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Great expectations – A Finnish perspective on international students' choice of university-level craft courses

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ABSTRACT

University students have different motives and expectations when it comes to going on exchange and taking university courses in another country. Similarly, different motives and requirements impact course choices. Some exchange students who come to Finland choose to participate in craft courses. Craft as a school subject can be a new and foreign experience for many of them. The aim of this study is to investigate international students' rationales for taking craft courses during their university studies in Finland. It also focuses on what kinds of expectations they have from a craft course and how they are met.

This was a qualitative study. Data was collected through questionnaires at the beginning (n=26) and end (n=15) of a craft course in which both international students and Finnish students had enrolled. Only international students' answers were reported. Students answered open-ended questions about why they chose the course and their expectations from the course. At the end of the course, they were asked how it met their expectations. Themes for motives and expectations were identified using reflexive thematic analysis. Motives for the students' choices related to their interests in the craft subject, their development, benefits in future work, new opportunities and practical studio work. Expectations related to, among other things, participants' learning and development, learning from and helping each other, and learning things that would be useful in future work. The findings suggest that the content of craft courses is important and relevant to learn among students with diverse cultural backgrounds, regardless of whether they have similar subjects in their home countries.

Key Words: craft education, exchange students, international mobility, motives, expectations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that exchange students (ESs) at Finnish universities with teacher education choose to participate in craft courses (e.g. Brännkärr, 2021; Kiviniemi, 2021; Kokko & Dillon,

2011, 2016; Kröger, 2012, 2020). In Finland, craft is a mandatory school subject in grades 1–7 and optional in grades 8–9 (Porko-Hudd et al., 2018). The subject’s focus is that pupils learn to master the whole craft process. The aim is that pupils gain knowledge and skills useful for everyday life and develop their creativity as well as their motoric and planning skills (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2014). The subject involves planning and working with various materials and techniques, such as sewing, knitting, wood and metal work, and electronics, as well as 3D printing and programming. There are two categories of teachers in Finland: class teachers (generalists in all subjects in grades 1–6) and subject teachers (specialists in subjects in grades 7–9). Class teacher students in Finland are required to study craft, and craft science is a major subject at the four universities in Finland that educate subject teachers in craft. Craft as a school subject can be novel or even unknown among ESs (Kokko & Dillon, 2011, 2016).

ESs have certain requirements to complete their studies. For example, the Swedish-language university Åbo Akademi (ÅAU) in Finland, this study’s context, recommends 30 credits (ECTS) per semester and 60 ECTS per full study year (Åbo Akademi, n.d.), and non-Swedish-speaking ESs are offered a limited number of courses (Study guide, n.d.). One such course is *Craft in Natural Materials* (CNM), which is worth five ECTS. This study focused on international students participating in this course, which is part of the basic studies in craft science and required for first-year students majoring in craft science. The course is also available to students taking craft as a minor subject and offered as an elective course for students in different study programmes, including international degree programmes, and ESs. The course includes extensive craft activities during which students use various techniques and materials. It is science-based and includes article reading, reflection, discussion and written assignments. Although the course language is Swedish, international students receive guidance and complete tasks in English. In this study, the term *international students* refers to both *exchange students* (ESs) who study in another country for a short period and *international degree students* (IDSs) who study in another country to obtain a degree.

This raises the following question: Why do students, coming on exchange to teacher education, choose craft courses during their stay in Finland? The aim of this study was to investigate the rationales that impact international students’ decisions to take craft courses during their studies at ÅAU and their expectations from the course. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Why do international students choose craft courses?
2. What expectations do international students have from a craft course?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have identified several factors that motivate students to go abroad for exchange studies. According to Sova (2017), three drivers motivate students to go on exchange and choose specific courses during the exchange: discovery, change and curiosity. Discovery pertains to discovering something new or unusual and learning about a new country or culture. Change pertains to a change in one’s environment by exploring a different country or culture. Curiosity

pertains to exploring the unknown and the different; it is about students' interests and desire to learn, to be challenged and not to have expectations or a clear idea of what to learn.

