually representing high

social classes and would look for more expensive programs and might use educational agents.

To conclude, universities can build student personas on various factors and background information matching their recruitment strategies and needs. These student personas need to be aligned with the institution´s mission and their target audience. The main goal of creating student personas is to make the potential student feel confident that this is the right institution for them, create a personal connection, thus leading to conversion from a lead to enrolled student.

2.5   Sources of influence

A crucial factor of the student personas is the decision- making process and the sources of influence. There are different stakeholders shaping students' decisions regarding their further education. Young individuals are strongly influenced by parents, agents, high school counselors, relatives and friends, and university representatives. It can be observed that the family plays an essential role in a student's decisions. Understanding who the stakeholders are and how they influence students' decisions would lead to more successful recruitment strategies. According to the QS (2020), two-thirds of the prospective students know either a relative or a friend who has studied abroad. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how these personal connections can influence students' decisions. For instance, word-of-mouth recommendations tend to be more valuable and significant compared to any information that candidates find on the official channels of the particular institution. The 2020 QS International Student Survey also shows that 62% of the students perceive their parents as the most knowledgeable party, and they would go to them for advice. Parents are considered to be the primary influence of students' decisions regarding further education. Furthermore, almost 39% of the students will ask their siblings for advice, and 26% of the students will speak to other family members. In conclusion, three-quarters will discuss their further education options with someone from their family and relatives and rely on their recommendation.

Nonetheless, institutions need to take into account that students will speak to their parents and other parties that might influence their decisions. For example, according to the QS (2020), 43% of the students will talk to high school counselors in their schools. These

people are also considered to have the expertise, knowledge, and university connections regarding the different study opportunities. Besides, 40% of the prospective students will approach a student ambassador of the desired university in order to receive more information from a current student. Student ambassadors currently experiencing student life are perceived as more trustworthy sources in comparison to the official information sources of the institution.

Moreover, university alumni are another crucial party that plays a vital role in word-of-mouth recommendations. Therefore, universities need to provide a pleasant student journey experience throughout the studies. This would inevitably lead to satisfied graduates who will share their own successful experiences. Essentially, 40% of the candidates tend to ask agents for their professional expertise. Agents have different motivation factors that will be discussed below. To summarise, two-thirds of the candidates will approach someone outside their families, which means that students are looking for advice not only in their close family network but also outside reaching various parties (QS, 2020).

Taking all these stakeholders into account, universities should adapt their recruitment and marketing strategies, accordingly, considering that there are many different influencers when it comes to study decisions.
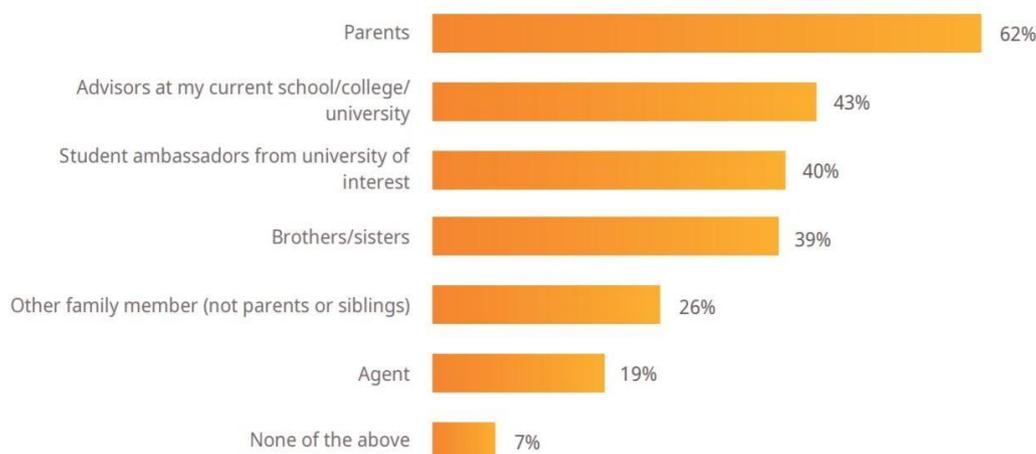
FIGURE 9: HAVE YOU OR WILL YOU DISCUSS YOUR STUDY OPTIONS WITH ANY OF THE FOLLOWING STAKE-HOLDERS (SOURCE: QS, 2020)

2.5.1 Parents
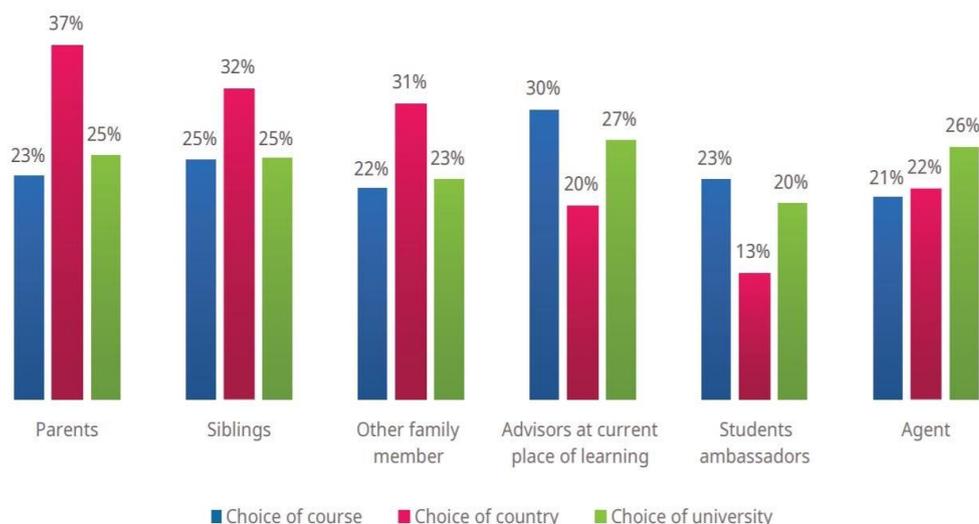
FIGURE 10: WHAT HAVE YOU DISCUSSED WITH THESE PEOPLE? (SOURCE: QS, 2020)

The QS (2020), indicates that students tend to talk about different segments of their studies with different stakeholders. For example, the survey shows that students will mainly talk to their family, such as parents, siblings, relatives, when it comes to choosing the study destination.

Furthermore, it is important to evaluate to what extent parents influence their children in the decision-making process. According to QS (2020), 30% of the students outline that their parents positively influence their decisions. However, a higher percentage, 33%, says that their parents' opinion about further education does not influence. Nonetheless, it is crucial to bear in mind this percentage is different based on nationality. This difference will be discussed further in the thesis. Besides, according to the survey, students believe that the most significant factor determining their parents' opinions is the safety of the destination. This is the top priority and primary topic of discussion that parents indicate. How safe, international friendly, and supportive the country and the particular university are among the most significant concerns parents have. Therefore, university representatives need to keep in mind that they have to emphasize different elements when communicating to different parties included in the student decisions. In other words, underlining the safety, support, and welcoming environment of the country is a crucial point in presenting the institution to parents and would lead to a successful long- term strategy.

Taking into account the current situation with COVID-19, this concern has been addressed even more often. According to QS (2020), parents favor universities that provide a safe campus environment, providing on and off-campus classes.

Furthermore, the choice of a study program leading to a career in the desired field after that is equally important for parents. In other words, the course their children study needs to be related to the job they want after graduation. Future career opportunities are also among the priorities parents have when it comes to the decision-making process. On the other hand, it is interesting to see that the institution's reputation or student life is not perceived as that important among parents. In light of these considerations, universities need to target the different parties in the decision-making process differently, pointing out the most critical factors.

2.5.2 High School Counselors

However, with regards to choosing a course, students tend to direct their questions and concerns to their high school counselors. According to QS (2020), prospective students believe that high school counselors have the knowledge and expertise to suggest different study options. The choice of courses is based on their chosen career path. Therefore, young individuals believe that high school counselors would best match their career preferences to course subjects they should be applying.

2.5.3 Agents

At last, students tend to direct their inquiries about the choice of university to education agents. Students value agents' expertise regarding scholarships, international environment, teaching approach, university size. However, it is important to bear in mind that agents usually recommend universities that are part of their network. Besides, agents' commissions and incentives also play a crucial role in their influence when it comes to recommending institutions.

As stated in the 2020 QS International Student Survey, agents do not play a significant role in the decision-making process overall. 44% of the students are not planning to use an agent, followed by 24% planning to use but have not done that yet, and only 11% that have used an agent. Regardless, agents' overall influence is unquestionably growing in some regions, where agents are the primary source of information. As a result, direct recruitment and marketing strategies can be challenging in some regions.

Consequently, it is significant for universities to establish good relationships with the agents and provide training. In addition, setting up commissions and incentives that are appealing for the agents can influence their recommendations. Sometimes agents act as a single source of information, and they put a barrier between the university and the students. Henceforth, students cannot make a fully informed decision.

2.6   Comparison between Western European and Eastern European students

All the factors mentioned above are based on different characteristics that determine further education choices among student groups globally. In order to see these differences, the QS, What drives an International Applicant today Survey (2018a) is broken than by regions. Two geographical regions are of importance for this thesis - Eastern Europe and Western Europe.

The QS Applicant Voices Eastern Europe (2018b) surveyed 382 students representing 22 countries in Eastern Europe. The most prominent respondents' groups are from Russia, Albania, and Ukraine. The Undergraduate participants are taken into account, and they sum up to 175.

2.6.1   Study motivations

It can be observed that the main factor based on which Eastern European students choose higher education institutions is employment opportunities. One of the reasons is that students from low and mid-income families would like to stay and search for employment opportunities after graduation. This is followed by other motivating factors for higher-qualification degrees, particularly a master's degree. Experts believe that the Soviet-era could have an influence on these decisions, as well as the deficiency in good universities in these areas. Figure 6 shows the main study motivation factors among Eastern European Undergraduate Applicants.

Study Motivations
Eastern European Undergraduate Applicants

Motivation	Percentage
To progress to a higher level qualification	69%
To progress in my current career path	57%
As a requirement to enter a particular profession	43%
To improve my employment prospects	32%
For personal interest	31%
Opportunities for exchange	20%
Reputation of the university that offers it	10%
Other	3%
My employer required me to take the program	1%

Source: 2018 QS Applicant Survey

FIGURE 11: STUDY MOTIVATIONS EASTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

As Figure 11 presents the leading study motivation for Eastern European students is to progress to a higher-level qualification. This is followed by the desire to progress in the chosen career path. Lastly Eastern European students believe they need to acquire a degree in order to enter a particular profession.

On the other hand, 1066 prospective candidates representing 20 countries in Western Europe took part in the QS, Applicant Voices Western European students (2018c) Survey. 383 Undergraduate participants will be taken into account. The most prominent respondent groups are from the United Kingdom (30%), Italy (22%), and Greece (13%).

The main factors that influence Western European students' decisions are to progress to a higher level qualification (70%), for personal interest (50%), and as a requirement to enter a particular profession (44%). This can be seen in Figure 12.

