

## Aleš Oven, Marko Gavriloski and Mitja Tretjak

# International students' demand for quality of teaching and services – The case of UP FAMNIT

**Abstract:** As the numbers of international students (degree mobility) at the University of Primorska, Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies (UP FAMNIT) are rising significantly, we were interested in learning what convinced them to enrol at UP FAMNIT and move abroad. In 2017, we approached these students and used a combination of methods (survey, semi-structured interview) to gain deeper insight into the expectations of their studies. Findings show that future students became familiar with UP FAMNIT primarily through their acquaintances. A large majority (over 80%) of students bring study-related knowledge with them and want to improve it further. Other aspects, such as environment, are not as important. Combining students' expectations with the fact that the majority found UP FAMNIT through word-of-mouth and that existing students probably explained how the Faculty works, we can conclude that, in the case of UP FAMNIT, internationalisation is directly linked to a high quality of teaching and services. In large part, international students already recognise that the Faculty offers quality programmes, further proven by the popularity of PhD programmes. Our results prove that UP FAMNIT's internationalisation enhances the quality of education and research. These expectations must, however, be further nurtured, met and developed and pose an immediate demand for Faculty staff to meet students' expectations.

**Key words:** Internationalisation of higher education, quality of services, international students' expectations

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## Introduction

As Knight (2011) has pointed out, the internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) became an important and complex process—as well as a confused and misunderstood concept—during the last two decades. However, it has become clear in the past few years ago that researchers must move their focus of debate from ‘conceptual notions and implications for higher education in general’ to a ‘more contextualised research approach’ (Beelen, 2012, p. 18).

We already know that IoHE is not a substitute for quality and that international students are not agents of IoHE. If we read this sentence in the opposite way, we can identify two of the five myths of internationalisation that Knight (2011) emphasised. The second myth (*international students as internationalisation agents*) reveals that the simple fact of having international students does not improve quality and is not linked to high standards. Pezaro (2017) stressed that we must get ‘student feedback at a personal level to understand what is happening on the shop floor’. She was referring to teachers’ work, but we can expand this approach to other roles in the internationalisation process. This process could also mean that it is important to provide quality of service for students, based on students’ feedback.

Many authors (Mihut, Altbach and de Wit (eds.), 2017; Larsen, 2016; Hawawini, 2016; Yudkevich, Altbach and Rumbley (eds.), 2015; Ullberg (ed.), 2015; Hudzik, 2015; Rumbley, Matross Helms, McGill Peterson and Altbach (eds.), 2014; Beelen and de Wit (eds.), 2012; Knight, 2011; Brooks and Waters, 2011; Kelo, Rogers and Rumbley, 2010) have addressed different aspects of IoHE. Many of these scholars provide us with interesting solutions, ideas and practices. Nevertheless, we will describe this concept only briefly because the focus of the research is on international students’ expectations for their study in Slovenia. As the subject of our case, we chose the University of Primorska, Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies (UP FAMNIT). We were interested to find whether we can link students’ expectations and quality of service, even though we are aware of the limitations of the research.

## Theoretical background

### *Internationalisation of higher education*

As de Wit and Hunter (2017, p. 25) have emphasised, the IoHE is a 'relatively new phenomenon but, as a concept, it is one that is both broad and varied'. Van der Wende (1997, p. 19) pointed out that, at that time, internationalisation was 'making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalisation of societies, economy and labour markets'. The real twist in understanding the essence of internationalisation was made a year after that. Mestenhauser (1998) was one of the first who emphasised that all graduates will sooner or later work in a globalised world in different areas. Consequently, all students should be involved in more internationalised curriculum and not just a few of them. As Jooste and Heleta (2017) note, the problem of higher education internationalisation research lies in the developed world. It means that all the research, interpretations and building concepts were 'dominated by [western] organisations and individuals [...] lacking inclusivity and genuine collaboration' (ibid, p. 5). This concept implies that the 'developed' and global North was dictating research and higher education policy. 'The existing theories and approaches, developed in the global North, are in most cases the primary references for all' (ibid.), which could be problematic if universities from different cultural environments copy these approaches and strategies without reflection upon, and adaptation to, the context of work/study.

We also have to be careful in assuming that having international students means that the Faculty is internationalised (Knight, 2011; de Wit, 2012, 2017). De Wit (2012, 2017) emphasised nine misconceptions about internationalisation, among others, that 'having many international students is equal to being internationalised' (de Wit, 2017, p. 10). One of these misconceptions is that universities are international 'by nature', which is simply not true, because 'internationalisation does not arrive naturally in general universities and universities of applied sciences but needs to be introduced' (ibid.).

