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The Decision-Making Process in Access Paths to Master's Degree Studies: The Case of International Students in Spain

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Abstract: International student mobility is an important dimension of internationalisation in higher education, involving a high percentage of students in certain subject areas. A literature review revealed the absence of studies deepening our knowledge of this group of students in specific contexts and stages. Thus, this survey study was undertaken to gather data on the profiles and academic and professional careers of a sample of students. Specific differences in their intrinsic and extrinsic motives for their choice of degree subject were found. A total of 314 students from 14 Master's degree programmes at two public universities responded, 42.4% of whom were international students. The data showed differences in reasons for choice between international and Spanish-native students when enrolling in a Master's degree programme. The foreign students had diverse motivations, in many cases related to each other, with no predominance of extrinsic or intrinsic motives. This suggests that, when students are deciding to study abroad, universities should consider the importance of offering guidance to these students at the stage prior to accessing the Master's degree.

Keywords: international student mobility; internationalisation; Master's degree transition; international student decision-making process; higher education; degree mobility



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1. Introduction

Universities in Europe have undergone constant change as a result of the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and this has led to the standardisation and equivalence of university qualifications. This process, at both national and European levels, has resulted in a restructuring of university education into three new cycles which, combined with the universities' own internationalisation policies, have boosted one of the most important current dimensions of university life, i.e., student mobility.

In this article, "international students" are those undertaking study-related stays outside the country in which they first enrolled in higher education. It is important to distinguish this form of mobility from shorter-term study periods, internships, language courses and other such foreign stays for educational purposes (referred to as "short-term mobility," or "credit mobility"). The term "study abroad" is often used as a synonym for international student mobility (ISM). However, according to Netz [1], strictly speaking, "study abroad" emphasizes individual action at the micro level, while ISM describes cross-border student flows from the macro perspective.

In the last two decades, enrolments in higher education abroad have increased from 2 million to more than 6.4 million (2020 figures) [2]. The constant growth in these numbers has only faltered during the COVID pandemic, declared in March 2020, which resulted in a drop of 15% in international student enrolments for that year. Current data, however, show numbers of international students returning to pre-pandemic levels [3].

Analyses of student mobility flows have revealed the existence of countries and regions that are highly appealing destinations for international students (the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia attract almost 50% of international students), while other areas emerge clearly as exporters, with China (900,000) and India (600,000) heading this list [2,4,5]. A literature review also revealed the relationship between these mobility flows and other variables such as degree level [5,6], field of study [3–5,7], gender [8], social class [9,10] and prior trajectory [11].

If we consider the level of the degree, more than 14% of students who decide to study abroad take a postgraduate or Master's degree programme [5]. In absolute terms, credit mobility, mainly at the undergraduate level, predominates; however, this trend is reversed among those enrolling for a full degree, who are in clearly greater numbers in Master's and PhD programmes [6].

The data confirm the relationship between international mobility and the type of course: With few exceptions, the proportion of international students enrolled in higher education programmes gradually increases with the level of the degree, a tendency that remains constant over time. However, this relationship differs according to gender [4,8]. Although the feminisation of higher education is a clear trend, we find a higher number of male foreign students as the level increases.

The field of study is another variable to take into account. Data collected by the OECD [4,5] suggest a differential pattern according to areas of knowledge and host countries. Generally speaking, more than one third of international students are concentrated in the fields of social sciences, economics and law, followed by engineering and health.

In the specific context of this article, figures from the Spanish Ministry of Universities (MU) show that the total number of international students enrolled in the 2018–2019 academic year was 139,708 (8.8% of the total number of students in the Spanish University System (SUE)). The percentage of this group at the Master's level rose to 22.2% (47,667 international Master's degree students) [7]. These mainly originated from Latin American and Caribbean countries (62.1%), and five out of ten students chose courses in the social sciences and law [12]. Catalonia and particularly the city of Barcelona were found to be the main destinations for international students choosing Spain [7].