Study Motivations
Western European Undergraduate Applicants

Motivation	Percentage
To progress to a higher level qualification	70%
For personal interest	50%
As a requirement to enter a particular profession	44%
To progress in my current career path	36%
To improve my employment prospects	35%
Opportunities for exchange	17%
Reputation of the university that offers it	16%
Other	4%
My employer required me to take the program	1%
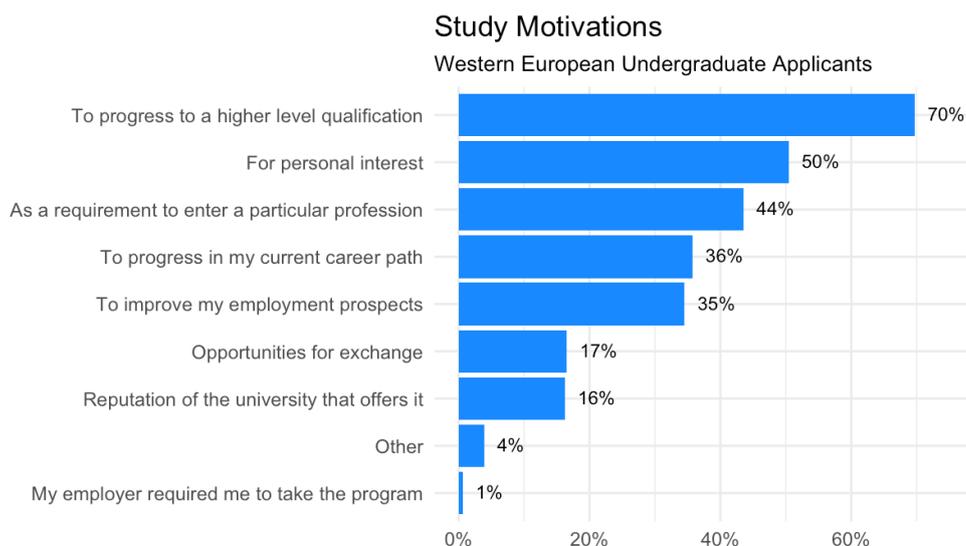
FIGURE 12: STUDY MOTIVATIONS WESTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

Figure 12 shows that personal interests highly trigger Western European students. This could be because of the generally higher income status in comparison to the Eastern European Countries. In other words, better economic systems, and accessibility to loans. Besides, in some countries like Germany and Austria, education is for free. The lack of necessity to pursue a degree because of return on investment allows these students to choose a degree based on their preferences, in contrast to the Eastern European students. Furthermore, the 2018 QS Application Survey demonstrates that Western European students are mainly interested in countries with similar cultures and lack interest in countries from Africa, the Middle East, or Latin America.

2.6.2 Top study destinations

In order to identify student mobility trends, examining the top student destinations can be a crucial factor. Nowadays, internationalization and diversity worldwide influence student's study opportunities. The choice of student destination is not only based on the universities located in the specific areas but also on the economic situation, geopolitical events, and demographic transition (QS, 2018b).

According to the QS Applicant Survey (2018b), Eastern European students' first choice is the United States (34%), followed by the United Kingdom (32%) and Germany (32%), as shown in Figure 13.
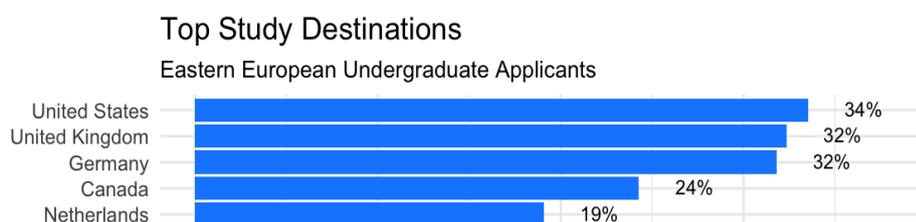
Top Study Destinations
Eastern European Undergraduate Applicants

United States	34%
United Kingdom	32%
Germany	32%
Canada	24%
Netherlands	19%

FIGURE 13: TOP STUDY DESTINATIONS EASTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

On the other hand, Figure 14 presents the results for Western European students, where the United Kingdom is in the first place, followed by the United States and Canada. Germany holds fourth place.

Top Study Destinations
Western European Undergraduate Applicants

United Kingdom	63%
United States	35%
Canada	19%
Germany	16%
Australia	15%
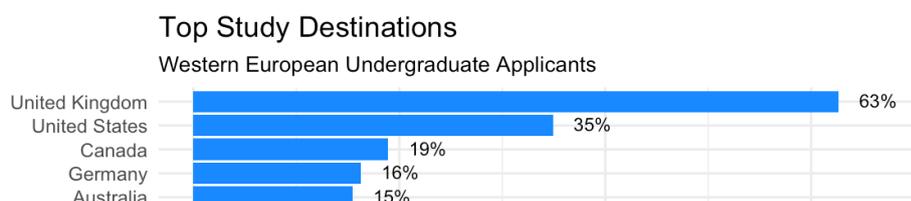
FIGURE 14: TOP STUDY DESTINATIONS WESTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

2.6.3   Country choice motivations

Another interesting point are the different motivational factors that determine the choice of study destination. The QS Applicant Survey (2018b) shows that Eastern European students favour specific destinations based on the Scholarship and Financial aid (39%), Would like to work there afterwards (35%), International recognition of qualifications (32%).
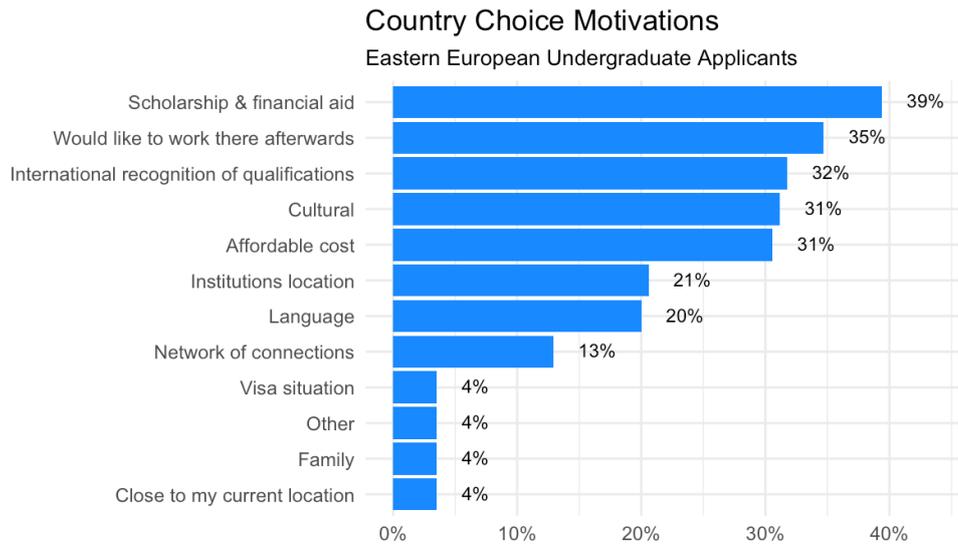
FIGURE 15: COUNTRY CHOICE MOTIVATIONS EASTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS
(SOURCE: QS, 2018)

In comparison to Eastern European students, Western European students point out Cultural (38%) as the primary motivating factor, followed by institution's location (36%) and international recognition of qualification (34%). It can be seen that the primary motivator for Eastern European students Scholarship and Financial Aid is in fifth place with (25%) for Western European students. See Figure 16 (QS, 2018c).
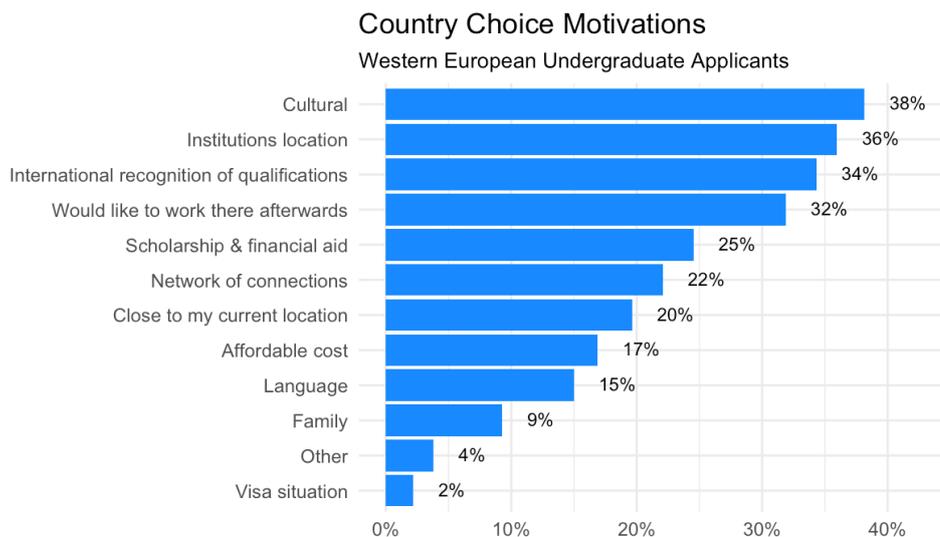
FIGURE 16: COUNTRY CHOICE MOTIVATIONS WESTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS
(SOURCE: QS, 2018)

2.6.4   Institution Choice Reasons

In order to have successful recruitment and marketing strategies, it is crucial to investigate the main reasons for choosing a study institution. Based on this information, universities can adapt their recruitment strategies depending on the regions they recruit. For instance, Undergraduate Eastern European students point out that Funding (47%), Program (39%), and Reputation in the subject area (36%) are the main factors that influence their decision regarding an institution (QS, 2018b).

Institution Choice Reasons
Eastern European Undergraduate Applicants

| Reason	Percentage
Funding	47%
It offers specific parts of the program I want to study	39%
The institution's reputation in my chosen subject area	36%
The cost of the program compared to other institutions	34%
The overall reputation of the institution	29%
The location of the institution	19%
The course structure	18%
The reputation of the department	16%
Personal recommendations	13%
Profile of graduates	12%
Other	2%

FIGURE 17: INSTITUTION CHOICE REASONS EASTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

However, the QS Applicant survey (2018c) demonstrates that Western European Undergraduates choose future universities because of the institution's reputation in my chosen subject area (53%), funding (42%), and the course structure (35%) as shown in Figure 18.

Institution Choice Reasons
Western European Undergraduate Applicants

Reason	Percentage
The institution's reputation in my chosen subject area	53%
Funding	42%
The course structure	35%
It offers specific parts of the program I want to study	35%
The overall reputation of the institution	34%
The location of the institution	26%
The cost of the program compared to other institutions	24%
The reputation of the department	15%
Personal recommendations	10%
Profile of graduates	9%
Other	1%

FIGURE 18: INSTITUTION CHOICE REASONS WESTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018

2.6.5 Preferred disciplines and target industries

In addition, regarding the subject choices, Undergraduate Eastern European students are primarily interested in Engineering (20%), Medicine (15%), and Computer Science (15%), whereas Western European Undergraduates are interested in Business/Management (17%), Medicine (14%), and Economics & econometrics (14%). It can be seen that Medicine is the preferred discipline for both regions. Furthermore, students from Eastern Europe state the skills they believe would be valuable for their future employment. Problem-solving (50%), Leadership (42%), and Teamwork (41%) are leading the ranking. Besides, they believe that the skills acquired during their education would be helpful in the following industries: Technology (27%), Finance (26%), Engineering (25%) as shown in Figure 21 (QS,2018b).
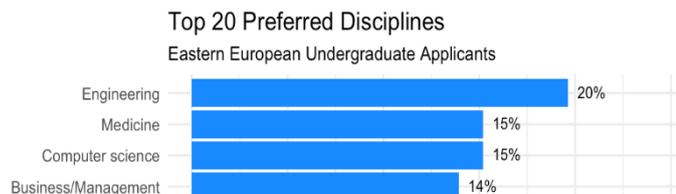
FIGURE 19: TOP 20 PREFERRED DISCIPLINES EASTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

Similarly, according to the QS Applicant Survey (2018c), Western European students indicate the same skills: Leadership (44%), Problem-solving (44%), and Teamwork (39%).
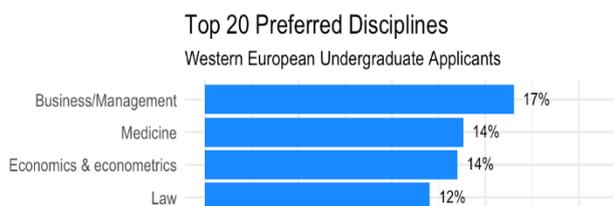