Jooste and Heleta (2017) furthermore discussed rethinking the IoHE. For the last 30 years, researchers have mainly been interested in separate topics, such as 'student and staff mobility, student recruitment, study abroad, internationalisation at home, internationalisation of the curriculum, joint degrees, partnership' (ibid, p. 6). The current authors do not deny the relevance of these topics, but we cannot research them as if they are not connected to the whole. The IoHE should be discussed in 'relation to global challenges (i.e. conflict, poverty, environment, climate change, inequality, migration, xenophobia, political, and other kinds of oppression, and post-conflict reconstruction' (ibid.). Higher institutions should be able to reflect their part in the globalised world to become internationalised. It is important for the world that they provide 'graduates who can understand and engage with the environmental, social, economic, political, and other challenges of today and tomorrow' (ibid.).

Jooste and Heleta also suggested that future research in this field should contain critical social approaches and reflective questions on how 'institutions, policies, and frameworks are formulated and implemented in practice' (ibid.). We followed their advice in the present research even though we are aware of the limitations and narrow area of research focus.

### *Quality of service*

Kelo, Rogers and Rumbley (2010, p. 18) emphasised that 'services to students have [...] an important role in the quality assessment [...] of institutions'. For over ten years, those services have been as important as other standards (teaching, research, academic). If the higher education institutions are not aware of the importance of student services, this lack of awareness could lead to lower quality. Cabrera and Le Renard (2015) emphasise that 'universities will have to adapt to meet future challenges, attract students and maintain quality while making higher education more accessible' (ibid., p. 11). When we address the question of quality, we should know that we cannot discuss it separately from other aspects of quality (teaching, academic, research). Quality of service for international students is only one aspect of quality of the IoHE. In other words, perhaps we should take a 'holistic approach to internationalisation' (Leask, 2012). For higher education institutions, it is important to understand the needs of full-degree international students. The problem occurs when the administration does not know students' needs but are still providing some services based on the administrative perception of students' needs. In that case, it is important to perform a needs analysis. Kelo, Rogers and Rumbley (2010, p. 51) suggest to 'query students directly'. It may happen that students' expectations are not reasonable or that institutions cannot respond suitably. Nevertheless, it is crucial that 'services to support all students will need to be provided' (Leask, 2012, p. 84).

## **Starting points**

### *The case of UP FAMNIT*

UP FAMNIT shows a few specifics compared to other higher education institutions in Slovenia, which are important to understanding the findings and practical implications for the Faculty.

UP FAMNIT was established in 2006 and enrolled the first class of students in 2007. UP FAMNIT emerged from a research institute (now UP IAM), which existed for 18 years before the Faculty itself. As the staff was, and still is, shared between these two institutions, there is a large overlap between research and education. From the beginning, the study programmes were based on strong involvement with research activities of staff and the guiding decision was to work on quality

rather than on quantity. The management of the Faculty and the staff understood “quality” through the introduction of the following approaches:

- Small classrooms (a maximum of 45 students for the most popular programmes, but preferably fewer);
- Involvement of students in research activities on all cycles of studies;
- Introducing research-based doctoral studies and trying to attract excellent PhD students from abroad;
- Involvement of students in projects with industry and non-industry partners;
- Strong emphasis on research work of all Faculty;
- International engagement (visiting professors and researchers, organisation of international events, supporting staff with post-doc positions abroad, supporting research visits abroad);
- International recruitment of staff, where the research excellence is of the highest importance (international staff represents 13 % of all staff, and more foreigners are in the process of obtaining a residence permit to work at UP FAMNIT);
- Strong research collaboration with institutions abroad;
- Among the Slovene employees, preference is given to the teaching and research staff, who have strong experiences from abroad (PhD studies, post-doc positions).

Strong traditions in Slovene higher education area made national recruitment challenging. For this reason, the Faculty decided to start implementing study programmes in English and try to attract students from abroad (especially from the area of the former Yugoslavia and non-EU Slavic speaking countries, such as Russia, Belarus and Ukraine).

The Act on Higher Education (OJRS, 12/32) prevents the implementation of study programmes in English only. It can be done only in parallel to Slovene study programmes. Hence, the Faculty introduced study programmes in English, which also run in Slovene and the classroom interaction of the two groups of students is limited.

The international recruitment focused on attracting candidates who perform well in international competitions (such as the International Mathematical Olympiad), and University scholarships were introduced to support them during their studies. Scholarship recipients must show excellent marks and extraordinary achievements outside the classroom during their previous education (especially in international competitions).

In the academic year 2017/2018, UP FAMNIT has 132 international students, who represent 24% of all students at the Faculty. Among the first-year students, international students represent 44%. Simultaneously, the number of incoming exchange students quadrupled in the last three years.

## **Research aim**

The main aim of this study was to learn what convinced international students to enrol at UP FAMNIT and move from their home countries to Slovenia.