Research has shown how the historical link between countries, a colonial past, or a common language [13–19], a deficit in training provision or the perception of the quality of training in home countries [20–25], as well as the prestige and/or reputation of host institutions [13,26–30] often wrongly represented by international rankings, encourage (or maybe promote) mobility flows and the choice of certain destinations when pursuing a degree abroad.

The scale of this phenomenon attests to the importance of research in the field, which has been prominent on the agendas of higher education institutions for more than two decades. The lack of studies on the transition to Master's degrees and on the specific group of international students in the Spanish context [16,31–34] makes this study necessary in complementing an already extensive body of research carried out in other countries.

International Students' Decision-Making Processes: What Are Their Objectives in Choosing a Course?

Prior studies on international students' motivations for making choices have centred on Lee's push–pull factor model of migratory processes [35]. In the specific case of international students, examples of important work include Mazzarol and Soutar [36] and de Wit's classification [37] of four main factors: educational, political-social, cultural and economic.

From the point of view of transitions and student guidance, the reasons for degree choice are characterised by students' motivations and expectations regarding their choices. Fakunle [38] affirmed that international students interweave varying rationales for studying abroad in order to achieve their goals. This idea coincides with Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory [39], which stresses that these goals or motivations can include both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In fact, research has found that students embark on their

educational journey seeking to acquire more qualifications by means of an experience that can benefit them both professionally and personally. Many students also have common extrinsic motives, such as enhanced economic or professional outcomes and/or social recognition [40–42].

This allows us to situate motivations as key variables of the student's personal microsystem. These experiential reasons or motives include a number that lead to the choice to take a Master's degree in another country, and amongst them we may find the desire to enjoy new social and cultural experiences, for example, or to expose oneself to more diverse environments (leaving the comfort zone, living independently and making this decision autonomously and without constraints). In many cases, the educational value of experiencing mobility is included in these motivations.

Haas and Terryn [43] identified the personal factors that facilitated or limited the decision-making process: the student's motivations, expectations and prior academic and professional career. The authors identified the reasons for making choices as a measure of the expectations that students have of their education. Other studies in the field have argued that the main motive for a person to decide to leave their country to study abroad can be found in the quest for an international experience that facilitates growth on three levels: personal, academic and professional [44,45].

Although motives of different types can coexist, the research has found differences in the weight of one or other type of reason for undertaking a stay abroad. In [46], the authors analysed patterns of choice according to the type of mobility, i.e., credit or degree, and found that priorities differed between credit mobility students, on the one hand, who experienced their move abroad as an experience of socialisation and acculturation, aiming to enjoy the host culture and learn in a new environment and, on the other hand, the academic and professional motivations of those who were travelling to obtain a full degree. Various studies have also highlighted differences depending on the stage of education, i.e., undergraduate, Master's degree or PhD, and have found that the importance of specialisation and promotion increased for postgraduate levels [22,24,47,48].

Studies conducted with Master's degree students in Spain have also pointed to differences related to the type of degree itself. Thus, intrinsic motives, for example, the enjoyment of education for its own sake, were stronger among students of research degrees compared to those of professionally oriented courses, amongst whom extrinsic motives played a leading role [40–42]. Several studies have found that students sought options to fit their motivations, prioritising certain aspects of the degree or the professional opportunities it afforded [26,29,38,49,50].

Other variables studied include student background [51,52]. For example, Bhandari [53] argued that the fundamental motivations of students from the developing world were different. In his research among Indian students, he concluded that their primary motives for studying in the West were not the pursuit of cultural exchange or the desire to learn a foreign language, but that their considerations were more pragmatic, driven by the insufficient capacity of high-level Indian institutions and their desire for career advancement. King and Sondhi [52] explored the differences between students from India and the United Kingdom, and Cantwell et al. [51], in a study of international students in Mexico, noted differences among motivations relating to participants' countries of origin.

Similar studies have identified the host country as an influential variable. Chen and Zimitat [54], for instance, found differences among Taiwanese students depending on whether they travelled to universities in the United States or Australia: For those who chose Australia, their perception of the country's higher education was more important, while for those opting for the USA, the influence of family and social context weighed more heavily. The importance of these last two factors in the development of a student's mobility project has been confirmed by many research studies [26,28,49,55].