FIGURE 20: TOP 20 PREFERRED DISCIPLINES WESTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

After acquiring the above-mentioned skills, students will target industries such as Health / medical (24%), Finance (24%), and Government / public sector (24%). See Figure 22.
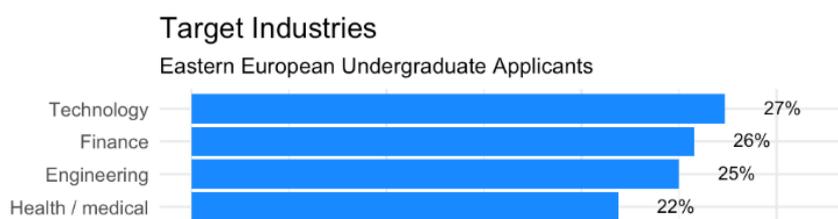

FIGURE 21: TARGET INDUSTRIES EASTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

Target Industries
Western European Undergraduate Applicants

Health / medical	24%
Government / public sector	24%
Finance	24%
Technology	17%

FIGURE 22: TARGET INDUSTRIES WESTERN EUROPEAN UNDERGRADUATE APPLICANTS (SOURCE: QS, 2018)

Furthermore, institutions should take care how do they manage their communication channels. This is one of the essential parts of the student journey experience. Finding complete and relevant information in an easy and accessible way is essential in the decision-making process. According to the QS (2018a), Undergraduate Eastern European and Western European students look for information on the official website, they do general online search, and ranking.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, taking all these important factors into account, this study aims to investigate whether there is a difference in the decision- making process between Balkan and Western European students. The results of this research answers whether there is a need for specific recruitment strategies when targeting Balkan students. In order to do that, a qualitative method of analysis is used.

The thesis follows a conceptual framework which maps the relationship between the concepts in the research study. A conceptual framework is needed as it provides a structure of the study and summarizes the theoretical knowledge and the study's research questions. It also gives consistency between the different aspects in the design cycle. The conceptual framework includes the theories explored in the study and the relationships between these theories (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020).

The literature review of this thesis is based on topics covering the reformation developments in higher education in the Balkan countries, the general worldwide student mobility and specific student mobility patterns in the Balkans and Western Europe. In addition, the European Higher Education and the Bologna process lay an important foundation of the structure of the thesis. Furthermore, the author investigates the factors and

stakeholders influencing student´s decisions in the Balkan and Western European countries to understand the differences between these two regions. Hence, based on this information, recruitment strategies can be improved. The literature review describes student personas and student journey to enrollment process. The investigation of the published literature constructs a basis for the future primary investigation- whether the factors mentioned above are a reason for different recruitment strategies targeting students from the Balkan countries. (Refer to Figure 18.)

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┌──────────────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                          │                    │ Reformation and developments │
│                          │                    │ in higher education in       │
│                          │                    │ Balkan countries             │
│                          │                    └──────────────────────────────┘
│                          │                    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                          │                    │ General student mobility and │
│                          │                    │ student mobility patterns in │
│                          │                    │ the Balkans and Western      │
│                          │                    │ Europe                       │
│ Recruitment strategies   │                    └──────────────────────────────┘
│ for students originating │ ◄──────            ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ from Balkan countries    │                    │ European Higher Education    │
│                          │                    │ (EHEA) and the Bologna       │
│                          │                    │ process                      │
│                          │                    └──────────────────────────────┘
│                          │                    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                          │                    │ Factors influencing student´s│
│                          │                    │ decisions in Balkan and      │
│                          │                    │ Western European countries   │
└──────────────────────────┘                    └──────────────────────────────┘
                                                 ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                                                 │ Student Personas and Student │
                                                 │ Journey to enrollment        │
                                                 └──────────────────────────────┘
                                                 ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                                                 │ Sources of influence- parents│
                                                 │ high school counselors,      │
                                                 │ current students, agents     │
                                                 └──────────────────────────────┘
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FIGURE 23: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research approach

This chapter represents the research approach selected in order to achieve the aims and objectives of the thesis. The research methodology presented in the thesis implies a qualitative method for analysis. In contrast to quantitative studies using large samples, qualitative studies focus on smaller-size samples suitable to study in-depth. Studying a smaller group allows for an investigation of more details and the collection of detailed data (Farrugia, 2019). The qualitative method is used to understand an individual's beliefs, experiences, behaviors, and motivations. (Pathka, Bijayini, & Sanjay, 2013) The qualitative study design includes building a defining research problem, selecting a sample, collecting data, and analyzing the findings.

In this research, an inductive research is structured. The difference between inductive and deductive research is that "inductive reasoning aims to develop a theory, whereas deductive reasoning aims to test an existing theory. (Streefkerk, 2019, p.1)" An inductive research is done as the author develops the theory that Balkan students need a different recruitment and marketing approach.

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Semistructured Interviews:

The researcher has chosen semistructured interviews to collect the necessary data. This method has been selected as it allows the participants to discuss and share their views freely. The semistructured interview consists of fewer structured questions than the structured interview (Merriam, 2002). The author compiled a list of questions that serve as a guideline, and the order of the questions was determined ahead of time. The interview questions are based on the topics covered in the literature review. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix. The literature review compares the differences between two regions- Eastern European students and Western European students. Taking these differences into account, the author built the interview questions on factors influencing

the students from these two regions. In addition, topics related to the sources of influences were investigated as well.

According to Barrick (2020), the researcher tries to understand how participants perceive their social world with these semistructured interview questions. The in-depth, semistructured interviews are based on a theme intended to answer the research question. Given that the semistructured interview has an open-ended nature, the participant might share insights that would further develop the researcher's hypothesis. One of the advantages of semistructured interviews is that the interview is more structured; therefore, the comparison and analysis of the data will generate more structured results.

The data results from 31 semistructured qualitative interviews. Sixteen interviews with current and graduate students of Modul University Vienna see Table 1. Thirteen interviews with the parents of these students (see Table 2) and two interviews with educational agents (Table 3).

Balkan students	8 interviews	6 interviews with current students 2 interviews with graduates	2 males 6 females	Serbia, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria
Western European students	8 interviews	6 interviews with current students 2 interviews with graduates	4 males 4 females	Austria, Switzerland, France, Germany, Hungary

TABLE 1: INTERVIEWS WITH BALKAN AND WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS

Balkan parents	8 interviews	Serbia, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria

Western European parents	5 interviews	Austria, Switzerland, France, Germany, Hungary

TABLE 2: INTERVIEWS WITH BALKAN AND WESTERN EUROPEAN PARENTS

Balkan agents	2 interviews	Serbia, Bulgaria

TABLE 3: INTERVIEWS WITH BALKAN EDUCATIONAL AGENTS

The participants were guided through their student journey that has been divided into four phases:

- Pre-decision phase
- First point of contact
- Decision-making phase
- Post decision phase

The interview questions were selected and structured based on the author's experience as a recruiter and on secondary data. It includes a mix of different questions such as yes/no questions, open-ended questions, and Likert scale questions. The interviews were done via video calls and recorded. Through the video call, the researcher can observe the participant's reactions, emotions, and body language. The participants were not provided with the questions beforehand. Each interview was no longer than 30 minutes; however, some participants were open for a more extended discussion focusing on their overall study journey.

For the interview opening, the researcher explained the research topic, this was followed by guidance through the four main phases.

A separate interview was conducted with the parents of the students that took part in the interviews. The questions in these interviews are focusing more on the influence that parents have over their children. Furthermore, the author conducted interviews with two agents located in the Balkans. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

After the responses become similar, and the information is no longer coming up, saturation has been reached. (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020) According to Marshall (1996, p. 523): "An appropriate sample size for the qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question."

In order to categorize the data of the interviews the author labels relevant phrases, sentences, and words mentioned in the interview answers in a spreadsheet. These words are labeled with codes which help the author to recognize important repetitive data and patterns (Canary, 2019). In this research the labels are related to different factors influencing students´ decisions. Furthermore, the author creates categories by grouping these codes and connecting them to the topics of the research. The four main categories are pre-decision phase, first point of contact, decision- making process and post- decision phase. The relevant interview questions are subcategories of these four phases. See Appendix 1.

3.3 Sampling

According to Farugia (2019), sampling plays a crucial role in qualitative research. Sixteen current and graduate students from Modul University Vienna were selected as interview respondents for this study. In addition, thirteen parents of these participants were interviewed as well. Furthermore, two agents located in the Balkans took part in the interviews.

Modul University Vienna was chosen on the basis of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. When using convenience sampling, participants are easily accessible to the researcher. This institution was chosen because the researcher works for the recruitment and marketing team; therefore, access to data is possible. In addition, Modul University Vienna is an international university; therefore, the researcher could test the hypothesis of whether different recruitment strategies are needed for the Balkan countries.

On the other hand, the researcher chose purposive sampling, which is a conceptually driven approach. Using this approach, the researcher selected the sample group on purpose, believing that this group could be the most suitable and able to answer the research

questions. The selection is based on different aspects or qualities of the potential participants that could affect the contribution to the study (Farrugia, 2019).

According to Farrugia (2019), there are different forms of purposive sampling; however, the researcher chose two forms: typical case sampling, where the author is building a profile of a typical case. This represents the "average" participant in the research. In this study, the "average" representative is an international student experiencing study abroad.

The sample of respondents that have been interviewed include Western European and Balkan representatives. The participants from each region share similar behaviors and attitudes within their groups. They have similar background, beliefs, and values (Farrugia, 2019)..

Referring to Table 1, The Balkan group includes eight students- one from Serbia, one from Romania, two from Albania, and three from Bulgaria. The Western European group consists of eight participants where three students from Austria, two students from Switzerland, one student from France, one student from Germany, and one student from Hungary.

In the same way, parents of these two groups took part in a separate interview. The decision to invite the parents for interviews was based on the assumption and the literature gathered before, that they have an influence on their children's decisions. In addition, this would answer one of the sub-research questions whether different stakeholders have an impact on student's choices. Five Western- European parents and eight Balkan parents took part in the interviews. (See Table 2.)

Moreover, in order to understand how many stakeholders are involved in the student's decision-making process, the author designed an interview for education agents. Two agents took part- one from Bulgaria and one from Serbia. (See Table 3.)

3.4   Research Ethics

When it comes to human subjects, it is crucial to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. However, if anonymity is not required, then the consent of the participants should be required. The subject consent should be based on information on the purpose of the study, assurance of confidentiality, and a statement of approval by a committee that can authorize research with human subjects. The interview questions for this study were approved by the IRB of Modul University Vienna. In addition, according to Klovdahl (2005), when designing a study, the researcher should try to guarantee voluntary participation, opting out from the interviews, and the method should not be altered at a later stage.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher provided information about the purpose of the research topic, the chosen target groups, the reason for the interview, and how the data will be used. All participants were asked for permission to record the video call. In addition, the participants were informed that the information they provide would be used anonymously.

Using the provided data anonymously allowed the participants to freely speak and share any pain points and disappointments they have experienced during their student journeys.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the author presents the results of the interview questions. The author analyses and compares two sample groups- students from the Balkan and Western European countries. Similarly, the researcher conducted interviews with Balkan and Western European parents. In addition, the analysis from the interviews with the agents is also presented.

In order to adapt the recruitment strategies accordingly, it is crucial to understand how prospective students choose their future study destination. Furthermore, given their different nationalities, it is essential to acknowledge the differences between them, which are the prominent influencers in the decision-making process and how they conduct their research. Eight Balkan and eight Western European whereas ten female and six male students took part in the interviews. The age range is from 20 to 27. (See Table 1.)