## **Methods**

In 2017, we approached international students and used a combination of the methods listed below to gain deeper insight into their expectations for their studies. In preparing the methodology, we relied on Grob (2014), Vogrinc (2008), Lee and Forthofer (2005), Patton (2002) and Flere (2000). We used the following methods:

- Semi-structured group conversation with new international students during orientation days: between 11 and 21 UP FAMNIT and 49 to 51 UP students gave answers to specific questions
- Survey among UP FAMNIT first-year students – 40 students responded

### *Semi-structured group conversation*

#### **Participants**

The respondents in this research (N=51) were international students of different faculties in the University of Primorska, of which 21 were from UP FAMNIT. Both degree-seeking and incoming exchange students participated in the conversation, regardless of their cycle of studies.

#### **Measure**

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview containing three main questions:

1. What do you bring with you?
2. What benefit do you expect to get?
3. What do you expect from us?

## **Procedure**

On the last weekend before the start of the academic year, the University of Primorska organised orientation days for all international students coming to the University of Primorska for the first time.

During the programme, students were asked about their expectations. In an hour-long guided group conversation, they answered three questions (listed above) and provided their answers on sticky notes. The written answers were counted and combined. From some answers, it was clear which students were answering, but not for all. Therefore, the answers were combined as follows:

| Number of answers                                           | What do you bring with you? | What added value do you expect to get? | What do you expect from us? |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| International students of UP FAMNIT                         | 17                          | 21                                     | 11                          |
| International students of other faculties                   | 19                          | 17                                     | 13                          |
| International students of unknown faculties                 | 13                          | 20                                     | 27                          |
| Total international students of the University of Primorska | 49                          | 58                                     | 51                          |

*Table 1: Sample of the semi-structured group conversation*

## Survey

### Participants

All students who were enrolled in the first year of bachelor studies at UP FAMNIT were asked to participate in an online survey. A total of N=54 international first-year students were invited, of which N=40 (74%) participated, while a total of N=70 Slovene first-year students were invited, of which N=62 (89%) participated.

### Measure

The research instrument was an anonymous online questionnaire. Participants responded to the following questions:

1. Where did you first hear about UP FAMNIT? (Multiple choice)
2. Where did you gain the most information about FAMNIT? (Multiple choice)
3. What convinced you to enrol in FAMNIT? (Multiple choice)
4. What are you looking forward to the most? (Open-ended question)
5. Is there something that you are worried about regarding your studies at UP FAMNIT? (Open-ended question)
6. Is there something you would like us to know? (Open-ended question)

### Procedure

An online survey was conducted in October 2017. International students were informed about the online survey through e-mail. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. Data were analysed with descriptive statistics. The results of the research are presented, interpreted and discussed in the following sections.

## Limitations of the study

Despite the explanation of the methodology, this research has some limitations. First, we have to consider the possibility that students may have given socially desirable answers. This data should be interpreted with caution. Second, students were surveyed based on their expectations and not on their experiences. We should explore this aspect in the future.

## Findings

The first question posed to first-year students was *Where did you hear about UP FAMNIT?* (Figure 1). The majority of students learnt about UP FAMNIT through their acquaintances, both in Slovenia and abroad. While Slovene pupils also became familiar with UP FAMNIT in schools and through events organised by the Faculty, this percentage is lower for international students where their peers play a pivotal role in information sharing.

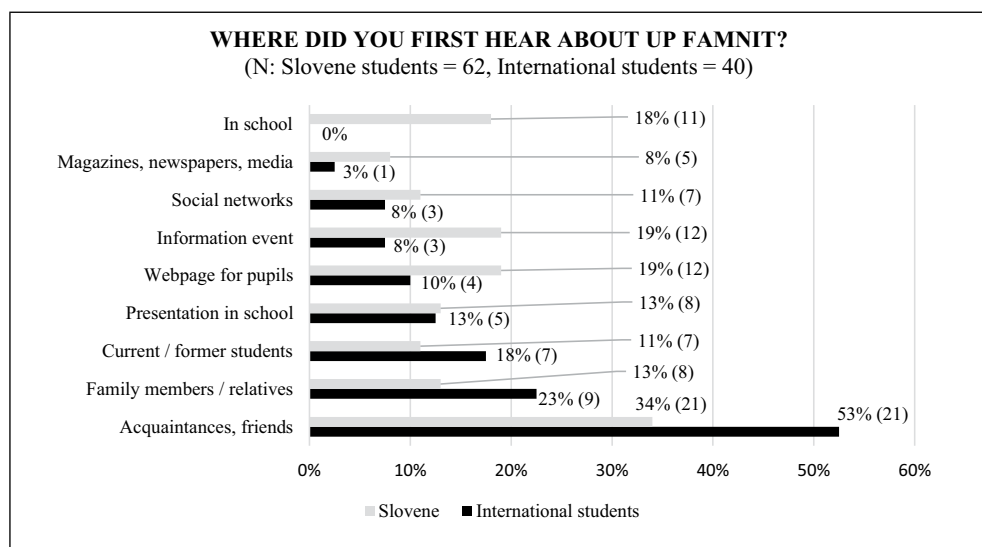


Figure 1: Chart of replies to the question 'Where did you first hear about UP FAMNIT?'