The international mobility project has to do with the way in which a person conceives and imagines his or her professional development on the basis of a discipline or professional field and its related labour market. As Pinto [11] has shown, this representation is closely

related to biographical factors, i.e., the student's prior academic and professional career and concomitant processes of socialisation. On the basis of her research among international Master's degree students from Latin America, she identified different types of trajectories linked to occupational experience: (a) young people without work experience, whose aim was to specialise in an international context; (b) young university and research centre employees for whom a degree abroad enabled them to boost their academic career; (c) public sector workers who wanted to improve their skills abroad due to the need for international specialisation for progress to higher levels; (d) professionals in specific areas seeking greater job opportunities in their sector; (e) primary- and secondary-education teachers seeking access to university positions; and (f) professionals who were dissatisfied either because of difficulties in entering the labour market or because of the precarity of their current jobs. Job dissatisfaction is one of the reasons for the mobility of Mexican students coming to Spain, as found by Trejo Peña and Suárez Bequir [56].

When choosing a degree programme, expectations of employment prospects or the benefits stemming from promotion at work are important. Academic motives such as interest in highly specific technical training or the quality of the teaching and the reputation of the teaching and research staff are the main factors. Thus, international students analyse both the extrinsic or prestige objectives relating to the course and the intrinsic objectives arising from their interest in the subject [57]. Finally, the choice of university will be influenced by its reputation, quality and, to a lesser extent, its position in the international rankings and the location and surroundings of the campus, with campus facilities, services, social life and diversity also influencing the decision.

Students' expectations, motivations and personal characteristics are important variables in evaluating the impact of an academic programme [41]. Studies by Hardré and Hackett [58] and Hardré et al. [59] found that differences between expected and actual experiences negatively predicted overall satisfaction with academic experience, while the degree of congruence between the objectives for pursuing the Master's degree and the perceived benefits of the course determined student satisfaction in the short term and assessment of impact beyond the completion of the degree. Figuera et al. [40,41] identified an even stronger relationship between intrinsic motivation and satisfaction, finding that intrinsic motivation was one of the most significant predictors of perceived success among graduate students [60] and also predicted satisfaction among international students [61].

However, do we really know what international students who come to study Master's degrees in our country are like, or what their motives are for their choice of degree? This paper sets out to answer these questions within the framework of a broader research project whose purpose is to understand the transition processes of students embarking on Master's degrees.

Student transitions in different university settings are systemic, dynamic processes with multiple influencing factors. This article centres on analysing the decision-making process in the choice of graduate degree among Spanish-native and international students.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper presents the results of a study carried out among Master's degree students, specifically international students (Project titled *Transiciones y trayectorias de acceso a los estudios de máster en la universidad española: un análisis en el ámbito de ciencias sociales* (Transitions and Access Paths to Master's Degrees in Spanish Universities: an Analysis in the Social Science Field; Grant EDU2016-80578-R funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and, "ERDF A way of making Europe", by the "European Union"). A descriptive survey study was chosen in order to analyse the reasons for choosing the degree, according to a set of demographic variables from students' profiles and previous career and academic paths.

The survey population consisted of students enrolled in 14 official Master's degree programmes in social sciences at two public Catalan universities (the University of Barcelona and the Autonomous University of Barcelona). These universities have the highest percentage of international students at the Master's level [7]. The Master's degree programmes

chosen were classified according to their orientation or focus: professionally oriented Master's degree programmes that provide training in skills for the practice of a particular profession; research degree programmes aiming to develop research skills in a specific field, usually focused on a subsequent PhD programme; and lastly, mixed Master's degree programmes offering both paths. Among the Master's degree programmes offered at both universities, they were also selected intentionally, since permission of the degree coordinators and the criterion of a minimum number of international students enrolled were required. The selected degrees have a duration of one year (60 ECTS) and are in the field of Social Sciences, represented by the areas of Communication Sciences, Political Science and Sociology, Law, Economics, and Education.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample participating in the study; 68.9% of the total students enrolled in the degree programmes answered the questionnaire (sampling error = 3.2%, 95% confidence interval for finite populations, p and $q = 0.5$). The sampling method was non-probabilistic and purposive, based on student attendance in the classroom during the first semester. Of the 314 students, 133 (42.4%) students were international students, of whom seven out of ten students were from Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the remaining students (181) were Spanish-native students.

