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Experiences of International Students in Latvia: The Case of India and Germany

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Abstract

This paper examines the internationalisation processes in the higher education sector in Latvia and explores the motives of international students to study in Latvia, their experience and their plans. The study uses a quantitative data collection method – a survey – the results of which allow us to judge the main trends of internationalisation processes in Latvia. The differences between different groups were investigated, highlighting the countries with the most respondents – India and Germany, and comparing them with each other and with students from other countries. The results show that there are substantial differences between the groups. For German students, Latvia was more of a second option when they failed to get into their preferred university in their home country or elsewhere. They chose to study in Latvia mainly because of the university's study programmes. At the same time, students from India were also interested in factors such as culture, the Baltic region and the attractiveness of Riga.

Keywords: higher education, internationalisation, international students, international student mobility, Latvia

Introduction

Student mobility and internationalisation processes in higher education are topical in Latvia. Many higher education institutions have made internationalisation one of their strategic priorities, including increasing both inbound and outbound mobile students, attracting international lecturers, and creating a more international home environment (University of Latvia, 2017; Mietule, 2019; Belova, 2018). Universities compete with one another to recruit not just domestic but also international students. Yet, overseas students pose additional challenges to current educational processes and models of university programmes, despite growing attention and interest in sustainability. (Heasly et al., 2020).

Latvia is a small country in terms of population. It needs to develop an internationally competitive higher education system (On the conceptual report..., 2020), which would broaden the capacity of the local population to accept the multicultural environment that international students bring. The Baltic States have developed economically over the last two decades, and their populations have remained more open, making them

more attractive study destinations. Latvia is a destination that attracts geographically diverse students, for whom Latvia is often not the first choice but is accepted as a 'second chance' (Brooks & Waters, 2009) for the duration of their studies.

While the number of mobile students in Latvia is increasing, the number of domestic students is decreasing, which is due to the low birth rate around 20 years ago, as well as the open borders in the European Union that have made it easier to leave Latvia to study in another country (Chankseliani & Wells, 2019). According to the national statistics the nations with the most students entering in 2021 was from India, Uzbekistan, Germany, Ukraine, Sweden, Russia, Finland, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Cameroon. Latvia now has students from 116 different nations and territories throughout the world.

Taking into account the diversity of incoming international students is essential to understand the motivations of international students in Latvia in choosing Latvia, and very often the capital Riga, as a destination for higher education. For the the development of further national and HEI strategies it is vital to find out how satisfied international students are with their study and living experience in Latvia and, finally, what the plans of international students might be. This is important as the need for labour is increasing as the number of young people in Latvia decreases. International students in Latvia are playing an increasing role in the local labour market, taking up jobs in, for example, the service sector. International students bring significant financial benefits not only to universities but to the economy of Latvia. The direct economic benefits of international students include tuition fees, housing and other living expenses (Auers & Gubins, 2016). The study is based on the analysis and comparison of the two largest groups in terms of numbers, namely students from India and Germany.

ISM and Internationalisation

Youth mobility has several characteristics. Many young people are abroad for a short time and do not intend to settle permanently. After graduation, they return to their home country or move to another country. Some young people, however, choose to stay permanently in their country of study. In the EU, migration has remained particularly simple: young people have the right to settle, work and study without special permits. Youth migration is often sudden and spontaneous. It is no longer influenced as much by political and economic factors as it was in the past. Young people are becoming more independent in their choices and decision-making (King, 2017).

Migrants from developing or relatively developing countries have predominantly chosen to go to regions with higher levels of prosperity (King, 2017). Geographically, student mobility can be characterised as horizontal and vertical. Positive vertical mobility is understood as a movement to countries with more developed educational or economic systems. On the other hand, negative vertical student mobility is characterised by lower academic and economic opportunities. However, horizontal mobility involves moving to a country or institution similar in terms of academic quality and economic development to the country of departure (van Mol et al., 2020; Rivza & Teichler, 2007).

Students often choose to study abroad if they are unable to get the place they want at home (Prazeres et al., 2017). Differences in tuition fees and the availability of study loans significantly impact study opportunities. For some, studying abroad is not a select option, but an alternative if securing a study place at home is impossible (Lulle & Buzinska, 2017).