The main question we asked first-year students was *What convinced you to enrol to FAMNIT?* (Figure 2). Here, Slovene and international students show bigger differences between the two groups. Personal career orientation was important for both groups of students but played a bigger role among international students, where more than two-thirds of the students chose this answer. Employment possibilities were also much more important to international students (43%) compared to Slovene students (11%), while an interesting study programme is more important to Slovene students (60%) than to international students (40%). More than a quarter



of Slovene students enrolled to UP FAMNIT because they were not accepted to other faculties, while there were no such students among international students. Therefore, UP FAMNIT was first choice for international students, but this is not the case for Slovene students. Location was less relevant in the decision-making process, as less than 25% of international students chose this answer.

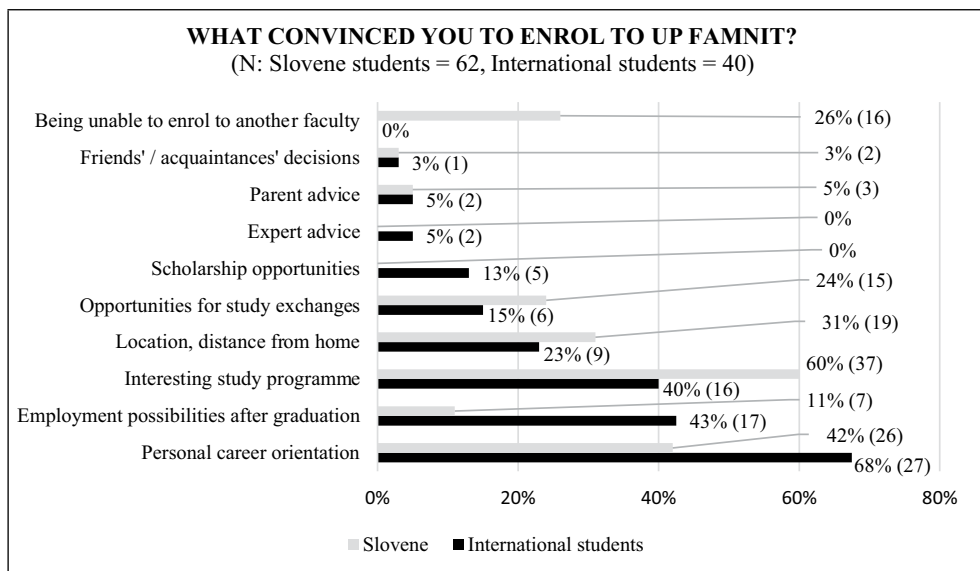


Figure 2: Chart showing replies to the question 'What convinced you to enrol to UP FAMNIT?'

The next question was *What are you looking forward to the most?* (Figure 3). Open questions offered additional insight into the international students' motivations for enrolment to UP FAMNIT. Answers were counted and grouped and then calculated relative to the number of students providing answers (N=33). More than half of the international students indicated that they are looking forward to getting study-related knowledge the most (58%). Getting new friends was also a relatively popular answer (24%), while other choices appeared less often. We must consider the possibility that the students may have given socially desirable answers when they say that knowledge is their first motivation. However, the difference in answers between Slovene and international students in Figures 4, 5 and 6 suggest that this has not happened.