Table 1. Population and sample of students participating in the study.

	Total Enrolment (N)	Sample (n)	Response Percentage (%)	Spanish Students n (%)	International Students n (%)
Total	456	314	68.9	181 (57.64)	133 (42.36)

To gather data, a questionnaire was devised that featured closed questions on demographic information and reasons for choice (Table 2). For the reasons for choice scale, factors associated with intrinsic and extrinsic motives were enquired into using a 10-item scale with 5 evaluation points, to which the item "PhD access" was added because doing a doctorate is an important motive for international students, who sometimes want to be able to access a doctorate at a foreign university after completing their Master's degree.

Table 2. Questionnaire dimensions and questions.

Dimension	Description	Questions/Items
Demographic	Personal characteristics and the student's academic and working career.	Gender (M/F); Type of access (direct from first degree/unrelated work experience/related work experience); type of Master's degree (research/professional/mixed).
Reasons for choice	The reasons for choice were seen as a measure of the expectations that students had of their course or programme. The relative weight of the different indicators of motivation for pursuing the degree was measured using a scale of eleven items.	ME1, to change the professional area (within the same career); ME2, to redefine the professional project (radical change); ME3, to improve the professional situation; ME4, to enjoy a new educational experience; ME5, to increase the network of contacts; ME6, to enter or stay in the labour market; ME7, to progress economically; ME8, to enhance professional skills; ME9, to acquire further educational qualifications; ME10, to stay active; ME11, to gain access to a PhD

The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) of the reasons for choice scale (Table 3) was 0.677, indicating that its responses had acceptable internal consistency. To explore the construct validity, a factor analysis (FA) was performed using the principal component

extraction method and varimax rotation, and the test application assumptions were met (KMO = 0.675 and Bartlett's test $p = 0.000$). The items of the scale were grouped into four factors that explained 62.72% of the variance. As found in the validation of the reasons for choice scale carried out in previous studies [40–42], there were three clear motivational factors (intrinsic, extrinsic, and those having to do with a change or reorientation of profession). In addition, for the specific case of international students, a subdivision emerged between intrinsic factors of academic or personal self-realisation, (Factor 3) and professional prospects (Factor 4).

Table 3. Technical analysis of the reasons for choice scale.

Factors	Scale Items	Extraction	Weight of the Item in the Factor	% of Variance of the Item	% of Variance of the Factor
Factor 1	ME6 Enter or stay in the labour market	0.698	0.827	26.376	17.592
	ME7 Achieve economic progress	0.974	0.793	15.947	
	ME3 Achieve work promotion	0.551	0.587	11.213	
Factor 2	ME11 Achieve access to a PhD	0.443	0.654	9.82	15.965
	ME5 Expand contact network	0.601	0.621	8.293	
	ME4 Enjoy a new educational experience	0.513	0.614	7.597	
	ME10 Stay active	0.422	0.599	5.149	
Factor 3	ME8 Enhance professional skills	0.786	0.864	5.172	15.399
	ME9 Acquire further academic qualifications	0.780	0.763	4.285	
Factor 4	ME2 Redefine professional project (radical change)	0.723	0.841	3.565	13.761
	ME1 Change the professional area (within the same career)	0.708	0.831	2.952	

Note: Factor 1. Extrinsic motivations; Factor 2. Motivations of personal and academic self-fulfilment motives; Factor 3. Motivations relating to professional prospects; Factor 4. Professional change or redefinition motives.