4.2 Student´s results

4.2.1 Pre- decision phase results

4.2.1.1 Factors when choosing a study destination

The decision to study abroad is often based on various factors. To begin with, Figure 24 shows that for Balkan students being close to their home country remains the key factor that influences their decision regarding the country they want to study in. Another important point which they consider is the city of Vienna- five out of eight students pointed out that they chose Vienna as a study destination because of its affordability (life in Vienna is more affordable and student-friendly in comparison to other capitals in Europe), and the fact that it is an international capital but at the same time a safe city. In addition, an influence is the fact that Vienna is ranked as the city with the best quality of life for the past ten years (Mercer, 2019). These are the two leading factors across Balkan students, followed by language (to know the language of the country or to be willing to learn

it), career opportunities after graduation, and similar culture and mentality. Furthermore, they desire to experience life in a different country and believe that they will receive better education abroad. Some of the interview participants said that another factor for consideration is the economic and political situation in the preferred country. It is a fact that the political and economic situation in the prospective country may have an impact on the study decisions. This is of greater importance to Balkan students than to Western European students.

Most important factors when choosing a country to study in
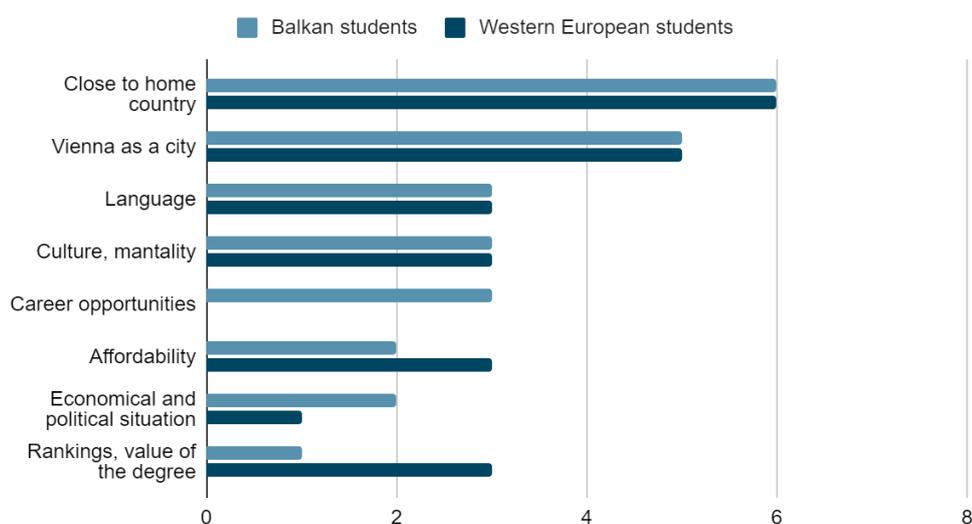
FIGURE 24: MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING A COUNTRY TO STUDY IN

Similarly, Western European students point out the same leading factors- close to home country and Vienna as a city, followed by language, culture, and mentality. However, there is a difference when it comes to rankings- Western European students point out that ranking as one of the key decision-making factors, whereas for Balkan students, this is not as important. This shows that university rankings are very important to prospective students from Western- European countries which also means that they would pay more attention to the rankings and look for this information when evaluating different study opportunities. Western European students do not perceive career opportunities as an important factor when choosing a university, however this is one of the main factors why did they decide to continue with their further education.

4.2.1.2 Top study destinations

In order to examine student mobility and trends, it is vital to investigate the top study destinations among Balkan students and Western European students. As it can be seen on Figure 25, for both Balkan and Western European students Austria is the leading country. However, it can be seen that the UK is in second place for Balkan students mainly because applicants can take advantage of the student loans. This is one of the primary triggers why Balkan students consider the UK as a study destination. This is followed by Spain, and according to Balkan students, this is because of culture and mentality similarities. Balkan students believe that they share a similar mentality and lifestyle with Spanish people. Spain is popular among Western European students too.
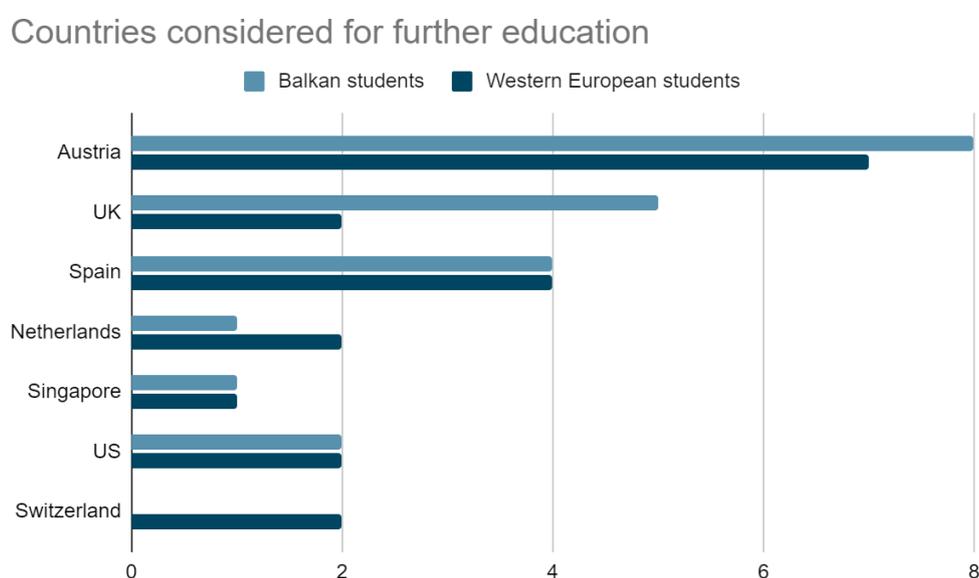
FIGURE 25: COUNTRIES CONSIDERED FOR FURTHER EDUCATION

4.2.1.3 Factors when choosing a university

The search for study programs that match the interests is the biggest driver for choosing a university for Balkan students as shown in Figure 26. Similarly to the factor influencing the choice of country, they also place great importance on the language of instruction which results in the search for an international university. In addition, students choose English as a main language of instruction because they believe it is easier to study in English. One of the crucial factors for Balkan students is to feel welcome, supported and

not excluded. They prefer international universities because these institutions embrace different nationalities and backgrounds, thus preventing students to feel that they do not "fit" in a certain community. Furthermore, students point out that some other important factors for them are the opportunity to develop outside of class, being involved in various student activities. Moreover, they would like to learn not only hard skills, but also soft skills such as leadership, team building, and networking. Interestingly, university size, campus environment, and affordability are of at least importance for Balkan students.
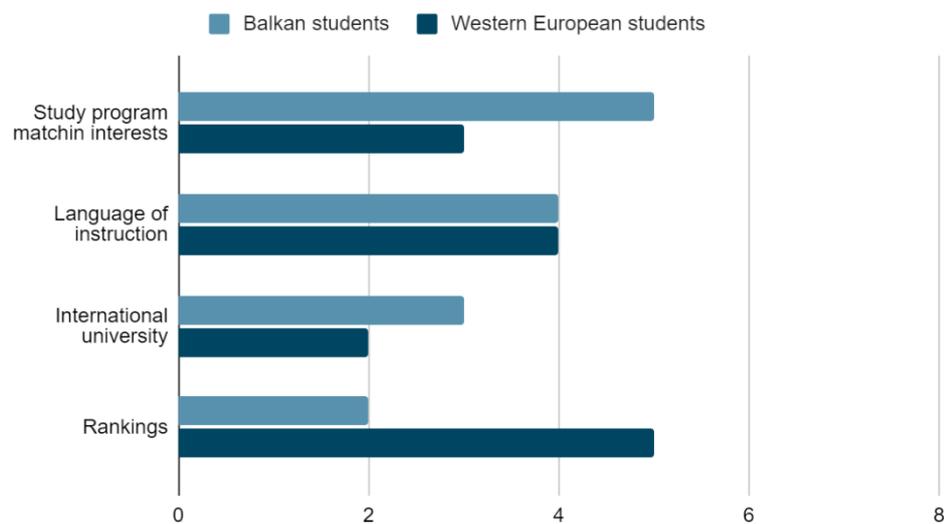
FIGURE 26: MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY- BALKAN AND WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS

In contrast, most Western European students put rankings at first place, believing that this reflects on the career opportunities afterwards. This is followed by the language of instruction, study program matching, and the country the university is in. None of the Western European students pointed out recommendations and affordability as decision-making factors.

Overall, the one of the most significant factors for prospective students and the reasons they get international education is the opportunity to find a job after graduation and learning new skills. Nowadays students expect an ongoing support from the Career Services that universities offer in helping them enter the preferred industry in a timely manner after graduation. In addition, students believe that the soft skills such as communication,

leadership, critical thinking are one of the most valuable assets they can gain from their university.

4.2.1.4 Preferred study disciplines

As it can be seen in Figure 27, the most preferred study discipline for Balkan students is Management, followed by Entrepreneurship and Marketing. The least favored one is sustainability. Nevertheless, Hospitality and Tourism, Management, Sustainability, and Entrepreneurship are the most favored ones among Western European students.
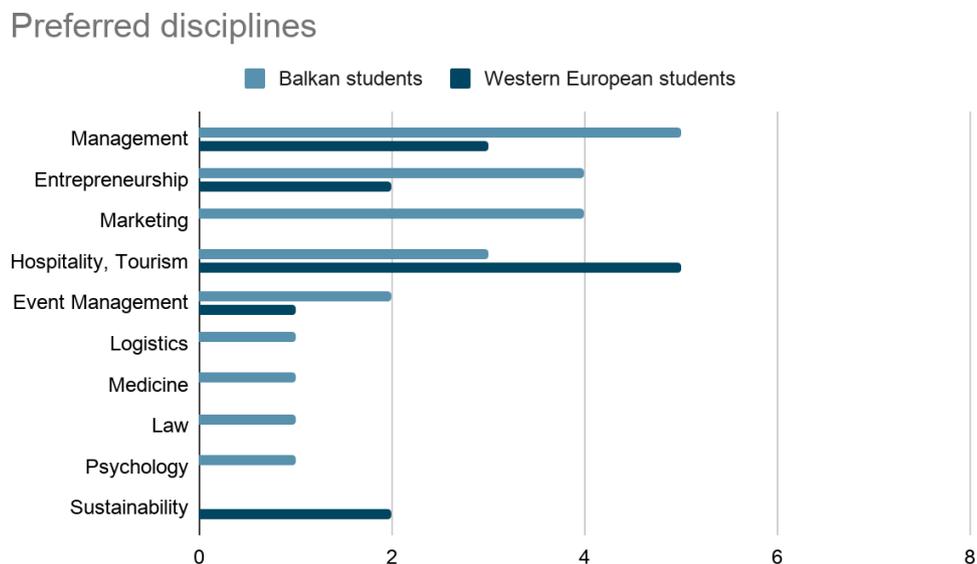

FIGURE 27: PREFERRED DISCIPLINES

4.2.1.5 Industry choice

When it comes to the industry where young individuals would like to work, it can be seen in Figure 28 that the most desired industries among both Balkan students and Western European students representing Modul University Vienna are Tourism, Hospitality, and Events. This is followed by Business and Management and Marketing for Balkan students. Then again, when it comes to Sustainability, this is the second preferred discipline for Western European students, whereas none of the Balkan students indicated they are

interested in this field. It is important to keep in mind that the results are biased based on the study program the students are enrolled in.