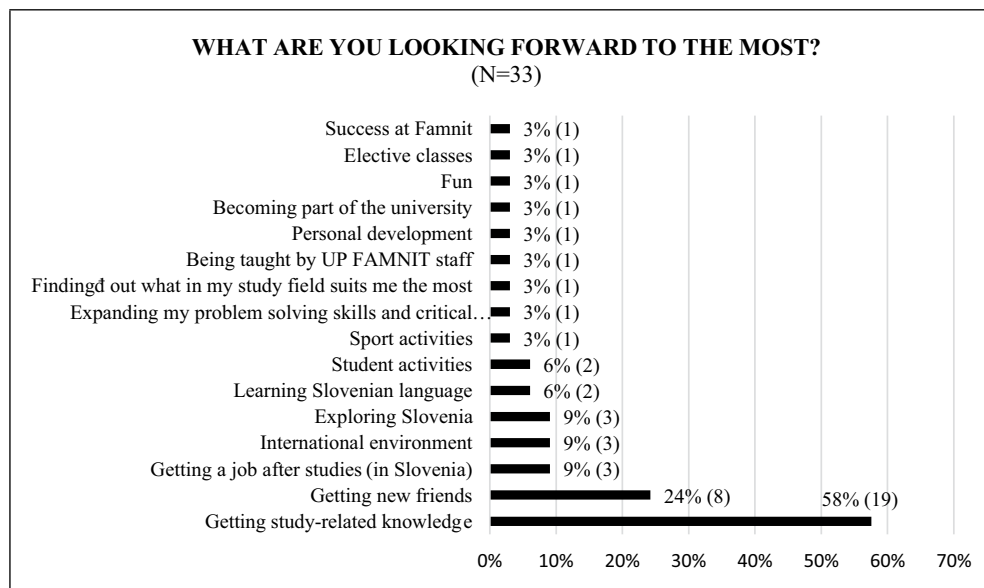


Figure 3: Chart showing replies to the question “What are you looking forward to the most?”

We gathered further information from students when they were providing answers to the questions asked during orientation days. Overall, these show that UP FAMNIT international students express greater desire to learn compared to their peers on other faculties. Next question was “*What do you bring with you?*” (Figure 4). Their answers were grouped and counted. The difference in the first two answers (study-related knowledge, desire to improve my knowledge) between international students from UP FAMNIT and students of other faculties is significant. UP FAMNIT students had already started talking about knowledge at the starting point when they were asked what they were bringing with them. 83% of them replied that they already have study-related knowledge, and 47% of them want to improve their knowledge further. Study and practical work-related skills (knowing how to work in a lab, knowing how to learn) also occurred often among the answers from students, while students did not often report other, non-study related skills.

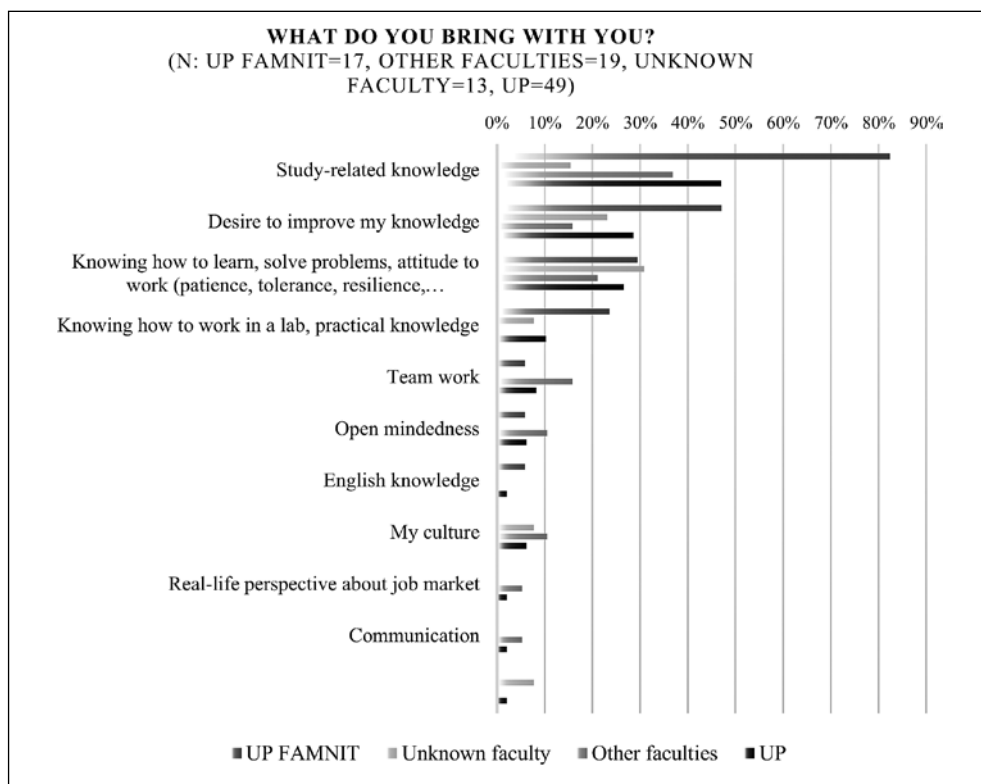


Figure 4: Occurrence of answers to the open question „What do you bring with you?“

Students replied along the same lines when they were asked about their expectations (Figure 5). A large majority (86%) expect to receive knowledge related to their study programme, which is a popular answer among all international students of the University of Primorska but not as strongly as among UP FAMNIT international students. Language (English, Slovene) improvement followed. Compared to all international students of the University of Primorska who provided answers, UP FAMNIT students did not list some of the expectations that other students had, such as meeting new people and having fun, obtaining skills relevant for employment and discovering new ways to learn.