Krzaklewska (2008) identified four areas of motivation for Erasmus students to go abroad: academic, linguistic, cultural and personal. The academic area pertains to learning about academic culture and different educational systems as well as gaining 'some kind of distinction which they [students] hope will make them more employable' (Krzaklewska, 2008, p. 90). The cultural area pertains to living in a new country and learning about a new culture. This is often connected to students' development of language skills, which is part of the linguistic area. The personal area pertains to new experiences, such as meeting new people, living in a foreign country and seeing different things. According to Krzaklewska and Krupnik (2006, p. 14), the top motivations for students to go on exchange are 'to practice a foreign language', 'to have new experiences', 'to enhance future career prospects' and 'to learn about different cultures'. A quantitative study conducted by Lesjak et al. (2015, pp. 853–854) found that the highest rated motivational factors among Erasmus students were 'to experience something new', 'to grow personally', 'to learn about different cultures', 'to meet new people' and 'to have a semester away from home'. Professional and personal growth are the main reasons students join Erasmus programmes (Lesjak et al., 2015). Erasmus+ is a European Union programme that offers, among other things, mobility and cooperation opportunities in higher education (European Commission, n.d.).

Krzaklewska (2008) constructed a theoretical model of motivation for going abroad to study. The model consists of two dimensions with two categories each. The experimental dimension, which contains the categories of cultural motivation and personal motivation, pertains to having new experiences, learning about cultures, self-development and having fun. The career dimension, which contains the categories of career motivation and academic motivation, includes, for example, improving academic knowledge and future employment opportunities. Although linguistic motivation is important, it lacks a clear place in the model, as it can fall under cultural, personal or career motivation. According to Krzaklewska (2008), all the types of motivation are interrelated, and motivation for going abroad can be described as, among other things, expectations.

Students' expectations from exchange studies can concern the studies, getting to know the host country, social relations, and personal growth and development (Hietaluoma, 2001). Students expect to improve their self-confidence as well as their social and communication skills (Costas & Singco, 2016; Hietaluoma, 2001). Their expectations can also focus more on having fun and adventure than on academic growth and developing competencies (Stronkhorst, 2005). Nilsson (2015) stressed that students' expectations are more about personal than academic expectations. Students want the exchange to be an adventure, they enjoy the change in their study environment and learning about other cultures (Nilsson, 2013, 2015). ESs are also motivated to learn the local language outside language courses and therefore try to find opportunities to use it (Kalocsai, 2009). Students have positive expectations, and their attitudes are even more positive after the exchange (Nilsson, 2013). They also expect exchange studies to be a challenge.

3. DATA AND METHOD

This was a qualitative study. Data was collected through questionnaires completed by international students at the beginning (n=26) and end (n=15) of the CNM course. The questionnaire at the beginning of the course was used for three years, while the questionnaire at the end of the course was used for two years (Table 1). Between each year, we made minor adjustments to the questions in the questionnaires to improve them. In 2019 and 2021, ESs and Finnish students participated in the course, while in 2022, IDSs also participated in the course. All students attending the course had the opportunity to fill out the first questionnaire at the start of the course. Questionnaires were chosen over interviews to minimise the risk of influencing participants' answers. The course had two teachers. Due to one of the teacher's dual roles as a teacher and researcher, it was carefully pointed out to the students that participation in the research was optional and unrelated to the course assignments and that it would not affect course grading. The second questionnaire was sent out after grading was completed to avoid ethical dilemmas due to participants being afraid of their answers affecting their grades. We could possibly recognise students based on their answers due to the small size of the groups. The first questionnaire focused on students' motives for enrolling in and their expectations from the course, such as learning outcomes, working methods, materials, techniques, tasks and interaction with others. The questions were open-ended. The second questionnaire focused on how the expectations were met during the course. It included a mix of open-ended questions, multiple choice questions and statements with a four-point Likert scale. This article reports the answers obtained from the open-ended questions and only answers from international students were used.

