

Why Do Students Choose Certain Mobility Destinations? An Exploratory Study of Decision Factors and Post-Mobility Satisfaction

Kornélia Sára Szatmáry

Obuda University

szatmary.sara@stud.uni-obuda.hu

Péter Szikora

Obuda University, Keleti Károly Faculty of Business and Management

szikora.peter@kgk.uni-obuda.hu

Abstract: Justify International student mobility has become an increasingly important component of higher education, offering significant academic, cultural, and personal benefits. However, the decision-making process behind selecting a mobility destination is complex and influenced by multiple interrelated factors. This study aims to identify and analyze the key determinants that shape students' mobility choices and to examine how these factors relate to their post-mobility satisfaction.

The research adopts a mixed approach, combining a structured literature review with a questionnaire-based exploratory study. The literature review synthesizes existing findings on student mobility decision-making, while the empirical component is based on survey responses collected from university students with and without prior mobility experience. The questionnaire focuses on the perceived importance of academic, economic, social, cultural, and geographic factors, as well as satisfaction levels among students who have already completed their mobility period.

The findings indicate that, in addition to academic considerations such as course compatibility and institutional reputation, non-academic factors—including city attractiveness, lifestyle, and cost of living – play a significant role in shaping student decisions. Furthermore, preliminary results suggest that factors influencing initial choice are not always aligned with those contributing to post-mobility satisfaction.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of student mobility behavior and highlights the importance of integrating both academic and lifestyle-related factors in the design of decision-support tools for mobility planning.

Keywords: Student mobility, Mobility decision-making, Post-mobility satisfaction, Internationalisation of higher education

1 Introduction

International student mobility has become a central element of modern higher education, contributing significantly to academic development, intercultural competence, and employability [1]. Participation in mobility programmes enables students to gain international experience, broaden their perspectives, and acquire skills that are increasingly valued in a globalised labour market [2]. As a result, studying abroad is no longer considered a supplementary opportunity but an integral part of many students' academic trajectories [3].

Despite its well-documented benefits, the process of selecting a mobility destination remains complex and often challenging. Students are required to evaluate multiple criteria simultaneously, including academic compatibility, financial feasibility, cultural environment, and personal preferences [4]. These decisions are typically made based on fragmented sources of information, such as university websites, informal recommendations, and prior student experiences, which vary significantly in structure and reliability [5]. Consequently, the decision-making process is characterised by uncertainty, cognitive overload, and limited transparency.

Existing research has identified a wide range of factors influencing student mobility decisions, often categorised into academic, economic, social, cultural, and geographic dimensions. However, less attention has been paid to the relationship between the factors that influence students' initial choices and those that contribute to their satisfaction after completing mobility [6]. This potential mismatch raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of current decision-making processes and the adequacy of available support mechanisms.

The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the key determinants that shape students' mobility choices and to examine how these factors relate to post-mobility satisfaction. By combining insights from the literature with empirical data collected through a questionnaire-based survey, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student mobility behaviour. Furthermore, the findings aim to contribute to the development of more effective decision-support approaches by highlighting the importance of aligning decision factors with actual student experiences.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Student Mobility and Its Growing Importance

Student mobility has become an increasingly significant component of higher education systems worldwide, contributing to both individual student development

and the internationalisation of universities [1]. Participation in mobility programmes enables students to acquire intercultural competencies, develop language skills, and enhance their employability, positioning mobility as a key instrument in academic and professional growth [7].

The growing importance of student mobility is reflected in its expansion over recent decades, as internationalisation has evolved from a peripheral activity into a central strategic objective of higher education institutions [8]. Consequently, an increasing number of students consider studying abroad as an integral part of their academic trajectory, making the decision-making process surrounding mobility both more relevant and more complex

2.2 Determinants of Student Mobility Decisions

The decision to participate in student mobility is influenced by a wide range of factors, commonly conceptualised in the literature as “push” and “pull” factors [9]. Push factors refer to conditions in the home environment that encourage students to seek opportunities abroad, while pull factors describe the characteristics of the destination that attract them. Academic considerations are consistently identified as primary determinants of mobility decisions. These include course availability, compatibility with the home curriculum, and the perceived quality and reputation of the host institution. Economic factors also play a critical role, particularly in relation to cost of living, financial support, and travel-related expenses.

However, the literature increasingly highlights the importance of non-academic factors in shaping student preferences [10]. Elements such as city attractiveness, cultural environment, lifestyle, climate, and opportunities for social interaction significantly influence destination choice. In many cases, these lifestyle-related aspects are equally important as academic considerations, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of student decision-making. Beyond these structural factors, personal and psychological aspects also contribute to the decision process. Individual motivation, risk perception, prior international exposure, and peer influence can shape both the willingness to participate in mobility and the final choice of destination. This highlights that mobility decisions are not purely rational but involve subjective and context-dependent elements.

2.3 Complexity of the Decision-Making Process

Despite the well-documented benefits of student mobility, the decision-making process remains complex and often challenging [7]. Students are required to evaluate multiple criteria simultaneously, often without clear prioritisation or structured guidance. This multi-criteria nature of the decision increases cognitive load and makes it difficult to identify optimal choices.