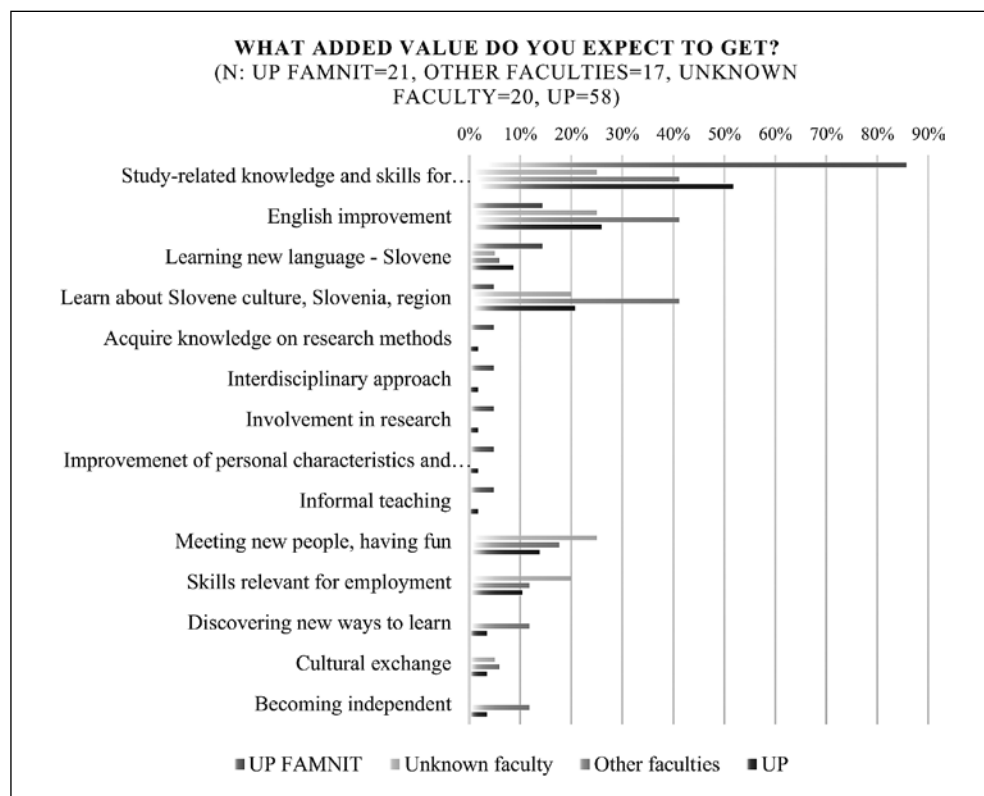


Figure 5: Chart showing the percentage of students providing specific answers when they were asked about their expectation. The answers were grouped and counted.

We were also interested in learning what students expect from us, the staff of the University and Faculty. Overall, (all students of the University of Primorska, including UP FAMNIT) students most often desire support with courses and teachers' understanding of different backgrounds and language barriers. UP FAMNIT students, to the same extent, again list study-related knowledge as what they expect to get from the Faculty, together with politeness, friendliness and understanding. UP FAMNIT international students were also the only ones who mentioned the quality of teaching. Other expectations did not occur as often. No student that could be attributed to UP FAMNIT expressed an expectation of support in integration, while this was the secondmost reply expected by students of other faculties.