The questionnaire responses were analysed using the SPSS-Win v.25 statistical programme. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric contrast tests were performed to verify the differences between Spanish-native and international Master's degree students, using Cohen's d statistic to interpret the effect size. For the comparative analysis, information was gathered on students' access trajectory or profile [40,42,62,63], according to whether they were students who had enrolled in the Master's degree programme directly after their first degree or had followed a discontinuous path, without working previously or with either related or unrelated work experience. In addition, data were collected on the students' regions of origin, differentiating between those from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and those from other regions. Lastly, profile variables such as gender and age (which have been identified as differentiating factors in previous studies, as found in the literature) were included. Multivariate statistical tests were used to identify student profiles associated with the variables analysed.

3. Results

In this section, first, we present a description of the general profile of the international students in the sample, followed by an analysis of their reasons for choosing the programme as a group, and then specifically according to region of origin, with the aim of obtaining a vision of the specific and common factors among international students, particularly those from Latin America and the Caribbean, as opposed to Spanish-native students. Secondly, we analyse those variables in student profile, type of degree and access path which, according to the studies discussed above, are related to their reasons for choice, taking differences in student origin into account.

The detailed international student profile (Table 4) corresponds to research degree students (46%) with related work experience (65.6%), 67% of whom were women. The majority of Spanish-native students were mostly taking professionally oriented degrees (57.5%) with a direct access path from their undergraduate programme (62.6%), 78% of them being women.

Table 4. Profile and access path of the Spanish-native and international students in the sample.

Variable	Categories	Percentage	
		Spanish	International
Gender	Male	22	33
	Female	78	67
Access path	Direct from first degree	62.6	21.6
	No related work experience	11.2	12.8
	Related work experience	26.3	65.6
Type of Master's	Professional	57.5	25
	Research	27.1	46
	Mixed	15.5	29

The reasons for choice by region of origin showed that LAC students formed a group of international students with distinct characteristics (Table 5).

Table 5. Reasons for choice according to student origin.

Factors on the Reasons for Choosing the Master's Scale	Total (<i>n</i> = 314)	Spanish (<i>n</i> = 181)	LAC (<i>n</i> = 96)	Other International Students (<i>n</i> = 37)	K-W H	Effect Size
		Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	Sig (<i>p</i> < 0.05)	Cohen's <i>d</i> (1-β)
Factor 1. Extrinsic motives	3.93 (0.88)	3.94 (0.86)	4.03 (0.88)	3.59 (0.91)	0.040	0.130
Factor 2. Personal and academic develop motives	3.55 (0.74)	3.40 (0.72)	3.94 (0.69)	3.30 (0.58)	0.000	0.260
Factor 3. Professional prospect motives	4.54 (0.70)	4.53 (0.66)	4.70 (0.65)	4.19 (0.88)	0.000	0.150
Factor 4. Change career motives	2.91 (1.12)	2.85 (1.07)	2.97 (1.22)	3.06 (1.07)	0.427	

The scores for each of the factors according to origin reflected statistically significant differences between LAC and Spanish-native students regarding personal and academic self-fulfilment motives (F2) and professional prospect motives (F3); in addition, Dunn's post hoc test revealed differences in extrinsic motives between the two groups of international students (F1).

Differences according to type of degree were also found. This variable was intended, as described in the theoretical framework, to differentiate degrees focused on the development of professional competencies (and for which the completion of an external internship was required) from research-oriented degrees, which were more theoretical and directed towards the subsequent completion of a PhD; for the same reason, we also included mixed Master's degrees, i.e., those allowing students to choose one path or the other according to their needs and motivations.

As can be seen in Table 6, significant differences were found among the students in research degree programmes. Thus, international students had higher scores for extrinsic and intrinsic motives (i.e., for personal and academic self-realisation and for professional prospects) compared to Spanish-native students in the same degree; thus, corroborating the mix of motivations characterising students seeking educational experience abroad.

Table 6. Reasons for choice according to type of Master's and type of student.