While the visibility and prestige of a university are one of its main attractions, more and more students nowadays choose to study abroad for the location rather than the university. Instead of going abroad to secure better career opportunities in the future, young people are more likely to go abroad for adventure and fun, to gain experience and to get to know other cultures. Young people often choose to move to another country because of the different lifestyle, which often determines whether they will stay after graduation. Popular culture, the media and social circles play an important role in stimulating students' imagination about living and mobility before moving there. Different places offer different qualities and lifestyles, so they can be compared in the imagination before deciding their destination. These comparisons then become critical factors for student mobility, with the advantages and disadvantages of places being carefully assessed (Prazeres et al., 2017). Students are attracted by the atmosphere of places and cultures of different cities and are evaluated where they can best enjoy the student lifestyle (King, 2017). Places also have their reputations, with institutions often using the characteristics of their region to attract prospective students (Prazeres et al., 2017).

Family opportunities are also an important factor influencing student mobility. Parental support, both moral and financial, is essential for studying abroad. If parents are unable to support a prospective student's choice to move abroad, or if they have limited possibilities, for example, because of their age or financial difficulties, this will usually affect the young person's interests. Often, a sense of duty towards the family is put first compared to potential personal initiatives (Hercog & van de Laar 2016).

Young people often choose to study abroad to improve their chances back home. Education abroad is seen as a sign of good English language skills, most often, as well as a range of essential qualities such as self-confidence, sociability and valuable social and cultural experiences. These qualities and experiences can help to secure jobs in the home country, especially in various international companies (Holloway et al., 2012).

The internationalisation of higher education is defined as the integration of an international, intercultural or global dimension into the aims, activities and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2004). Key elements of higher education include attracting international students, a more international environment at universities and campuses, student and faculty exchange programmes, internationalisation of curricula, and research and educational cooperation with other institutions at regional and international levels (Mietule et al., 2019; Taskoh, 2014).

Internationalisation can also be defined as commercialising education and research and competing internationally to attract international students to generate income, improve the national image and build an international reputation.

The internationalisation of higher education involves using new technologies, knowledge, people, values and ideas in different international contexts. As different historical events have shaped each culture, different cultures and traditions are distinct and heterogeneous; the successful internationalisation of higher education would require the promotion of compatibility between different cultures. Nowadays, higher education's internationalisation can be considered a leading national development trend (Crisan-Mitra & Borza, 2015).

In developed countries, international students provide a significant share of income for educational institutions. In many developed countries, the potential number of domestic students is declining. Attracting international students, for example, from countries with large populations alleviates the demographic constraints on local economies. In addition,

there are countries where international students are charged higher tuition fees than domestic students (Beine et al., 2012). By attracting fee-paying mobile students, universities can secure a growing income and support research and development (Beech, 2018). A large number of private institutions are implementing internationalisation programmes, partnering with other international institutions or acquiring companies to generate revenue through their international presence and pursue their business objectives (Yesufu, 2018). Public institutions are also often keen to attract international students when support from the state is waning or insufficient (Knight, 2004).

Attracting international students, talented home students and highly qualified researchers are key academic factors for internationalisation. International relations allow higher education institutions to improve the quality of their academic and research programmes and to internationalise their curricula, thus improving their status in the academic and industrial environment, both domestically and internationally. Knowledge exchange and cooperation improve an institution's access to knowledge, research and academic information, thereby increasing economic capital value (Yesufu, 2018).

Higher education institutions often engage in relationships with other institutions and organisations to improve their public image, status and competitive advantage in the academic environment. Institutions need to gain a globally recognised international reputation to attract the best students, a significant number of mobile students and major research projects (Knight, 2004). This aim, to seek international recognition, is primarily about public perception and can be seen as political (Yesufu, 2018).

The socio-cultural motives for internationalisation include the desire of higher education institutions to learn and share knowledge about the cultures of different societies and to understand the characteristics of these societies. Students increasingly want access to international educational experiences, and, to achieve this, educational institutions are engaging in internationalisation processes. This enables students to experience other cultures and gives them access to curricula that meet international standards (Yesufu, 2018). The internationalisation of higher education is associated with expanding the international dimension in research and teaching, broadening the academic horizon, and the improvement of the profile and status of institutions. The diversity of international students in universities can enhance the learning experience and attract more international students through student connections at home (Chanskeliani & Wells 2019).

Generally, factors contributing to internationalisation vary between institutions, government departments, stakeholders and countries. Divergent and competing approaches contribute to both the complexity of the international dimension of education and the vital contribution that internationalisation makes (Knight, 2004).