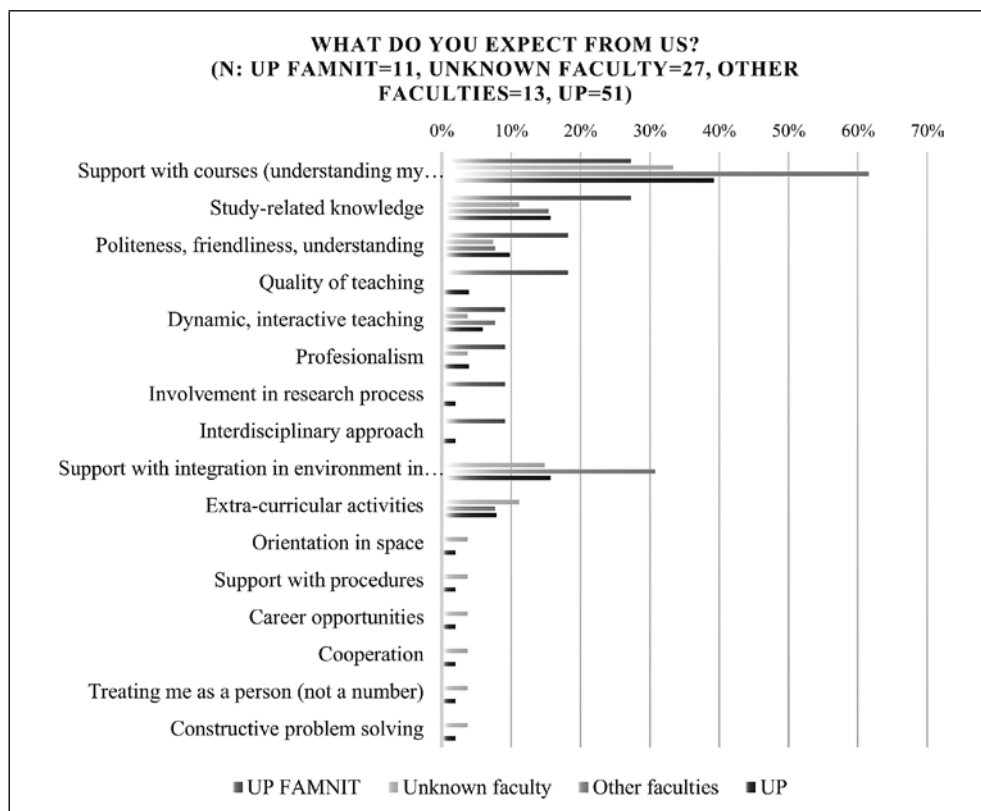


Figure 6: Occurrence of answers to the question *What do you expect from us?* Answers were grouped and counted.

## Results and discussion

The generation starting their studies in the 2017/18 academic year shows great enthusiasm for learning. They want to expand the knowledge they brought with them and further apply it to research and practical environments. They believe that UP FAMNIT is the right institution to teach them. In all (open) answers, knowledge appeared as the most important motivation to enrol in UP FAMNIT.

International students primarily expect quality studies as well as the understanding of staff that their pre-existing knowledge might be different from that of their Slovene peers, and that they are still struggling with the language.

The importance of knowledge and quality, as the main arguments of international students, show that they are not burdened with the traditions of Slovene higher education and some media stories. For international students only, the content is important and that has to convince them.

Interestingly, UP FAMNIT international students express different motivations compared to Slovene students of the same Faculty or even to international students of other faculties, which we can attribute to the following aspects:

1. Limited classroom interaction between Slovene students and international students, where higher education environment in Slovenia still plays a very important role in the decision-making for Slovenes (one-quarter came to UP FAMNIT, because they were not accepted to other institutions), while this is not relevant for international students, who primarily focus on quality and recommendations from their peers.
2. Recruitment efforts in the past were placed on attracting students with better achievements abroad, which seem to have been successful, while the Faculty could not reach them in Slovenia.
3. Consistent classroom work and following the standards also changed the composition of the incoming exchange students, who now come for knowledge, while in the past, other reasons played more importance. For example, UP FAMNIT sent a few students home without any mark, as they did not meet the minimum requirements. The initial expectation was that this would lead to the decrease of incoming exchange students. However, it happened the other way around – the number of incoming exchange students significantly rose, while the students who come, show greater motivation to learn and also obtain good marks (compared to the previous generations).

Overall, the results show that the Faculty was able to build a strong foundation for quality work with international students and there seems to be a clear link between the quality and international recruitment in the case of UP FAMNIT.

### *Practical implications*

Knowing the international students' motivations and their expectations bring immediate practical implication into everyday work at the Faculty, into its work with the students and into future recruitment. Nurturing and improvement of quality influences different levels:

#### Classroom work

Classroom work remains the core activity of each higher education institution, and it is important to follow the internal standards of work. At UP FAMNIT the following aspects are important:

- Demanding but fair education process, where rules are obeyed;
- Interdisciplinary approach;

- Usability and relevance of knowledge (e.g. some fields of natural sciences change so quickly that specific subjects have to be redesigned each academic year);
- Research overflow into the classroom – both through the involvement of visiting researchers and staff as well as through the introduction of research work by the Faculty into the classroom and, especially. final projects;
- Technical impeccability, e.g. language of instruction, and through the strong involvement of native speakers in the education process and international recruitment.

#### Work outside classroom related to study field

Students expect more than just quality classroom work. UP FAMNIT is implementing the following activities:

- Involvement of students in research projects of the Faculty;
- Involvement of students in projects with industry and non-industry partners;
- Preparation of students for international competitions and enabling their participation.

#### Future recruitment

As a result of the presented study, the recruitment approach changed. In previous years, the environment was the main factor for international student recruitment (e.g. Study by the Sea, Study on the Mediterranean, Study in EU). While these remain as factors that influence the final decision, the study showed that these responses were not the primary reasons. Therefore, the Faculty is now trying to attract students with the slogan 'Do science with us', reflecting a move from environmental aspects towards study- and knowledge-related topics.