Type of Degree	Reasons for Choice of Degree Scale	Spanish (n = 181)	International (n = 133)	K-W H	Effect Size
		Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	Sig (p < 0.05)	Cohen's d (1-β)
Professionally oriented degrees	F1. Extrinsic motives	4.13 (0.71)	4.06 (0.83)	0.771	-
	F2. Personal and academic develop	3.31 (0.72)	3.48 (0.74)	0.456	-
	F3. Professional prospect	4.52 (0.75)	4.27 (0.91)	0.147	-
	F4. Change career	2.91 (1.06)	3.31 (1.13)	0.070	-
Research degrees	F1. Extrinsic motives	3.55 (1.03)	3.98 (0.91)	0.035 *	0.443
	F2. Personal and academic develop	3.65 (0.62)	4.04 (0.64)	0.003 *	0.619
	F3. Professional prospect	4.58 (0.58)	4.80 (0.48)	0.021 *	0.415
	F4. Change career	2.82 (1.04)	2.94 (1.15)	0.560	-
Mixed degrees	F1. Extrinsic motives	3.88 (0.83)	3.66 (0.96)	0.346	-
	F2. Personal and academic develop	4.13 (0.71)	4.06 (0.83)	0.231	-
	F3. Professional prospect	3.31 (0.72)	3.48 (0.74)	0.685	-
	F4. Change career	4.52 (0.75)	4.27 (0.91)	0.613	-

Note: * indicates statistically significant differences.

Students' types of access show significant differences, in general terms, in the third and fourth factors (Table 7). Focusing on the statistically significant differences, on the one hand, students with related work experience had higher scores in motives related to professional prospects (mean = 4.67) than those without relevant experience or those who went straight into the Master's degree programme from their first degree. On the other hand, students without work experience related to their degree showed greater interest in a change or redefinition of their professional career (mean = 3.43), with higher scores in this area than their peers with different access paths.

Table 7. Reasons for choice according to type of access and type of student.

Type of Access	Reasons for Choice of Degree Scale	Spanish (n = 181)	International (n = 133)	K-W H	Effect Size
		Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	Sig (p < 0.05)	Cohen's d (1-β)
Direct from Grade	F1. Extrinsic motives	4.02 (0.82)	3.64 (0.98)		
	F2. Personal and academic develop	3.50 (0.64)	3.38 (0.60)		
	F3. Professional prospect	4.56 (0.61)	4.04 (1.02)	0.010	0.638
	F4. Change career	2.87 (1.00)	2.96 (1.16)		
No related experience	F1. Extrinsic motives	4.03 (0.68)	3.93 (0.87)		
	F2. Personal and academic develop	3.13 (0.86)	3.91 (0.64)	0.005	1.04
	F3. Professional prospect	4.40 (0.82)	4.38 (0.89)		
	F4. Change career	3.30 (1.21)	3.61 (.76)		
Related experience	F1. Extrinsic motives	3.74 (1.00)	3.98 (0.89)		
	F2. Personal and academic develop	3.27 (0.79)	3.82 (0.74)	0.000	0.719
	F3. Professional prospect	4.51 (0.72)	4.76 (0.51)	0.024	0.407
	F4. Change career	2.61 (1.16)	2.88 (1.19)		

The analysis according to student origin revealed statistically significant differences for each access type. Among students coming directly from their first degree, Spanish-native students had higher scores than their international peers (4.56 and 4.04, respectively); while among those who did not have related work experience, the differences were found in the second factor (personal and academic development), which was more important for international students than for Spanish-native students. Lastly, among those with work experience relevant to their degree, intrinsic motives (personal and academic development as well as professional prospects) were more important for the international students than for the Spanish-native students.

Furthermore, in general terms, differences were also observed between the different types of Master's degree programmes. Students in programmes of a research nature were characterised by higher intrinsic motives, while students in professionally oriented and/or mixed degrees showed a greater tendency towards extrinsic motives. These results are consistent with the different orientations stemming from the purpose of each type of degree.

By means of a multiple correspondence analysis, we set out to graphically show the grouping of categories according to profiles, which allowed us to identify the demographic characteristics defining the main reasons for choice according to student origin, type of degree and students' previous academic and work history.