One of the primary challenges lies in the fragmentation of available information. Students typically rely on multiple heterogeneous sources, including university websites, course catalogues, administrative guidelines, and informal recommendations. These sources vary significantly in structure, terminology, and level of detail, making direct comparison difficult. As a result, students often rely on subjective interpretation, which can lead to uncertainty and suboptimal decisions.

A further difficulty is the evaluation of academic compatibility between institutions. Course descriptions are typically unstructured and differ in terminology, making it challenging to assess equivalence between courses. This issue is particularly critical in structured programmes, where prerequisite knowledge and curriculum alignment are essential. Consequently, students must invest significant effort in manually comparing course content, often without sufficient support.

Administrative requirements, such as the preparation of learning agreements and the management of credit recognition processes, introduce additional complexity. These tasks are frequently time-consuming and require navigating institutional procedures that may not be transparent or standardised.

2.4 The Hungarian and Institutional Context

These challenges are also evident in the Hungarian higher education context, where student mobility is primarily facilitated through programmes such as Erasmus+ and the Pannónia Programme [11]. These initiatives provide structured opportunities and financial support, contributing to the expansion of mobility participation [10].

However, the coexistence of multiple programmes, institutional frameworks, and mobility formats increases the complexity of the decision-making environment. Differences in eligibility criteria, curriculum structures, and application procedures across universities make it difficult for students to compare options effectively [12]. At the institutional level, particularly in engineering and informatics programmes such as those at Óbuda University, mobility planning is further constrained by structured curricula and prerequisite dependencies. Students must carefully select courses that align with their home programmes, making academic compatibility a critical factor in decision-making. From the student perspective, these structural and institutional characteristics result in a fragmented and cognitively demanding process [13]. The lack of standardised and integrated support mechanisms reinforces reliance on informal information sources and increases the likelihood of uncertainty during decision-making [14].

Overall, the literature demonstrates that student mobility decisions are shaped by a complex interaction of academic, economic, social, and personal factors, while the decision-making process itself is characterised by fragmented information and high cognitive demands. At the same time, existing studies tend to focus either on the

determinants of mobility decisions or on the outcomes of mobility experiences, with relatively limited attention given to the relationship between these two perspectives. In particular, the extent to which the factors influencing students' initial choices align with those contributing to their post-mobility satisfaction remains insufficiently explored.

Understanding this relationship is essential, as discrepancies between expectations and experiences may lead to suboptimal decisions and reduced overall satisfaction. Therefore, examining both decision factors and post-mobility outcomes within a unified framework can provide a more comprehensive insight into student mobility behaviour and support more effective decision-making processes.

3 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, questionnaire-based exploratory research design to investigate the factors influencing students' mobility destination choices and their post-mobility satisfaction. Data were collected through an online questionnaire developed using Google Forms.

The survey targeted students of Óbuda University, including both students who had already participated in an international mobility programme and those who had not yet gained mobility experience. This allowed the study to examine both anticipated decision factors and reported post-mobility experiences.

A total of 127 valid responses were collected, consisting of 71 female and 56 male respondents, with an average age of 23.2 years. The sample included students from all study levels, predominantly Bachelor's students (102 respondents), complemented by Master's (12) and PhD students (13).

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The first collected demographic information, while the second examined the perceived importance of various destination-selection criteria using a five-point Likert scale. The evaluated factors covered academic, economic, geographic, cultural, and social dimensions, including course compatibility, scholarship opportunities, cost of living, safety, accommodation, university reputation, lifestyle, language, and travel opportunities.

Students with previous mobility experience completed an additional section measuring their satisfaction with different aspects of their mobility experience, including courses, hosting university, accommodation, city, social life, university support, and overall satisfaction. Finally, respondents were asked open-ended questions regarding the primary reason behind their destination choice, whether they would select the same destination again, and what advice they would give to future mobility participants.

Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to compare the relative importance of the examined factors and to identify similarities and differences between demographic groups and between expectations and post-mobility experiences.

4 Results

The results demonstrate that students consider a broad range of factors when selecting a mobility destination, confirming the multidimensional nature of mobility decision-making identified in the literature.

Among all examined criteria, safety emerged as the most important consideration, receiving the highest average score from both male (4.63) and female (5.03) respondents. Cost of living also ranked among the highest priorities, followed by the attractiveness of the destination country, language-related considerations, and academic factors such as course compatibility and course availability. These findings suggest that although academic considerations remain essential, practical and lifestyle-related aspects have become equally influential during destination selection.

Some gender differences were also observed. Female respondents consistently assigned higher importance to most decision factors, particularly safety, cost of living, travel opportunities, teaching language availability, and city attractiveness. In contrast, male respondents placed slightly greater emphasis on international university reputation. Nevertheless, both groups displayed remarkably similar overall ranking patterns, indicating a broadly shared perception of what constitutes an attractive mobility destination. Table 1 presents the mean importance ratings assigned to each decision factor. The "Diff" column represents the difference between the average ratings of female and male respondents.