Materials and Methods

The study analyses mobility trends of international students in Latvia, highlighting the two largest groups of international students in Latvia – Indians and Germans. It is based on a quantitative approach and analyses the results of a survey. In addition to the primary data analysis, a review and analysis of scientific literature on internationalisation processes in higher education and student mobility has been carried out, focusing on the motives behind student mobility.

In order to illustrate the main trends of mobile students in Latvia, the paper also uses available secondary data:

- Statistics on full-time international students in Latvia, as well as on the number and status of higher education institutions, from the 2018 Latvian Higher Education Report issued by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia.
- Statistics on changes in the number of foreign and total students in Latvia obtained from the database of the Central Statistical Office of the Republic of Latvia – statistics on the number of international students in Latvian higher education institutions at the beginning of the academic year (1995–2014) and the number of mobile students in Latvian higher education institutions at the beginning of the academic year (2015–2018).

The survey took place in the spring and autumn semesters of 2019 and used 521 valid questionnaires from different Latvian universities. Initially, the questionnaire data array was created in *Excel* by preparing a data template, which was then transferred to the statistical software *SPSS Windows 22* for analysis purposes.

The study used survey data from which a descriptive profile of the primary data was constructed, revealing the percentage differences, distinguishing students from Germany, India, and other countries, and indicating the overall distribution of respondents' descriptive variables. A 'word cloud' of all respondents' country of origin has been created – a visual representation of words in which words are represented in different sizes depending on how often they are repeated – words that occur more often are represented larger and more prominently than words that are repeated fewer times (Tag Cloud, 2020).

Descriptive and econometric data processing methods in *SPSS* software were used to process the survey data. In the econometric analysis of the primary data, non-parametric data processing methods were used, which can be used for ordinal (rank, ordinal) scale data (Clifford et al., 2010). Non-parametric data processing methods allow sample data analysis for relatively small data arrays that do not follow a normal distribution. The Kruskal-Wallis H-test allows us to determine whether the characteristics of a group correspond to those of the majority of respondents and whether there are statistically significant differences between groups.

A Likert scale measures the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with a particular statement. A Likert scale was used to assess students' motives for studying abroad – different factors (international experience, encouragement from family, starting an independent life, future international career opportunities, cheaper than at home, studying in English and the possibility of obtaining a European diploma) were rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with one being of low importance and five being of high importance. Each of the five responses on the scale has a numerical value which is used to measure the attitude of the respondents. The Likert scale allows for different degrees of opinion (McLeod, 2019), and a mean value of 3 allows for a neutral opinion, as opposed to simple yes/no responses (Clifford et al., 2010). The Likert scale was also used to assess the factors that motivated international students to study in Latvia (quality of studies, studying in the Baltic region, studying in English, friends or family in Latvia, job opportunities, living costs, getting to know the culture, Riga as a destination and using Russian), as well as to assess students' experience of living and to study in Latvia (getting international experience, life experience and adventure, choice of current university and location in Latvia, choice and cost of Latvia as a destination). In the experience rating, a score of 1 corresponds to a very dissatisfied opinion, while 5 to a very satisfied opinion. An

average value was calculated for all the factors evaluated, and characteristic graphs were created in *Excel* to show which factors were rated as more important and which were less important by the respondents.

The differences between the groups (Indians, Germans, students from another country) were investigated by assessing the importance of factors for motivation to start studying abroad, motivation to start studying in Latvia and assessment of previous experience, showing the mean for each of the motives, standard deviation, as well as cross-sectional tabulations using Pearson chi-square test, Kruskal-Wallis test.

They were asked which aspects of life (academic studies, studying in English, living in another country, making new friends, adapting to another culture, paying tuition fees, covering living costs and getting a job alongside their studies) international students in Latvia find easy or difficult. Each aspect was rated on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 and 2 corresponding to very difficult and difficult and 3 and 4 to easy and very easy. From the responses, percentages were calculated for each aspect, separating the easy and difficult aspects of life, and the differences between the groups were identified.

Respondents' plans were ascertained by offering four answers – return home, stay in Latvia, move to another country or no plans – from which the percentage distribution of respondents by the groups was calculated.

Characteristics of Primary Data

To describe the results, the two countries with the highest number of respondents, India and Germany, were identified and compared with each other and the responses of respondents from other countries.

58 % of respondents are men, and 42 % are women. Most respondents (53 %) are young people between 21 and 25. 65 % of respondents in Latvia are studying at the Bachelor level, 32 % at the Master level and 3 % at the Doctoral level. More German students are studying at the doctoral level.