Figure 1 shows a clear distinction between Spanish-native and international students in the type of Master's degree programme chosen (professional or research), previous academic and work experience and reasons for choice. Firstly, we observed that international students had prior careers in jobs relating to the degree subject, unlike Spanish-native students, who were younger, and therefore had not had a fixed occupation or had worked in jobs unrelated to their degree programme. In addition, most of the Spanish-native students embarked on their Master's degree directly after completing their undergraduate studies; thus, reinforcing the view of the Master's as a continuation of their education and not as a form of training for professional specialisation. Secondly, we were able to visualise the options for each student individually, finding that international students chose research degrees, with more theoretical content and tending to be directed towards PhD studies, while Spanish-native students opted for professionally oriented Master's degrees of a more practical nature.

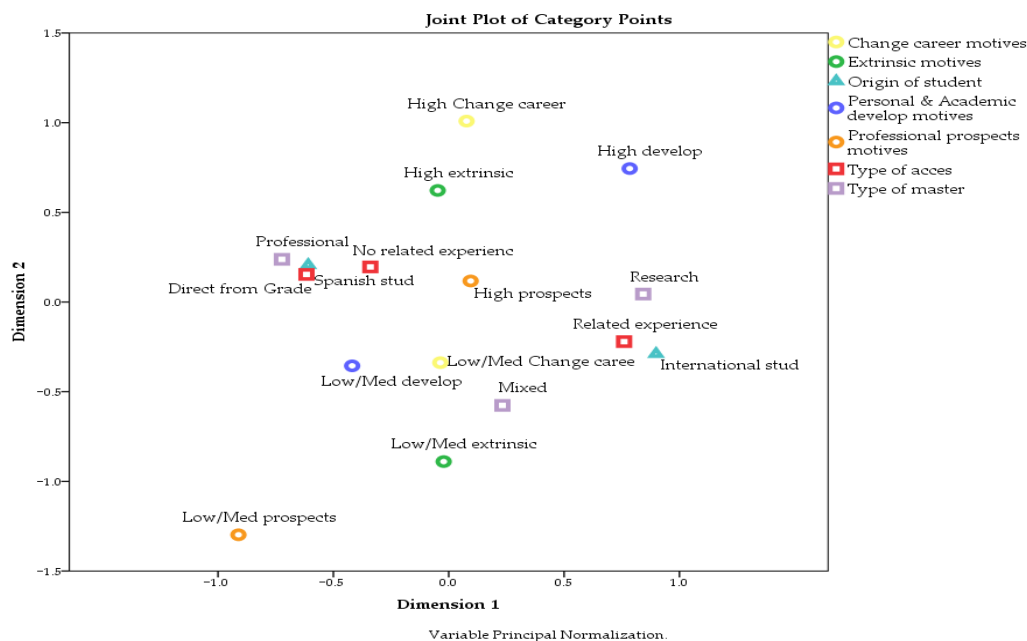


Figure 1. MCA, joint category plots.

Finally, this brings us to the motives for choice relating to students' origins and types of Master's degrees. In this area, Spanish-native students, who chose professional training degrees, showed a greater tendency towards extrinsic reasons for taking the course, while among international students, we observed a mix of motivations, with extrinsic motives prominent, but also motivations of personal and academic growth and those leading to enhanced professional prospects, which were characteristics shared by all students choosing a research degree.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The increase in the number of foreign students as a cross-border phenomenon is related to the internationalisation of higher education, a natural response to globalisation in the university context [64–66]. Indeed, Knight and de Wit [67] pointed out that, in the last two decades, internationalisation has changed from being a marginal and minor factor in higher education to being a global, strategic and dominant factor. This new context has increased research interest in transition processes among international students, who present different characteristics from those pursuing a degree in their country of origin.

An important variable in the study of transitions is reflected in the analysis of the reasons for students embarking in a Master's degree programme. These are highly important decisions in the transition to this level of education and, in the case of international students, such decisions are a key element in the initial stages of developing their mobility projects. This is a complex process, since the decision involves not only enrolling in a Master's degree programme but also many other planning and logistical factors, although the purpose of the programme itself is a common thread in the objectives pursued.