Factors	Male	Female	Total	Diff
Travel opportunities	4.07	4.49	4.30	-0.42
Safety	4.63	5.03	4.85	-0.40
Teaching language availability	4.18	4.58	4.40	-0.40
Cost of living	4.45	4.84	4.66	-0.39
Distance from home	3.38	3.77	3.59	-0.39
Attractiveness of the city	4.32	4.57	4.46	-0.24
Available courses	4.32	4.55	4.45	-0.23
Attractiveness of the country	4.43	4.65	4.55	-0.22
Scholarship amount	4.27	4.43	4.36	-0.17
Language of country	4.39	4.54	4.47	-0.14
Weather/climate	3.70	3.81	3.76	-0.12
Cultural life	4.00	4.10	4.06	-0.10
Career opportunities	4.39	4.45	4.42	-0.06
Accommodation	4.36	4.35	4.35	0.01
Compatibility of subjects	4.43	4.41	4.42	0.02
Recommendations from friends	4.05	4.03	4.04	0.02
University reputation	3.93	3.90	3.91	0.03
International reputation	4.23	4.06	4.14	0.17

The satisfaction analysis among students who had already completed a mobility

Table 2

Mean importance ratings of mobility destination selection factors by gender

programme revealed generally positive experiences. Social life (4.01), the destination city (4.05), and overall mobility satisfaction (3.98) achieved the highest average evaluations, while accommodation (3.89), the hosting university (3.90), and courses (3.83) also received favourable assessments. These results indicate that participants were generally satisfied with both the academic and non-academic dimensions of their mobility experience.

Factors	Male	Female	Total	Diff
Accommodation	4.00	3.80	3.89	0.20
University support	4.00	3.91	3.95	0.09
Overall with your mobility experience	3.98	3.97	3.98	0.01
Social life	4.00	4.01	4.01	-0.01
Courses	3.82	3.84	3.83	-0.02
City	3.98	4.10	4.05	-0.12
Hosting university	3.79	3.99	3.90	-0.20
Food	3.82	4.06	3.95	-0.24

Table 3

Mean satisfaction ratings among students with previous mobility experience

Recommendation	Frequency
Preparation and prior research	7
Financial planning	6
Safety considerations	6
Administrative preparation	5
Social openness	5
Language barriers	4
Adjustment and loneliness	3
Cultural adaptation	2

Table 4

Most frequently mentioned recommendations for future mobility participants

Students also identified several recurring challenges that future participants should consider. The most common recommendations concerned realistic financial planning, adapting to cultural differences, overcoming language barriers, managing administrative procedures, and preparing for the initial adjustment period. Many respondents emphasised the importance of conducting thorough research before departure and maintaining an open attitude towards new social and cultural experiences.

Overall, the findings reinforce previous research suggesting that mobility decisions cannot be explained solely by academic considerations. Instead, students evaluate destinations through a combination of educational, financial, social, and lifestyle-related factors. The results also demonstrate that while academic quality remains important, factors associated with everyday life abroad strongly shape both destination choice and overall mobility experience.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study support previous research suggesting that student mobility decisions are inherently multidimensional. While academic considerations remain essential, respondents consistently assigned high importance to practical and lifestyle-related aspects, particularly safety, cost of living, and destination attractiveness. These findings are consistent with the growing body of literature emphasising the influence of non-academic factors on mobility decisions.

An interesting observation is that respondents with previous mobility experience generally reported high levels of satisfaction, especially regarding social life and the destination city. This suggests that successful mobility experiences extend beyond academic outcomes and are shaped by everyday living conditions and social integration.

The qualitative responses reinforce these findings. Students repeatedly emphasised financial preparation, administrative readiness, and openness toward cultural

adaptation, indicating that successful mobility depends not only on institutional factors but also on personal preparedness.

Taken together, the results suggest that universities should provide more holistic mobility guidance that addresses both academic planning and practical aspects of studying abroad.

Conclusion

International student mobility represents a complex decision-making process in which students simultaneously evaluate academic, financial, social, cultural, and personal considerations. The results of this study demonstrate that no single factor determines destination choice; rather, students weigh multiple dimensions before making their decision.

Safety and cost of living emerged as the most influential decision criteria, while destination attractiveness and lifestyle-related characteristics also proved to be highly important. Although academic factors such as course compatibility and institutional quality remain essential, they are only part of a considerably broader decision framework.

The satisfaction results indicate that students generally evaluate their mobility experiences positively, particularly regarding social life, the host city, and their overall experience. The qualitative responses further highlight the importance of adequate preparation, realistic financial expectations, and openness towards cultural adaptation.

These findings suggest that effective mobility guidance should extend beyond providing academic information. Universities and mobility coordinators should also support students in evaluating practical and lifestyle-related aspects of potential destinations, thereby enabling more informed decisions and improving the overall mobility experience.

The present study is limited to students of Óbuda University and therefore cannot be considered representative of all higher education institutions. Future research involving larger and more diverse samples would allow comparisons across universities, disciplines, and countries, providing a broader understanding of the factors influencing international student mobility decisions. Therefore, mobility planning should be understood not only as an academic matching process, but as a broader decision-making challenge involving practical, social, and lifestyle-related expectations.

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