#### Welcome services and relocation support

Administrative offices working with future students play a specific role in interaction with international students, and they communicate with the potential students for months before the students are involved in studies. They follow these user experience standards:

- Providing replies in one day;
- The first reply provides an answer, and the one-stop-shop approach is used (e.g. future students do not receive replies indicating whom they should contact to receive an answer);

- Adaptability and sensitivity in all communication, including diverse channels of communications apart from e-mail (Facebook, Instagram, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype) and familiarity with specific country cases;
- Going a step beyond –e.g. international office provides official answers related to obtaining a temporary residence permit but also offers additional advice, explanations and suggestions on how to manage the process;
- Improvement of introduction days, which includes both a smooth integration into the environment and a smooth start of studies.

## Alumni

Mobility in all directions is a specific aspect of quality. The Faculty, therefore, supports students to enter the best universities in the world after they finish their studies at UP FAMNIT and tries to maintain links with them while simultaneously trying to attract quality candidates at higher levels of education. Future plans involve the development of joint PhD study programmes (three have been agreed upon but are awaiting accreditation) and further mobility between institutions, in both directions.

## Conclusions

The presented case study indicates that the quality of studies plays an important role among international students and influences enrolment to the Faculty. Further insight into the responses shows that international enrolment by itself is not a quantitative measure of quality, but it became a qualitative indicator. This claim is further supported by comparison with Slovene and international students to other faculties of the University of Primorska. As Sigala and Baum (2003) stress, it is hard to attract top-quality students. More and more universities compete to attract them. We cannot say that UP FAMNIT was able to attract good candidates from abroad. Nevertheless, it seems that the Faculty attracts highly motivated students who want to improve their knowledge. Based on this research data, a new hypothesis can be presented; if the student's main motivation is to upgrade his or her knowledge, he or she will enrol to the Faculty where he or she can achieve that goal. Someone in the same social circle may have told him or her what to expect, and that is what he or she expected.

It seems that UP FAMNIT defined certain aspects and approaches they believe lead to high quality in the higher education institution and was able to attract students who seek the same approaches. Hence, the specific 'qualities' in these relative terms have been linked. At least from UP FAMNIT's perspective, the study proved that UP FAMNIT offers high-quality education and has been recognised as such by international students. It is important, as stressed by Pezaro (2017) and Kelo, Rogers and Rumbley (2010), to get student feedback at a personal level to provide quality services to them.



We examined this case from a practical perspective and monitored its implications. However, we must be careful in making direct conclusions. This paper are highlighted some limitations of this research, such as the possibility that students may have given socially desirable answers and that students were surveyed based on their expectations but not on their study experiences. We also have not discussed the quality of teaching, which should be explored in the future.

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## **PRIČAKOVANJA MEDNARODNIH ŠTUDENTOV GLEDE KAKOVOSTI POUČEVANJA IN STORITEV – PRIMER UP FAMNIT**

**Povzetek:** Število mednarodnih študentov (redno vpisanih tujcev) na Fakulteti za matematiko, naravoslovje in informacijske tehnologije Univerze na Primorskem (UP FAMNIT) se je v zadnjih letih znatno povečalo, zato nas je zanimalo, kateri razlogi so mednarodne študente prepričali, da so se vpisali na UP FAMNIT in se odselili v tujino. V letu 2017 smo z dvema raziskovalnima tehnikama (anketni vprašalnik in polstrukturirani intervju) želeli ugotoviti, kakšna so njihova pričakovanja glede študija. Ugotovitve kažejo, da so se ti študenti z UP FAMNIT seznanili predvsem prek svojih znancev in prijateljev. Velika večina (več kot 80 %) že ima znanje, povezano s študijem, in ga želi še izboljšati. Drugi vidiki zanje niso tako pomembni. Povezava pričakovanj študentov z dejstvom, da je večina za UP FAMNIT izvedela iz svojega družabnega kroga, nakazuje, da bi lahko bila internacionalizacija v primeru UP FAMNIT neposredno povezana s kakovostjo poučevanja in storitev. V veliki meri je fakulteta že priznana zaradi kakovostnih programov, kar dodatno dokazuje priljubljenost doktorskih programov. Na podlagi pridobljenih rezultatov bi lahko sklepali, da internacionalizacija na UP FAMNIT izboljšuje kakovost izobraževanja in raziskovanja. Vsekakor bi bile potrebne dodatne raziskave, da bi lahko dokazali prej omenjeno povezavo. Pričakovanja študentov pa je treba še naprej negovati in razvijati, na drugi strani pa morajo strokovni in pedagoški delavci znati izpolniti ta pričakovanja.

**Ključne besede:** internacionalizacija visokega šolstva, kakovost storitev, pričakovanja mednarodnih študentov

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