As can be seen from the data analysed here, there were differences in the reasons for choosing a degree programme according to the origin of the students, in line with previous research in the analysis of this scale [40–42]. Thus, Spanish-native students, whose access profiles differed from those of their foreign peers, opted for an academic path focused on the results they could obtain for their professional future, marked by extrinsic motivations linked to expectations of an assured entry into the labour market. Likewise, in the case of international students, we observed the importance of education itself in their choices, with particular importance given to motives of personal and academic growth, characterised by the central role of the educational experience abroad, both in terms of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and closely related to their previous professional careers, typically working in the same field as their studies [43,44,46]. Students having to move to another country to obtain a degree were also much more focused on these intrinsic motives, unlike those students with shorter credit mobility projects [22,24,46–48].

During international students' journeys in fulfilment of their mobility projects, the decision-making process leading to taking a degree abroad played a central role in their lives, as also evidenced in numerous studies, models and publications on this topic [13,36,37,47,68,69]. As the literature and the results indicate, students seek options that suit their motivations, prioritising certain aspects of training or career opportunities that are linked to obtaining an international degree [26,29,38,49,50].

Broadening the contextual factors to delve more deeply into the key variables in students' personal microsystems, such as their motivations and prior expectations, is an important step in the explanation and understanding of the phenomenon, given the influence of these variables on the development of the mobility project [38].

We found that the profile of international students and their motives for choosing a degree programme differed from those of Spanish-native students. On the one hand, the Spanish-native students were typically young, recent graduates, mostly women, with no work experience and still living with their parents. On the other hand, international students had a more discontinuous path, with work experience related to their studies. This discontinuity also contrasts with studies among Spanish-native students by Figuera et al. [40,62] and Hernández and Pérez [12], which showed a trend towards an unbroken academic trajectory in access to Master's degrees.

The motivations leading the students to pursue a Master's degree were also different, and clearly related to their profiles. Authors such as Chen and Zimitat [54] and Bhandari [53] have previously pointed to the existence of different priorities or hierarchies of motives depending on the country of origin, which are also related to the country's level of development. International students moved to the host country motivated by their interest in pursuing their studies, mainly to the PhD level, responding either to personal concerns or in order to return to their society of origin (intrinsic motives). In addition,

they also showed extrinsic motivations related to long-term economic and/or professional improvement, as we were able to establish from the qualitative analysis.

The influence of students' previous trajectories has also been the subject of prior studies. Mendoza and Ortiz [50], for example, identified differences in the educational and professional paths of Master's degree students in Barcelona, the most important being the previous professional experience of Latin American students compared to local students who entered directly from their first degrees with the aim of specialising. This previous professional situation, and the students' attitudes towards it, showed a less homogeneous picture than that of their Spanish peers, since Latin American students' expectations formed a continuum ranging from enhancing a more or less settled professional career by taking an international degree to striking out in a different direction from that of their former career.

Our findings suggest that higher education institutions should pay careful attention to international students who come to their universities in search of a degree. Considering the life cycle of the international student [47,70], the first stage analysed in this contribution is a time of tension, bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient information [69,71]. In spite of this, there is a lack of attention by host higher education institutions to this stage, mainly marked by the recruitment of foreign students and, on numerous occasions, leaving aside the accompaniment of these during their mobility project planning process.

Establishing protocols and guidelines for reception and guidance services for international students with the aim of ensuring successful transitions, as indicated by Arthur and Flynn [72], is necessary in order to support the experience of mobility through actions for decision-making. Pérez-Encinas [70], for example, highlighted the importance of guidance for students, both psychologically and from the more administrative perspective.

Due to the multifactorial and systemic nature of the international student mobility project, it is important to establish future lines of work that allow us to approach the different levels of the transition of this group, for example, the adjustment and adaptation processes of international students [73,74], the post-mobility trajectories [75–77] taking into account those who return home and those who continue with new projects abroad and the impact of training in international contexts on employability in both home and host countries [38,78–80].

The complexity of the phenomenon discussed here leads us to comment on a methodological factor limiting the study, since a qualitative approach via narratives or reflective interviews would have yielded a deeper understanding of international students' transitions. In response to this limitation, and as a prospective line of research, we are currently working on the validation of a specific questionnaire for international students that will allow us to identify new dimensions and categories of analysis for interviews with this group.

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