Industry choice
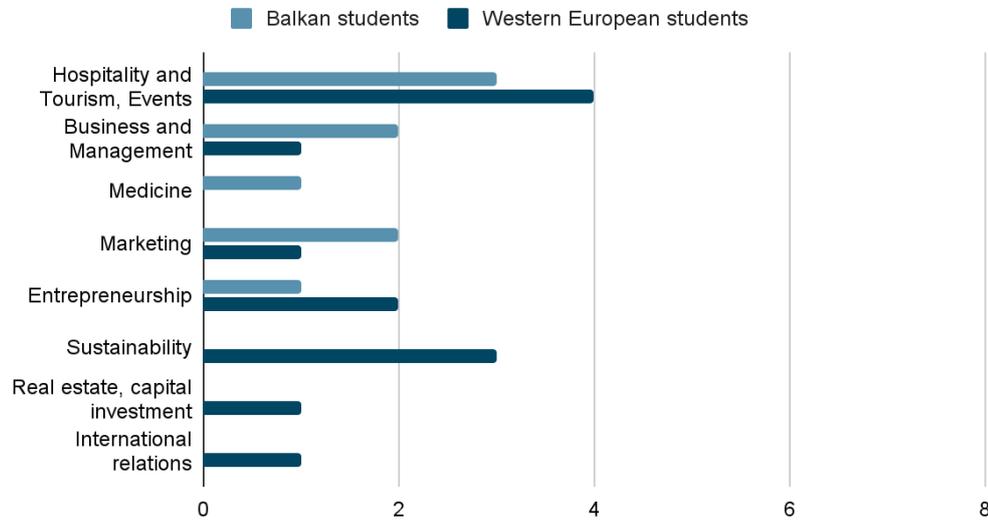
FIGURE 28: INDUSTRY CHOICE

4.2.1.6 Reasons to continue with further education after high school

Expectations from parents are the biggest driver of the initial decision to continue with further education after high school for Balkan students, as shown in Figure 29. Seven out of eight students would like to "make their parents proud," or they continued studying because of their parent's wishes. With the same importance is the belief that higher education would lead to better career opportunities. This is followed by the will to reach self-development and independence. Similarly, Balkan students point out that they continue their further education because of stereotypes. According to the Cambridge (n.d.) a stereotype is a "set idea that people have about what someone or something is like" In order words, it is a common perception among Balkan people that students should continue with their further education after high school and that higher education is "a must" nowadays. Lastly, the least important factor is personal interests.

Reasons to continue with further education after high school
Balkan students
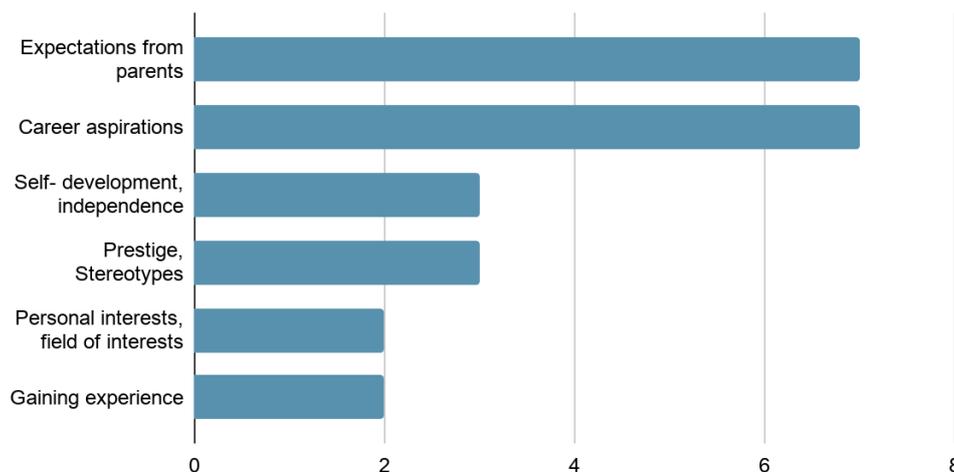
FIGURE 29: REASONS TO CONTINUE WITH FURTHER EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL- BALKAN STUDENTS

In contrast to Balkan students, none of the Western European students pointed out that they continued their further education because of their parents' expectations as seen in Figure 30. There is a crucial difference between these two groups and the reasons students continue their tertiary education. The only similarity is the career opportunities where likewise Balkan students, Western European students believe that higher education would increase their chances to get a good job. On the other hand, reasons like self-development and prestige or stereotypes are the least influential among this group. Five people out of eight pointed out that they would like to continue with their education because of personal interests, gaining more knowledge in the field of interest, whereas only two Balkan students out of eight-pointed out the same reason.

Reasons to continue with further education after high school Western European students
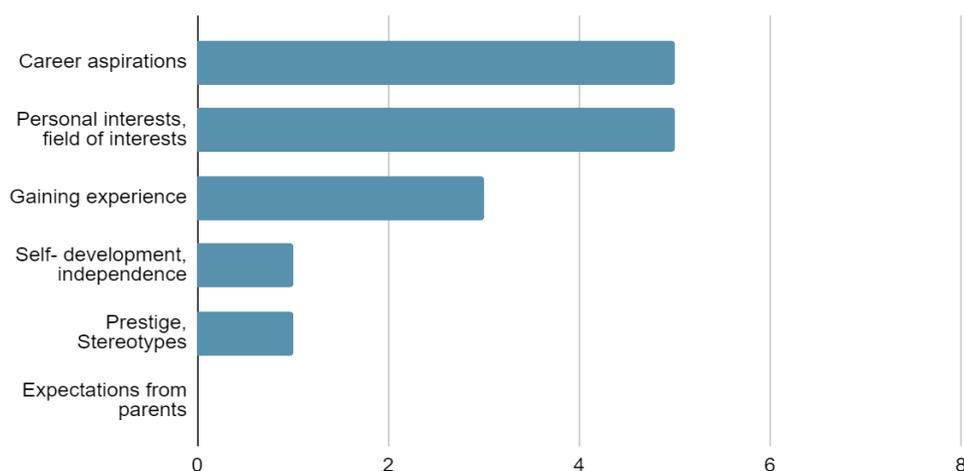

FIGURE 30: REASONS TO CONTINUE WITH FURTHER EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL- WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS

4.2.1.7 Main influencers in the decision-making process

Having established the main factors behind students' decisions regarding the future study destination or university, it is crucial to investigate the stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. With this in mind, parents are considered to be the primary influencer when it comes to the study decisions of Balkan students, followed by university representative as shown in the graph below. (Refer to Figure 31.)

When it comes to the extent to which these influencers are important, Balkan students rate parents and university representatives with 9 and 10 on a Likert scale, where one is not important at all, and ten is very important. Only three out of the eight Balkan students rated themselves as equally important as their parents.

In contrast, Western European students pointed out that they find their parents' decisions important; however, more than half of the interviewed students added that it is only from the financial perspective. In other words, Western European parents' widespread influence on decisions such as country or university is rated below three. Moreover, Western European students say that their parents' opinion is essential; however, it would not have changed their decision.

## Main influencer in the decision- making process Balkan students
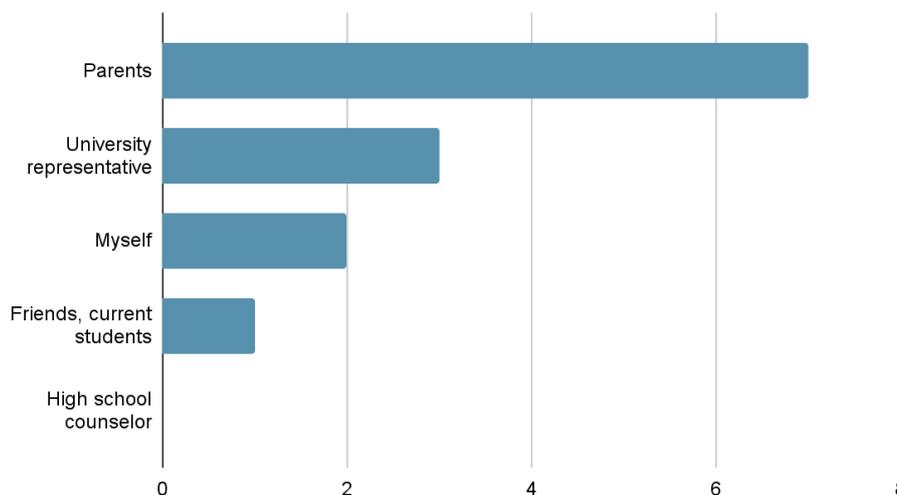
FIGURE 31: MAIN INFLUENCERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS- BALKAN STUDENTS

The study results show a significant difference between Balkan students and Western European in terms of main influencers in the decision-making process and to which extent these stakeholders are influential. While Balkan students rate their parents' influence as very high, Western European students are more likely to depend on themselves when making decisions. After the parents, the most influential stakeholders for Western European students are themselves and their high school counselors, as shown in Figure 32.

## Main influencer in the decision- making process Western European students
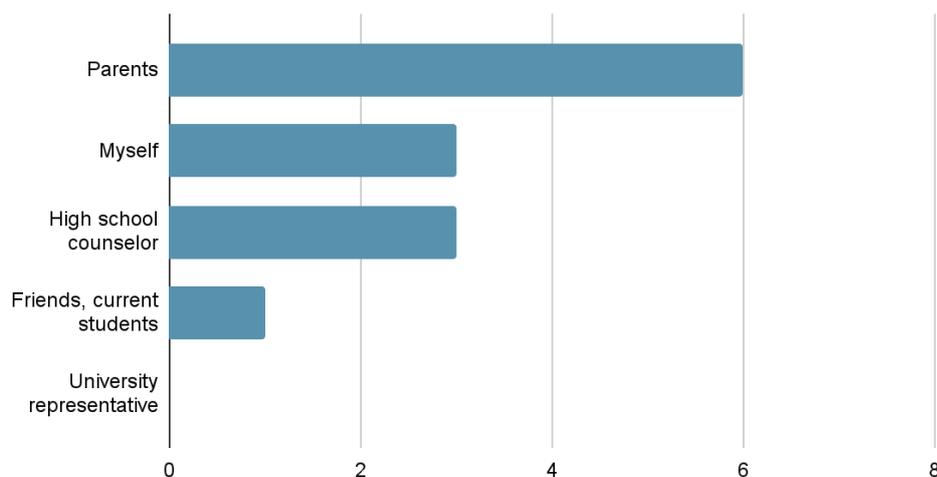
FIGURE 32: MAIN INFLUENCERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS- WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENT

4.2.1.8   Is the choice of the university or the choice of the country more important for students

In order to adapt the recruitment strategies, it is important to understand which of the following factors is more important to students when choosing where to study: the country, the university, or they are equally important.

Figure 33 shows that the most important factor for Balkan students is the country where the university is located. The main priority for Balkan students when it comes to studying abroad is the country followed by the university. None of the Balkan students indicated that they would first choose the university not taking into account the country. On the contrary, more than half of the Western European students share that the university is more important for their decision than the country. Only two out of eight Balkan students and one out of eight Western European say that the country and the university are equally important for their decisions.