Table 1.
Overview of empirical data

Year	Course participants		Answers to questionnaire, international (Int)	
	Total	International (Int)	Beginning (first)	End (second)
2019	28	10	9	-
2021	25	13	6	7
2022	31	15	11	8
Total	84	38	26	15

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the answers because it allowed us to identify themes across the dataset and to use both an inductive and deductive approach. Reflexive thematic analysis consists of familiarising oneself with the data material, making initial codes, organising the codes and generating and defining themes by combining codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). NVivo was used to conduct the analysis. During the first readings of the data, initial codes were made inductively, with separate codes for motives and expectations. The initial codes were evolved and some clustered together. During the development of the initial themes, we recognised similarities with the results of previous studies. The final themes for both motives and expectations were therefore developed based on Krzaklewska's (2008) theoretical model of motivation for going abroad. The codes for motives were collated into the following themes: *cultural motivation*, *personal motivation*, *career motivation* and *academic motivation*. Students' expectations from the course can be seen as related to their motives for choosing the course; therefore, the same theoretical model was adapted to expectations. The codes for expectations

were collated into the following themes: *cultural expectations*, *personal expectations*, *career expectations* and *academic expectations*. The same answer could be coded into more than one theme depending on its characteristics and content. After the themes were developed, the coding was refined and reviewed to ensure validity.

4. RESULTS

4.1. *Motives for course choice*

Personal motivation for course participation consisted of students' interest in the craft subject, own learning and knowing, and the novelty of the craft (course). It was clear that the students saw the course as fun, interesting, challenging and an opportunity to enhance their well-being. The few answers within *cultural motivation* related to experiencing Finnish craft, nature education and something different from their home country, these could also relate to academic motivation. *Career motivation* was related to students wanting to learn craft and other things for the future, and for the future work as a teacher or working with children. For example, while some students wrote more openly about implementing knowledge and skills at home, others specified work and activities at school:

I'm hoping that this course will teach me some of the basics on the topic and give me some ideas on how to include craft into my own private life as well as into teaching methods at primary school. (Int.19-4)

Academic motivation concerns recommendations about the course from students or teachers at the home university, the course being validated at the home university and students' choice of specialisation at their home university. Specific aspects of the craft course – such as its content and diversity, that it concerns practical studio work, its distinctness from courses at the home university and that students see craft as an important subject – are also related to academic motivation. Several students mentioned the nature or natural part, found in the course name or information, as motivational. One student saw the course as an opportunity to learn about basic education in Finland. The following quote illustrates how various aspects of academic motivation motivated the students to choose the course. It also illustrates an example of students' own interest in the subject as part of personal motivation and an example of career motivation when thinking about the future.

In my home university we can choose a focus and I took creativity. [...] I love to work with different materials and techniques. This course was also recommended by my teachers [...] I would like to get to know a lot of practical units, which I can also use or implement at home. (Int.22-1)

Students' motivations for taking a craft course mostly centred on academic motivation and personal motivation, especially their learning and interest in the subject. The least emphasis was on cultural motivation.

4.2. Expectations from the course

Course expectations have similarities with the motives. *Cultural expectations* include getting an overall picture of Finnish education and craft and students' development of attitudes to nature; they are not specifically about the course or studies at ÅAU. Students expect to learn about other cultures. The following quote is an example of this kind of cultural expectation:

Since there were students from many different backgrounds, I hope to share many thoughts and experiences together. And I also would like to support other students.
(Int.22-6)

However, as with motives, students' expectations emphasised this theme the least.