61 % of respondents have a father with a university degree, while 55 % have a mother with a university degree. The figures are higher for German students, with 83 % of respondents having a father with a university degree and 69 % having a mother with a university degree. 40 % of students from India have a father with higher education and 28 % a mother.

57 % of respondents previously attended a state school, while 40 % attended a private school. Most German students – 75 % – went to public school, while 23 % went to private school. The results for Indian students differ – 75 % attended a private school, while 23 % attended a public school.

In Latvia, 17 % of respondents have managed to find a part-time job alongside their studies. 19 % of students from other countries have found a job in Latvia. Indian students are more likely to have found a job – 21 %, while only 3 % of German students have a job in Latvia.

42 % were worried about studying abroad. The main concerns included the cost of studying, healthcare and language differences. German students were more worried about studying abroad, 42 %, while 25 % of Indian students were worried about something before going abroad.

Latvia was the first choice for 45 % of international students surveyed. Among German students, 30 % had Latvia as their first choice destination, and among Indian

students, 56 % had Latvia as their first choice. Among students from other countries, 43 % had Latvia as their first choice.

About 18 % of German students surveyed have family help with the costs of their studies. Of the Indian students surveyed, 34 % receive financial support from their families, while around 48 % of respondents from other countries receive financial support from their families.

The majority of respondents (57 %) are satisfied with their experience in Latvia, 22 % are very satisfied, and 16 % have neutral feelings. 4 % are dissatisfied, and 1 % are very dissatisfied with their experience so far. Overall, 80 % of the students surveyed consider Latvia a welcoming country. The majority of Indian students (94 %), whereas the number of German students (65 %) believes Latvia to be welcoming.

After graduation, 42 % of respondents would like to return home, while 19 % would like to move to another country. 11 % of respondents would like to stay in Latvia, while 28 % of respondents have not made any plans for the future. 12 % of respondents from other countries associate their future with Latvia. 15 % of Indian students surveyed want to stay in Latvia, but none of the German students surveyed indicated a desire to stay in Latvia after graduation.

International Students in Latvia

When comparing motives for studying abroad between the groups, German students rated the opportunity to study in English the highest. Gaining international experience and having an international career in the future were rated slightly lower. On the other hand, students from India rated the possibility of obtaining a European diploma the highest. German students may not have valued this factor as high as Indian students because they are European and, therefore, more likely to enter European universities and obtain this diploma than Indian students. Indian students highly valued international career opportunities, encouragement from family, and gaining international experience, which was relatively low for students from Germany and other countries. Students from other countries rated all factors similarly to students from Germany in terms of importance, but the average ratings were relatively higher. Students from India also rated all factors higher. Students from all groups rated starting an independent life relatively low, while the factor that it would be cheaper to study abroad than at home was rated lowest. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test show statistically significant differences between country groups in students' motivations to study abroad, as shown by the X^2 values (see Table 1).

One of the most important factors for studying in Latvia was the opportunity to study in English. The quality of the studies was also highly appreciated. The high rating of these factors shows that Latvia has an internationally competitive higher education system with quality studies also in English. It is possible that some international students studying in Latvia needed access to quality studies in their home country or needed access to the study programmes they wanted, and Latvia seemed like a good solution. About 45 % of respondents said that Latvia was their first choice. However, for the rest, Latvia was more of a second choice when they could not secure a place in their home country or get into a preferred university in another country.