Is the university or the country more important
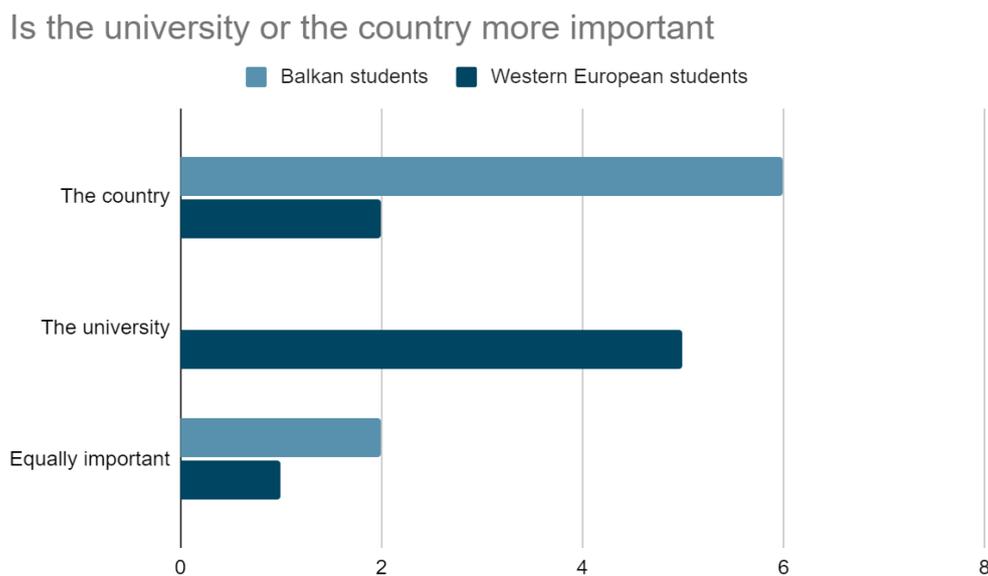
FIGURE 33: IS THE UNIVERSITY OR THE COUNTRY MORE IMPORTANT

Correspondingly, when recruiting, university representatives should know where to emphasize their strategies. For example, when it comes to Balkan students, the recruiters should pivot on location facts, whereas when promoting Western European students, they should focus on the facts about the university.

4.2.2 First point of contact

The second phase of the interviews is "The first point of contact." A valuable tool to retrieve more information about international students' behaviour is investigating how they find out about the university, how they usually find information, and whether they use social media in the research. This not only helps institutions to alter their recruitment strategies but also to track their communication channels.

As shown in Figure 34, the first point of contact that five out of eight Balkan students had was word of mouth. This is another evidence that Balkan students relate to the recommendation from their parents, friends, and relatives. These stakeholders are involved in looking for potential institutions and choosing the right one for the student. In contrast, only one Western European student found out about Modul University Vienna through a recommendation. They had the first point of contact either through fairs in their high

schools or through their high school counselors. This supports the facts above that high school counselors influence students' decisions.
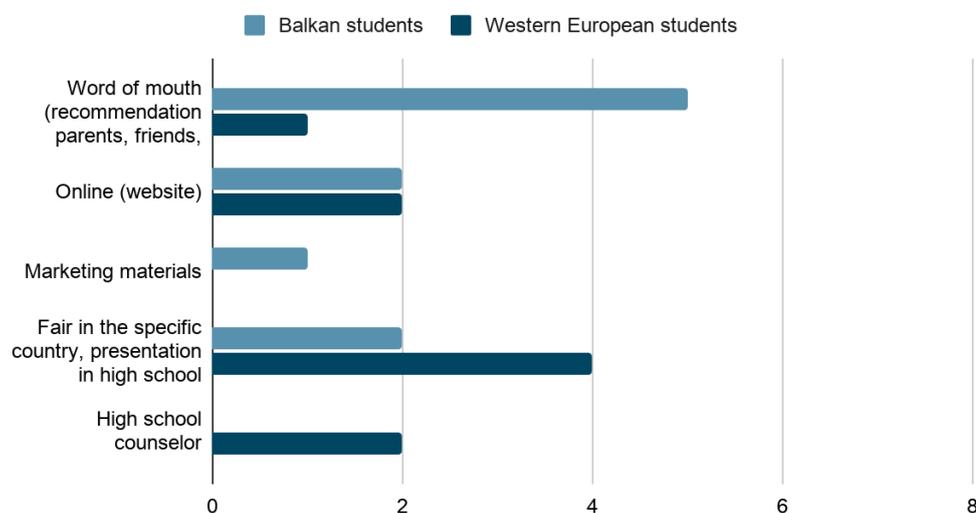

FIGURE 34: FIRST POINT OF CONTACT

4.2.2.1 How students find information

Referring to ways to find information, there are no significant differences between Balkan students and Western European students, as shown in the graph below. All students prefer to do independent research and find the information on their own such as by visiting the institution's website. The website is the primary source of information, followed by emails, as presented in Figure 35. Balkan students are willing to use social media channels or call the university, whereas Western- European students would not look for information there. In addition, Western European students are more likely to consult experts such as university representatives, high school counselors when they have a question.

How do you find information

**Balkan students** ■ **Western European students** ■
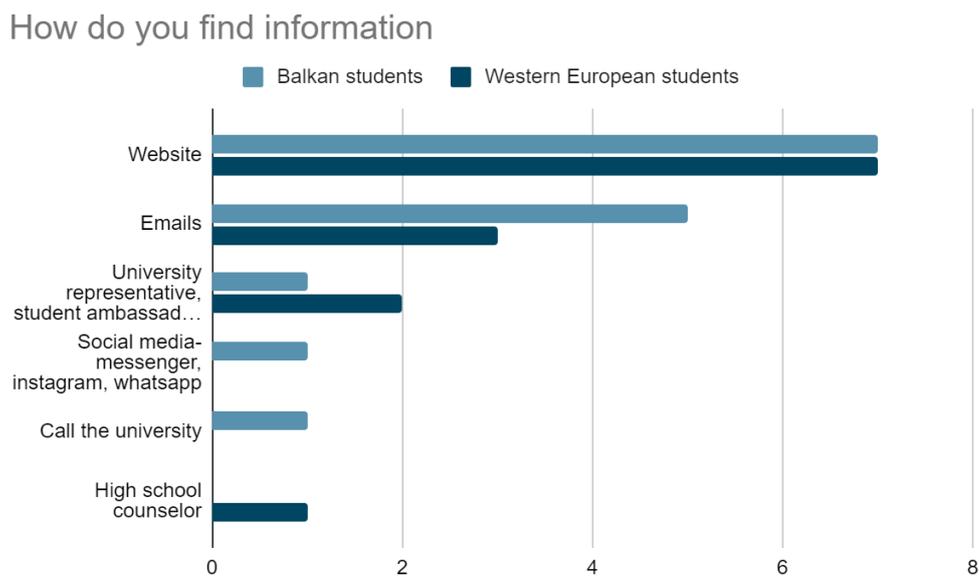
FIGURE 35: HOW DO YOU FIND INFORMATION

From the information presented in Figure 35, universities can get a better idea of how to communicate with the students effectively. According to the interview results, universities should focus on their homepage to be informative, user friendly, and updated as this is the linking point with the students. Seven out of eight students would start their research on the university website. Therefore, all the channels must be informative for the ones that would like to do their own research.

4.2.2.2 Social media in the research process

As shown in Figure 36 and Figure 37, when comparing Balkan and Western European students, it can be seen that both groups are likely to use social media at some stage of the process. However, this is not the primary source of information. Instagram is the most common platform used to research student life. This means that social media is more of a tool for gathering informal information such as student life, student clubs, entertainment. None of the students pointed out that social media helped them decide on where to study. Therefore, institutions need to adapt their social media content according to what students are looking for on these channels.

YouTube is also used for research on the preferred country and city. In addition, students find social media channels an opportunity to connect with current students and gain more information from a student's perspective. Furthermore, students share that they check whether their preferred institutions keep their social media channels up to date. They check if the university posts regularly if they are consistent, and whether the page looks professional.
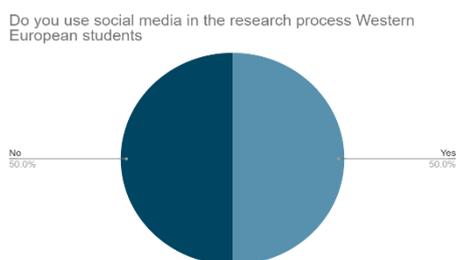
FIGURE 36: SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS
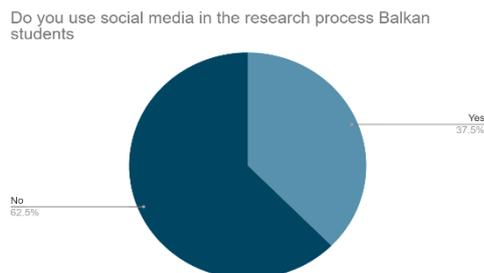
FIGURE 37: SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS BALKAN STUDENTS

All the students who shared that they use social media in the research process collectively listed more than two social media channels they use for research. In other words, higher institutions need to use various platforms where they can share information, facts, and updates targeting the new generation. Therefore, universities must keep investing in their social media channels, tracking which platforms and content generate the most significant interest, and alternate their marketing strategies accordingly.

4.2.2.3 Main communication channel with the preferred institution

The question of how universities should communicate with their prospective students remains. Students from Balkan and Western European countries were asked which channels they would prefer when communicating with universities. Figure 38 shows which is the primary communication channel students use with their preferred institution.

Main communication channel with the preferred institution
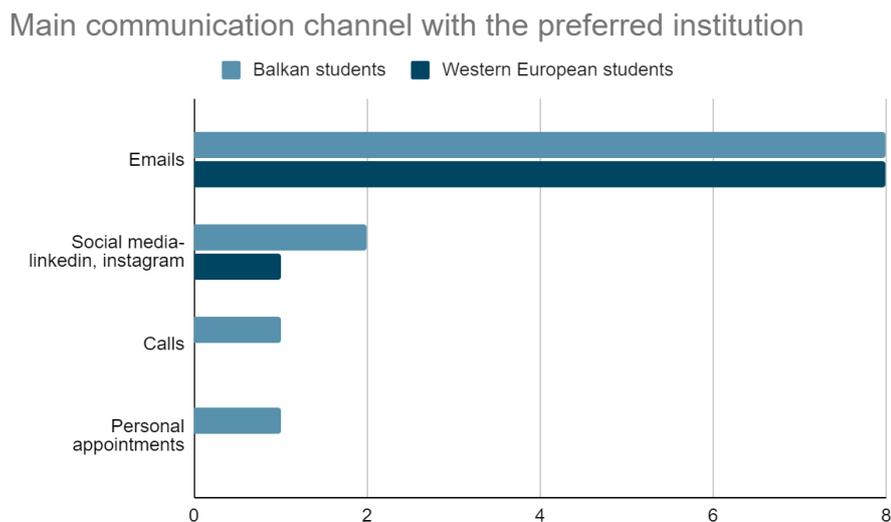
FIGURE 38: MAIN COMMUNICATION CHANNEL WITH THE PREFERRED INSTITUTION

Both Balkan students and Western European students prefer to communicate with the institutions through emails, followed by social media channels such as Instagram. However, less than half of the students would prefer communicating through social media channels. An important point to underline here is that traditional communication methods such as emails remain the most preferred channel to communicate with future students. Therefore, even though social media platforms are essential nowadays, institutions should keep focusing on traditional channels as they are the most preferred tool for communication.

4.2.3 Decision- making process

4.2.3.1 The moment students were convinced

Figure 39 shows the moment students were convinced that they would like to enrol in Modul University Vienna. It can be seen that both Balkan students and Western- European students were convinced after they visited the campus or talked to a university representative. Experience shows that the conversion rate from prospective students to candidates is highest when prospects visit the campus. It can also be seen that talking to their parents is not crucial in this process of Balkan students. This could be because the parents had influence at the beginning of the researching process- therefore, the parents have researched and approved all the institutions' Balkan students have initially applied to.

Therefore, their decisions now are not of much importance. On the other hand, as the parents were not involved in researching and choosing universities for Western European students, their influence can be seen in the later stage of the student journey. However, again, only two people of eight Western European students pointed out that they were convinced after talking to their parents.