Personal expectations include students' expectations about their development, learning and skills. They expect not only to have fun and to find the course interesting but also to be challenged. Trying, experiencing and learning new things is something many of the students highlighted as expectations. Expectations about interactions and contact with other students were found within this theme. Expectations are, as seen in the quote above, about supporting, helping and learning from each other. It is also about seeing what others do, learning to cooperate and getting to know each other.

Career expectations include students' expectations of doing and learning useful things for their future lives and careers, such as craft experiences and ideas to use with children. What these things are can also be undefined: 'I will have fun while learning something really useful for my future job' (Int.21-3). The context of the answer indicates that the mentioned usefulness has to do with content and pedagogical methods in crafts. Expectations also relate to gaining knowledge about how to teach craft and getting didactical thoughts or insights.

Academic expectations are mainly about the specific craft course students attend and pertains to the course design and content. Students expect the course to be practical and provide them with opportunities for creativity and making tangible artefacts. Some expressed expectations to obtain theoretical knowledge. Many aspects of this theme were stated in the course description and in the information provided by the teachers in the first class. Students stated that they expected to learn many techniques and use many different materials without specifying what 'many' is. When the students specified materials and techniques, they mostly listed the materials from the course information. It is worth noting that many mentioned 'natural materials' without specifying exactly what they are. This indicates that the course name, Craft in Natural Materials, impacted expectations. A few codes did not belong to any specific theme, such as learning Swedish words, which only one student expressed as an expectation. As mentioned in previous research, this could be placed within several themes. Some expectations were vaguely expressed and therefore not placed in any of the themes. These were related to students' openness and their expression of having high expectations.

The results imply that students' expectations from the course can be interpreted as great or 'excellent', as one student wrote. Overall, regarding how their expectations were met, the students were very satisfied. Only one student out of 15 listed expectations that were not fulfilled. They

pertained to working more in nature and having clearer instructions. Working more in nature can again be an indication of the impact of the course name. All the other students said that their expectations were fulfilled or even exceeded.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While both academic and career motivations and expectations were clearly discernible in this study's results, previous studies have shown more emphasis on the personal aspect (Nilsson, 2015; Stronkhorst, 2005). The academic context of this study may have significantly influenced the answers, resulting in the observed focus on academic and career motivations and expectations. This study's results about learning for the future may reflect how future career prospects can be among students' top motivations for going on exchange (Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2006). As in other studies, the personal motivations and expectations were clearly discernible. Students being motivated by the fact that the course is a new kind of opportunity for them reflects what previous research has revealed about students' desire to experience something new during an exchange (Lesjak et al., 2015; Sova, 2017). As seen in previous research (e.g. Krzaklewska, 2008; Sova, 2017), students want to learn about other cultures during their exchange, and some participants saw the opportunity and expected to achieve this through the course by being in contact with students from diverse backgrounds. The findings regarding participants' expectations to learn to cooperate were in line with those of Costas and Singco (2016) and Hietaluoma (2001), especially in terms of social and communication skills. This study's results were also similar to those of Hietaluoma (2001), Nilsson (2013) and Stronkhorst (2005) in that they found that students expected to have fun and expected the course to be interesting and challenging.

This study's findings differed from those of previous studies in that only one participant wrote about learning a language (see Kalocsai, 2009; Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2006). This finding is remarkable given the context, as international students were mixed with local students, and the course language was Swedish. The presence of vague answers that could not be coded into themes indicates that perhaps the students did not really know what to expect from the course. This is in line with Sova's (2017) study, which found that students did not have clear expectations about what they wanted to learn. In the second questionnaire, some participants stated exactly this – that they did not know what to expect at the beginning of the course.

In conclusion, craft as a university-level subject seems to be appealing for international students. The unknown can make craft appealing, as well as the opportunity to engage in practical studio work. Many of the participants expressed an interest in crafts and working with their hands. Craft and its content can be considered relevant for students, both personally and in relation to their future work. A course or subject being novel might impact students' ability to define their motivations and expectations. The course name and description may therefore play a vital role in this regard.

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