Table 1

Importance of Factors for Motivation to Study Abroad

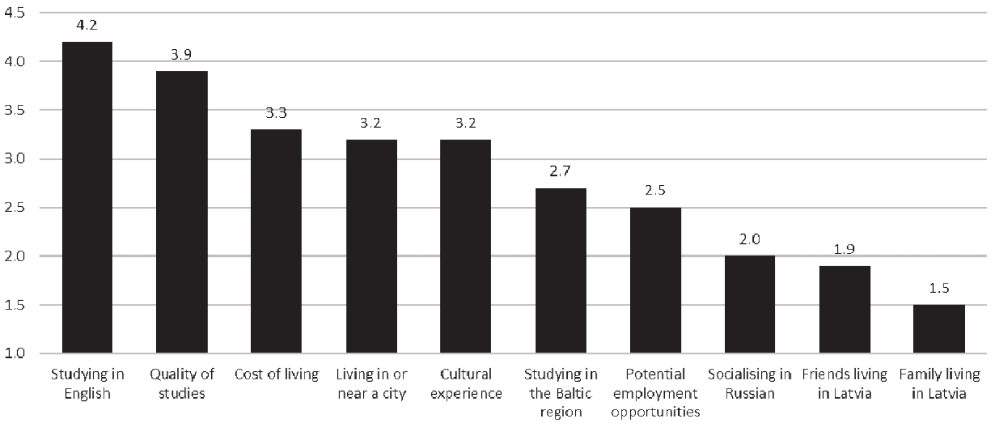
Variable	Germany		India		Other countries		Statistical differences
	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD	X^2
Study in English	3.24	1.366	3.90	1.379	3.70	1.432	15.423***
International experience	3.18	0.970	4.00	1.090	3.74	1.276	30.633***
International career	3.16	1.250	4.32	1.129	4.01	1.338	51.866***
European Diploma	3.07	1.389	4.38	1.126	3.62	1.503	42.902***
Starting independent living	3.05	1.226	3.99	1.325	3.53	1.353	33.783***
Encouragement from family	2.85	1.208	4.01	1.156	3.23	1.427	47.802***
Cheaper than studying at home	1.24	0.815	2.95	1.381	2.01	1.356	98.209***

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

The cost of living, living in a city and cultural experiences were rated moderately high. Factors such as studying in the Baltic region and potential career opportunities were rated slightly lower. Career opportunities were rated higher by students coming from the former Soviet Union, who make up around a fifth of the total. As a large part of the population in Latvia speaks Russian, students from the former Soviet Union are more likely to get a job in Latvia alongside their studies. Accordingly, these students also rated the opportunity to socialise in Russian higher. However, the rest of the students rated this factor as unimportant, resulting in a relatively low average value. The factors of having friends and family living in Latvia were also rated low.

Figure 1

Motives of International Students to Study in Latvia (n = 521)



Students in all groups rated the opportunity to study in English the highest. All students also appreciated the quality of their studies. Indian students appreciated learning about Latvian culture and the cost of living. Riga as a destination and studying in the Baltic region were also rated relatively highly. On the other hand, students from Germany

rated all factors lower compared to Indian students as well as students from other countries. The cost of living, studying in the Baltic region, using Russian, having family and friends in Latvia, and job opportunities were rated low, which were rated relatively higher by students from India and other countries. This suggests that students from Germany chose to come to Latvia solely to study, regardless of other factors.

In contrast, other qualities from India attracted students – the Baltic region, Riga, the different cultures, etc. Students from other countries ranked all factors similarly to students from India, but Indian students gave higher ratings to all factors. The Kruskal-Wallis test results show statistically significant differences between the groups in the importance of the factors for choosing Latvia as a study destination, as shown by the X^2 values (see Table 2).

Table 2

Importance of Factors When Choosing Latvia as a Study Destination

Variable	Germany		India		Other countries		Statistical differences
	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD	X^2
Quality of studies	3.57	1.166	4.05	1.126	3.91	1.132	11.672 ***
Study in the Baltic region	1.95	1.125	3.46	1.266	2.71	1.389	70.867 ***
Study in English	3.87	1.145	4.22	1.105	4.18	1.119	13.357 ***
Friends in Latvia	1.70	1.166	2.17	1.394	1.87	1.246	12.061***
Family in Latvia	1.46	1.079	1.66	1.180	1.46	1.048	12.901***
Job opportunities	1.41	0.88	2.99	1.378	2.46	1.436	69.654***
Living costs	2.40	1.035	3.85	1.224	3.27	1.277	71.774***
Getting to know a culture	2.69	1.199	3.88	1.162	3.23	1.350	53.777***
Riga as a destination	3.20	1.438	3.66	1.232	3.24	1.407	17.843***
Use of Russian	1.56	1.202	2.51	1.315	2.04	1.371	33.513***

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Satisfaction of International Students with their Experience so Far

Almost all Indian students surveyed find studying English easy or very easy, while making new friends was remarkably highly rated by German students, with around 92 % finding it easy. Students from India also find academic studies relatively easy – almost 70 % of Indian respondents find them easy, compared to around 50 % from Germany and other countries. Students from Germany find it easier to cover costs and live in another country than students from India and other countries. Students from other nations swiftly adjust to a new culture.