The moment you were convinced
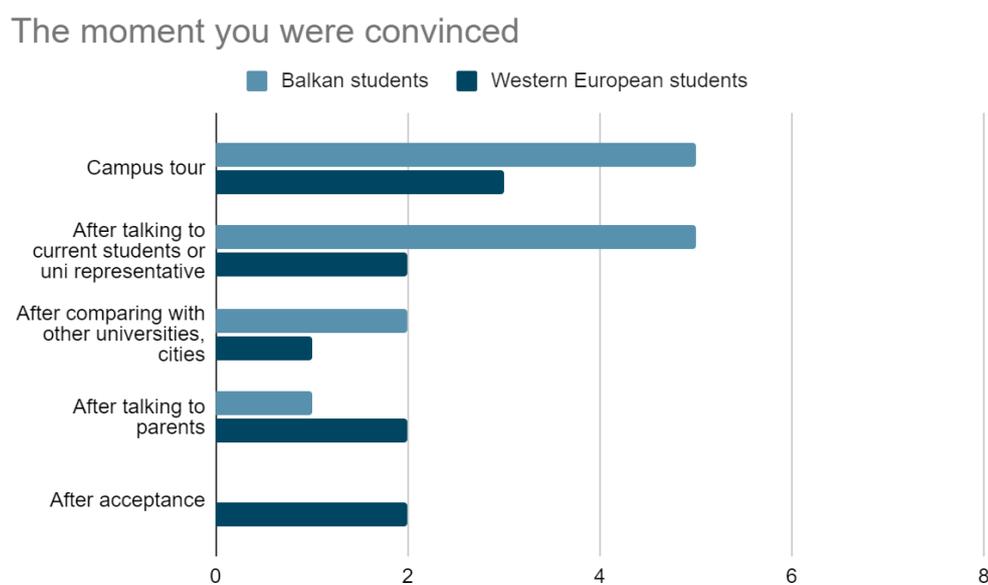
FIGURE 39: THE MOMENT STUDENTS WERE CONVINCED

4.2.3.2   Relatives who study abroad

As observed in Figure 32, relatives and friends play an essential role in the decision-making process. Therefore, one of the questions aimed to understand whether having a relative abroad would influence students' decisions. Figure 40 and Figure 41 depict that half of the Balkan students, and more than half of the Western European students have a relative abroad. One Balkan student out of these five and two students out of the six shared that this factor influenced them. However, for the rest of the students, this did not play an important role.

Balkan students

Western European students
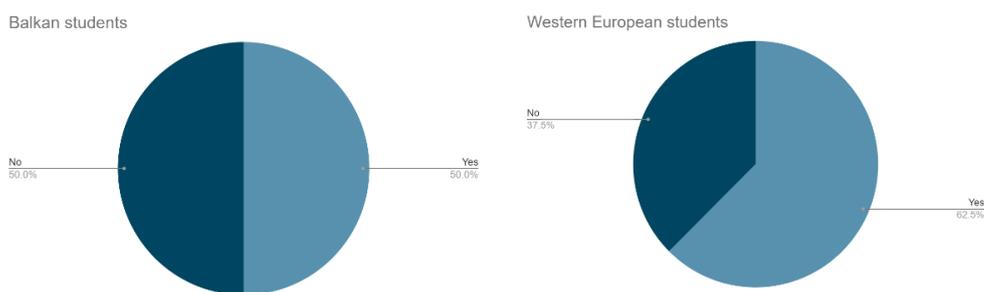
FIGURE 40: RELATIVE WHO STUDIES ABROAD BALKAN STUDENTS

FIGURE 41: RELATIVE WHO STUDIES ABROAD WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS

4.2.3.3 Consulting agents

Based on the author's experience and the admissions statistics, many Balkan students apply to universities through agents. This is because they are seen as trustworthy sources when it comes to studying opportunities. However, the interview results demonstrate a different trend as shown in Figure 42 and Figure 43.

Did you consult agents Balkan students

Did you consult agents Western European students
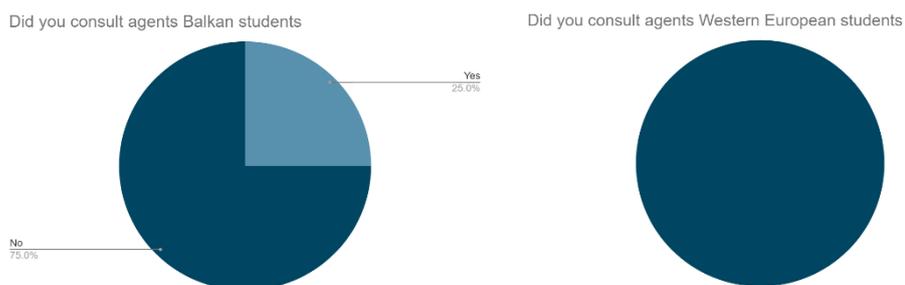
FIGURE 42: DID YOU CONSULT AGENTS BALKAN STUDENTS

FIGURE 43: DID YOU CONSULT AGENTS WESTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS

Only two Balkan students out of eight have consulted agents during the application process. Not surprisingly, none of the Western European students have consulted agents. Based on the conversations with the students, it can be observed that participants would instead consult agents for more general information and consultation than for assistance with the application. Furthermore, they say that agents could not influence their decisions about where and what to study.

4.2.4 Post- decision phase

4.2.4.1 Student journey

Seven out of eight Balkan students rated their student journey from the moment they found out about the university to the beginning of classes with a 10 or 9 on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 is negative and 10 is positive. A positive student journey is defined by a high response rate, punctuality, flexibility, friendly and supportive behavior from faculty and staff. In addition, students had a positive student journey because they felt like they were welcome and safe and that there is a personalized approach towards them. Some students share that they did not feel like just a number but like individuals with their interests and motivations. Furthermore, students point out that having a straightforward process and application is also important to have a positive student journey.

Referring to the Western European students, only two participants rated their student journey with 10. They pointed out the same factors as the Balkan students. However, even without specifying any difficulties or pain points, some students rated their student journeys with 7 or 5. Only two students had difficulties because of lack of communication and lack of transparency. A delay in a response or not a clear answer might influence the overall study experience before the beginning of classes. Therefore, institutions need to make sure that they provide clear and transparent information in a timely and personalized manner to ensure a positive student journey. Prompt replies are vitally crucial for universities when communicating with prospective students.

4.2.4.2 The impact of COVID- 19 on the student journey

Another critical factor to consider as part of the student journey is how external factors such as the COVID- 19 crisis might influence the overall study experience. Therefore, one of the questions in the interviews was tackling this challenge. It is a fact that COVID-19 affected education, as well as the student experiences. This question aims to understand the concerns of Balkan and Western European students and their parents. The results would be helpful to come up with a strategy in order to meet their needs and enhance their student satisfaction and overall student experience. Also, it is important to mention that prospective university students might be reluctant to go abroad nowadays because of the uncertainties related to the crisis. According to the interviewed students, COVID- 19 negatively influenced their studies, resulting in decreased motivation, focus, concentration, and inability to participate in class. Most of the students point out that the biggest challenge is the lack of personal contact with their colleagues and professors. They add that university life is a lot about socializing, creating networks, lifetime friendships, and due to the lockdown, this was impossible; therefore, the whole study experience was affected.

At the same time, it is essential to mention that some students believe that COVID- 19 had a positive impact on their study experience. They point out that they improved their time management, and in this way, they had more time to focus on other projects and interests. They could also pick up new skills and hobbies. The grades of these students were also not affected.

4.3 Parent´s results

Given that parents play a crucial role in the decision-making process, it is essential to understand the main factors they value when it comes to their children's higher education. In order to understand the role of the parents, it is also crucial to evaluate how much influence they have. During the interview, the students were asked how much influence their parents had on their decisions. Similarly, in the interview with the parents, the parents were asked how much influence they think they have on their children's decisions. It is interesting to see whether there is an alignment between parents and students or any differences in these two groups' expectations. Eight Balkan and five Western- European parents were interviewed. (See Table 2)

4.3.1   Factors when choosing a study destination

Referring to the parents, there are some factors related to the study destination which influenced their decision. More than half of the parents in both groups identify Vienna as the main influential factor. The parents value factors such as safety, good quality of life, and high-quality education in a capital city. In addition, both Balkan and Western European parents specified that it is important for them that their study destination is close to their home country.

4.3.2   Top study destinations

Eleven out of thirteen parents said that Austria is among the top countries they considered for their child's further education. Five out of eight Balkan parents choose the UK after Austria. The same trend was observed among the Balkan students. Switzerland, Germany and Spain follow this. Interestingly, none of the Western European parents considered the UK. This group is interested in the Netherlands, Italy, or Dubai.

4.3.3   Reasons to continue with further education and university choice

Correspondingly, to fully understand parents' reasons, some of the questions aim to gather more information on what parents value when it comes to their children's further education.

Balkan parents believe that studying abroad would lead to financial independence and personal development and assure a "bright future." They also value factors such as career opportunities, prosperity, broadening of knowledge and skills. Some parents also pointed out that they would like it if their kids can apply what they have learned abroad in their home country after graduation.

Western European parents point out that one of the main factors influencing their decision regarding their kids' education is if the country offers the field of studies that their child is interested in. Moreover, another critical factor is the language of instruction- parents prefer countries with universities offering English courses. In addition, the value if the

country offers a safe environment, where their child would feel welcome. In addition, one of the parents shared that they were looking for a place "where their child is happy."

4.3.4 The level of influence parents have on their children´s decisions

In comparison to the results of the Balkan students, there is a significant difference between students and parents. The most compelling evidence is that only one out of eight Balkan parents rated their influence with 10 (very high), which is interesting, considering that seven out of eight Balkan students rated their parent's influence as very important. Most Balkan parents rate their influence between 2 and 5, which is relatively low compared to their children's ratings.

Similarly, Western European parents rate their influence as relatively low which complies with the results from the Western European students.

4.3.5 Relatives who study abroad

When it comes to the relatives studying abroad, none of the parents from both groups said that this influenced their decisions or their children's preferences.

4.3.6 The impact of COVID- 19 on the study journey

When it comes to COVID-19, Balkan and Western European parents share similar concerns. From a parent's perspective, the biggest concern is the inability of students to socialize. Some parents shared the fear of missing out, in other words, that their kids will not have a "normal" university experience, no contact with the professors or their classmates. This might lead to an inability to learn how to organize one's days, manage oneself, and create networks. In addition, some parents point out that they find online education a "waste of money, time and energy.

Furthermore, a stumbling economy and a good company choice for the first job after graduation are also among the concerns parents have. Some parents pointed out that the studies do not provide enough guidance into work-life; therefore, getting a job after graduation might be challenging. Out of the thirteen parents interviewed, only one Western European parent said she has no concerns related to COVID- 19 and her child's education.

As seen from the analysis of the interviews, parents play a crucial role in students' decision-making process. Students from the Balkan countries are more dependent on their parents' wishes than students from Western- Europe. Correspondingly, recruiters should develop their strategies in a way to target these critical influencers.

4.4   Agent´s results

As the study focuses on a sample group- current students or graduates from Modul University Vienna, the author conducted interviews with two agents in the Balkans countries. The reason for this is to understand better the general study motivations and concerns of Balkan students. Two agencies in the Balkans took part- one in Bulgaria and one in Serbia. Both agencies have different offices across the Balkans- Albania, Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria; therefore, the insights they have shared are covering the Balkan region.

4.4.1   Concerns that Balkan students have when choosing a study destination

To begin with, the first question of the interview aims to understand the main concerns Balkan students have when choosing a destination. The Serbian agent points out that recognition of the diploma, employment options afterward, and safety are among the main factors that Balkan students consider. Correspondingly, the Bulgarian agent shares that one of the challenges high school students face is discovering their vocation, thus the program that will lead them there. Besides, there is a concern of making the right choice. This concern is often influenced by multiple factors – entry requirements, financial aspects, rankings, future career development. Although there is plenty of information available, it often might be confusing, making it challenging to filter the most appropriate data and extract the essentials. According to the agent, Bulgarian students predominantly look for programs taught in English, followed by courses in German and French. When considering the factors mentioned above, they seek to balance affordable education, good rankings, and excellent career prospects. The top study destinations among these groups are the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria.

4.4.2   Main factors that Balkan students consider when choosing a university

The second question focuses on the main factors that Balkan students consider when choosing a university. The Serbian agent shares that these students value if there are any scholarships available. Likewise, the stable economy of the country, and closeness to home are among the main factors. Moreover, experiences of other students living and studying in that country, prestige, and ranking of the university they are to attend. The most compelling evidence is that the Balkan agents have used the main factors such as proximity to home country and stable economy and the word "prestige." That is to say that the answers of the Balkan students alternate with those of the agents.

In like manner, the Bulgarian agent shares that Balkan students are interested mainly in the program's content and the possibilities of internship and practical aspects of the education. In addition, the university's ranking, feedback from other students and friends, tuition fees are among the top factors. Some additional factors are the location, accommodation, and exchange opportunities.

It is interesting to see that both agents mentioned that rankings are among the most important factors for Balkan students. However, according to the interview results with the students, rankings were among the least important for Balkan students compared to Western European students.

4.4.3   How much support do Balkan students need during the application process

When it comes to the support throughout the application process, the Serbian agent shares that students generally need more support and information for Bachelor's programs. Moreover, students need reassurance that the program and the university are recognized and that it is a good choice for them. Likewise, the Bulgarian agent says that students need as much information as possible, including a comparison between institutions with the agent's help.

For Balkan students the most popular study disciplines are Business, Economics, Psychology, and Computer Science. Correspondingly, speaking of the industries, students

from this region are interested in Information Technology, Business, Marketing, Economics, Tourism and Hospitality, Design, Engineering. Consulting.

As agents play a crucial role in the student recruitment process, they are also the first contact many students have with the prospective institution. As there has been an increase in agents in the past years, universities need to understand how to cooperate with them. Therefore, one of the questions in the interviews focuses on agents' consulting. This question aims to understand whether agents recommend universities that are not part of their network. Both agents share that they offer support for any university, whether they are partners or not; however, they would recommend only their partner institutions.

4.4.4 Concerns regarding the impact of COVID- 19 on the student journey

Moreover, referring to COVID- 19, according to the agents, parents' biggest concerns related to the study mode are that their children would not be able to participate in physical lectures and experience student life like before. The top concern would be, however, the health risk. Besides, they also share that the student's accommodation is a concern and the financial aspect- whether and how the pandemic will influence the household income.

According to the QS (2020), generally, agents are set to be one of the leading players in student recruitment; therefore, universities need to build strong relationships. Furthermore, due to the pandemic, students do not have the opportunity to visit different fairs and talk directly to the university representatives. Correspondingly, agents might play even a more prominent role in the connection between students and universities.

4.5 Summary of results

In conclusion, students, parents, and agents took part in the semistructured interviews. The students and their parents are representatives of Modul University Vienna. The participants were guided through four phases including the pre-decision, first point of contact, decision-making and post- decision. Factors such proximity to home country, future career consideration, culture and mentality are most important for prospective students when choosing where to study. The top study destination among Balkan and Western European students representing Modul University Vienna are Austria and the UK. Study

program matching the interests, language of instruction is amongst the priorities for candidates. It is interesting to point out that a university´s ranking is a crucial factor for Western European students, in contrast to Balkan students. Furthermore, parents have a significant influence on Balkan students where 90% of the students continue their education because of their parents´ expectations. It is interesting to see based on the results, that Balkan parents do not realize their influence on their children. On the contrary, Western European parents do not have the same influence on their children. Here, high school counselors are most likely to advise when it comes to higher education decisions. Education Agents are viewed as a helpful resource with narrowing down the university options and destinations, however none of the students that take part in the interviews applied through agents.

5   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this master thesis aims to examine whether there any specific recruitment strategies needed for students coming from Balkan countries and how do they differentiate from strategies for Western European countries. In order to do that, secondary data describing the global student mobility trends and comparing Eastern European and Western European students is collected. In addition, an explanation of student recruitment strategies, student journey, and student personas is provided. The data is retrieved from journals, reports, surveys, and websites.

The methodology approach used to test the hypothesis of whether there is a need for specific recruitment strategies in the Balkan countries was following a qualitative method. Factors such as study motivations, university and country choice, stakeholders, the first point of contact, COVID- 19 concerns were taken into account. In addition, a convenience sampling was done, interviewing international students from Modul University Vienna. In order to fully understand whether there is a difference between Balkan students and Western European students, semistructured interviews with students and parents representing both regions were made. This method inevitably helped to outline some significant differences between the two groups. After investigating these differences, strategic implications and recommendations for institutions were provided. In this way, universities can alter their recruitment strategies and increase the conversion rate of Balkan students.

5.1   Research question

Are there any specific recruitment strategies needed for students coming from Balkan countries and how do they differentiate from strategies for Western European countries?

Based on the results of the conducted semistructured interviews and the collected secondary literature, the author is able to answer the research question. Overall, in many respects, Balkan and Western European students share similar views; however, there are some differences that should be taken into account.

The research results show that the most significant difference between Balkans and Western Europeans is the parent's influence in the decision-making process. 90% of the Balkan students shared that they continued with their higher education because of their parents' expectations. In order words, Balkan students are heavily influenced by their parents' wishes and motivations. In contrast, none of the Western European students pointed that they are pursuing an undergraduate degree because of their parents; in their case, personal interests play a crucial role. However, it is interesting to mention that Balkan parents do not realize their influence on their children's decisions as only one parent rated their influence as "very important." Therefore, if parents play such an important role in the decision-making process, it is essential to take into consideration the factors that they tend to value the most when it comes to their children´s further education. These are career opportunities, prosperity, broadening of knowledge and skills.

Moreover, Balkan parents believe that studying abroad would lead to financial independence and personal development and assure a "bright future." Knowing the importance of parents for Balkan students, universities need to adapt their recruitment strategies accordingly. Targeting Balkan parents and highlighting the factors they value can lead to successful enrollments and increasing interest from these regions. In addition, in this region, personal interactions are of high value.

Furthermore, word of mouth and recommendations from friends and current students are among the predominant ways of finding information for Balkan students. Universities should also focus on ensuring a positive student journey for their current students- from the moment of enrolment to graduation. In this way, attracting Balkan students through word of mouth can be ensured.

Another leading factor that significantly differentiates Balkan students from Western European students is the importance of the study destination. Balkan students would first choose the country they would like to study in and then the university. In contrast, Western European students would first choose the university, followed by the country. Factors such as language, quality of life, culture are among the most important ones for the Balkans. Therefore, universities should focus their marketing campaigns on promoting the study destination and safety, giving relevant information about the culture and life.

Furthermore, based on the interview results, rankings would not serve as a strong recruitment and marketing tool in the Balkan countries. This a factor that these students value least.

In conclusion, choosing the right university, country, and study program remains an emotional and life-changing period for students. Identifying the institution's unique selling points will help determine the competitive advantage and will contribute to build a marketing and recruitment strategy. Universities can use the detailed findings in this report to develop strategic recruitment for an increasing Balkan audience of applicants. Recruiters should take into account the fundamental motivations behind applicant choices. In addition, universities should invest time and resources in creating student personas identifying target students' needs and concerns. Based on this, they will be able to provide a personalized and student-centered approach leading to more applicant conversions and satisfied students.

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5.2   Limitations

The study faced some limitations. The thesis is based on convenience sampling where only students from Modul University Vienna took part in the interview. The limitation of the convenience sampling is that it could lead to poor quality data, as well research's reliability (Farrugia, 2019). In this case the assumptions presented in the report are based on only one private institution.

Another limitation is the ethical issue concerning the relationship between the interviewer and the participants if there was a power imbalance (Farrugia, 2019). The researcher is a representative of the university; therefore, participants might be cautious to fully share their opinion. In addition, the sample size might not be significant for making general assumptions about Balkan students and their study motivations.

Lastly, the interviews were conducted during the COVID- 19 pandemic, therefore students and parents´ replies might have been influenced by this external factor. Therefore, their perceptions might change after the pandemic is over.

5.3   Future research

In order to fully develop this research, interviews with more students, parents, and agents have to be conducted. As mentioned above, using convenience sampling might limit the results. It would be interesting to interview students from other private institutions in Austria and other countries as well.

In addition, it is an undeniable fact that COVID- 19 affected the overall student experience and the recruitment and marketing strategies of universities. Virtual events have played a vital role in recruitment activities, and they provided an easy way to engage with prospective students from all around the world. However, keeping the students engaged has been challenging throughout the academic year. Lack of motivation and the feeling of "missing out" have been among the most significant concerns students and parents have. However, experts believe that the recruitment scene will never be the same. Claire Whittingham, Managing Director of QS Digital & Events, says: "After the ability to travel opens up, we still believe that student recruitment will have changed forever. Both virtual and physical recruitment events will continue to ensure strong return on investment and prove appealing from an accessibility perspective. Having the right mix of event products will only provide more recruitment options across every region of the world to help meet candidate and higher the education needs. (QS, 2021, p.6)"

Inevitably, COVID-19 changed prospective student´s motivations and concerns. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct research in a post COVID- 19 era and see whether there are any significant differences influencing student´s decisions regarding their higher education after the pandemic.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name
2. Age
3. Country
4. Are you currently enrolled in a university?
    1. If yes, which one?
    2. If no, which university are you a graduate from?

5. In which program are you currently enrolled/ were enrolled?

Pre-decision phase

6.   Which are the three most important factors when choosing a country to study in? Please list them based on importance.
7.   List three countries (if relevant) you considered for your further education.
8.   Which are the three most important factors when choosing a university? Please list them based on importance.
9.   Name three preferred study disciplines. Please list them based on importance.
10.   In which industry would you like to work after graduation?
11.   Specify three reasons based on which you decided to continue with your further education? Please list them based on importance.
12.   What is/was more important for your decision: (a) the country the university is located or (b) the university as an institution or (c) both equally important?

First point of contact

13.   What was the first point of contact with the university?
14.   How do you find information when you have a question about the application?
15.   Do you use social media as part of the research process when deciding where to study? If yes, which social media platform and why?
16.   Which is the main communication channel you use with your preferred institution?

Decision- making phase

17.   During your student journey, when was the moment you were convinced that you would like to enroll in the university?
18.   Who was the main influencer in the decision- making process? - Agents, parents, high school advisors, university reps? Please provide some details.
19.   How did you perceive the importance of these influencers? Please rate from not important at all to very important on a scale from 1 to 10.
20.   Do you have a relative who studies/studied abroad? If yes, did he/she influence your decision?
21.   Did you consult agents? If yes, did you find it helpful? Grade it on a scale from 1 to 10.

Post- decision phase

22.   On a scale from 1 to 10, how satisfactory was your student journey until the study start?
23.   Please specify some reasons why the student journey was satisfactory or not.
24.   Did you experience any difficulties your student journey? If yes, please specify.
25.   If you are a current student, how did COVID-19 influence your overall study experience? Please rate on a scale from 1-10 and provide some insights.

Interviews with Parents:

1. Which were the three main factors that influenced your decision regarding your kid's further education?
2. Which were the top three study destinations you considered for your child's further education? And why?
3. Which was the crucial point related to the study destination that influenced your decision?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much influence do you think you had on your child's study decisions?
5. Do you have a relative who studies/studied abroad?
6. Which are the three main concerns you have related to COVID-19 and your child's further education (Applicable to parents of current students)

Interviews with Agents:

1. Which are according to your experience the main concerns Balkan students have when choosing a study destination?
2. Which are according to your experience the main factors that influence Balkan students' decisions when choosing a university?
3. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much support do Balkan students need when it comes to the decision- making process? Please provide some insights.
4. Which are the top three study destinations for Balkan students?
5. Which are the top three study disciplines that Balkan students go for?
6. In which industries are Balkan students interested after graduation?
7. Do you recommend universities that are only part of your network or others as well?
8. Which are the three main concerns that parents and students have regarding COVID-19 and higher education?