The most challenging thing for all Latvia international students is finding a job alongside their studies – about 17 % of respondents have managed to find a job in Latvia, primarily students from India and other countries, while only 3 % of German students have found a job. About 72 % of Indian respondents find it challenging to live in another country, compared to 48 % from other countries and 33 % from Germany. This is most likely related to geographical distance since these students have fewer options to return home during their holidays than German students.

About 50 % of respondents do not find it difficult to pay tuition fees, while the remaining 50 % do. In this respect, there are no marked differences between the groups.

In order to assess students' satisfaction with their experience in Latvia, a scale of 1 to 5 was used to compare experiences, where 1 means very dissatisfied with the experience and 5 means very satisfied. Gaining international experience was rated highest, as was choosing the current location and university, enjoying the adventure, and generally choosing to study in Latvia. The cost of studying in Latvia was rated lower than the other factors (see Table 3).

Table 3

Evaluation of Experience of Studying in Latvia

Variable	Germany		India		Other countries		Statistical differences
	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD	X^2
Gain international experience	3.96	0.65	4.05	0.90	3.95	0.89	2.367
Life experience and adventure	3.70	0.79	3.82	0.96	3.86	0.91	3.122
Choice of university	3.71	0.77	4.09	0.89	3.85	0.88	13.740***
Choice of location in Latvia	3.93	0.97	3.94	1.04	3.93	0.84	0.570
Choosing Latvia as a destination	3.64	0.94	3.94	0.99	3.66	0.94	12.272**
Cost	2.46	1.09	3.73	1.01	3.33	1.11	67.033***

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Indian students rated their current university, their choice to study in Latvia and the cost of studying slightly higher. The three groups show statistically significant differences, as shown by the Kruskal-Wallis test X2 values. On the other hand, Germans as well as students from other countries were more dissatisfied with these factors.

The Kruskal-Wallis test shows that differences between country groups regarding plans are statistically significant. Around 66 % of German students want to return to Germany, and 15 % want to move to another country. Of the Indian students surveyed, 28 % want to return to India after graduation, while 18 % want to move to another country to continue their studies or start a career. Of the international students surveyed, 42 % want to return home, and 21 % to move to another country. 15 % of Indian respondents and 12 % of respondents from other countries associate their future with Latvia, but no German student indicated a desire to stay in Latvia after graduation. 19 % of German students, 39 % of Indian students and 25 % of students from other countries currently have no concrete plans, which means these students could potentially stay in Latvia and enter the labour market.

Conclusions

The most important factors motivating respondents to study abroad were having an international career, international experience, a European diploma and studying in the English language. Students from Germany ranked international career opportunities the highest, while students from India ranked a European diploma as important.

Students' primary motives for studying in Latvia were the opportunity to study in English and the quality of their studies. This shows that Latvia has internationally competitive higher education.

Students from India also ranked highly in factors such as getting to know the culture, studying in the Baltic region and Riga, and living costs. In contrast, students from Germany ranked these factors low. This suggests that students from Germany chose to come to Latvia solely to study, regardless of other factors, which is inconsistent with previous research that argues that students are primarily motivated to study abroad by the positive attributes of a place (Prazeres et al., 2017).

The easiest part of studying in Latvia for international students is learning English, making friends and adapting to a different culture. The most difficult thing for international students in Latvia was finding a job alongside their studies – only about 17 % of respondents managed to find a job, mostly students from India and other countries. Only 3 % of respondents from Germany managed to find a job alongside their studies, which can be explained both by the lack of need for employment during this period and by the specific nature of their studies, for example, medical students, whose opportunities to join the labour market are limited.

Students from Germany and other countries find living away from their families easier than students from India. Students from India find academic studies easier compared to students from other groups.

So far, students are satisfied with their international education, their current location and university choice, experience, and overall choice to study in Latvia. The cost of studying was ranked lower than other factors. Indian students ranked the choice of their current university, the choice of studying in Latvia and the cost of studying slightly higher. On the other hand, Germans and students from other countries were more dissatisfied with these factors.

Most respondents want to return home or move to another country for further studies or a career after graduation. However, many respondents have no realistic plans, meaning these students could stay in Latvia and join the labour market.

Potentially, more Indians could stay in Latvia – 15 % believe they will stay in Latvia after graduation, while no Germans associate their future with Latvia. 12 % of respondents from other countries also want to stay in Latvia.

In general, Indian students are more satisfied with their studies and life in Latvia, while most German students associate Latvia only with their studies and university.

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