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To the ends of the earth: student mobility in southern Chile

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Abstract

Purpose – Although student mobility worldwide is increasing dramatically, systematic analysis of the effects and variables associated with its results is still recent, especially in new destinations. The purpose of this paper is to examine student mobility in southern Chile from a case study perspective. An exploratory study is presented to analyze the experiences of students in an exchange program over a five-year period and the academic performance of local students abroad.

Design/methodology/approach – A single-case design with two embedded units of analysis is presented. Data were drawn from semi-structured surveys and students' grade records. Content analysis was applied to the students' reports and statistical methods were used to verify the influence of certain variables.

Findings – The experience of Chilean students abroad centered on building up personal competences, while visiting international students concentrated on intercultural interaction, influenced mainly by the quality of accommodation and language factors, the latter determining their relations with professors and local students. Academic performance of local students abroad was determined by the type of academic activity undertaken, course validation, and the selected destination.

Practical implications – Some patterns recorded in international literature are similar to the results of this particular case. However, this study reveals some unique findings that can be associated to the operation of study abroad programs in emerging countries, especially in young regional universities unprecedented in aspects related to student mobility.

Originality/value – The lack of scientific studies on student mobility in Chile, a country which international student population is rapidly growing, concedes great value to this exploratory study.

Keywords International students, Study abroad, Case study, Academic performance, Student mobility

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) involves almost all aspects of institutional activity (Knight and De Wit, 1995; De Wit, 2011) and various implementation strategies (Knight, 2004; Dewey and Duff, 2009), of which student



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mobility has become one of the most recurrent (De Wit, 2010). Although student exchange is not a new phenomenon (Varghese, 2008), it has become progressively more common over the last few decades. In 2010, the estimated number of students abroad was 4.1 million, i.e. a fivefold escalation since 1985 (OECD, 2012). Furthermore, an exponential expansion is predicted for the forthcoming years (Altbach, 2008) as a result of increased student expectations (Varghese, 2009), the importance of financial payback for institutions (OECD, 2004), and the anticipated improvement of human capital and competitiveness of emerging economies (OECD, 2011).

Systematic analysis of the effects and variables associated with student mobility has developed differentially across countries (OECD, 2004), and results are primarily associated with variables such as language and culture (Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Kondakci *et al.*, 2008; Henderson, 2009; Montgomery, 2010; Sawir, 2005), emotional concerns (Sawir *et al.*, 2008; Russell *et al.*, 2010; Sherry *et al.*, 2010; Lee and Rice, 2007; Yoon and Portman, 2004), and administrative issues (Teichler and Steube, 1991).

In the past decade, student mobility has also grown considerably in importance and accessibility in Chile due to government scholarships and the implementation of internationalization policies at HEI (Ramirez, 2005). Though still marginal, Chile has significantly increased its participation in the global market share of international students (OECD, 2012). When compared to larger Latin American countries such as Mexico or Brazil, Chile receives proportionally more international students than local students sent abroad (UNESCO-UIS, 2010), which is significant to an emerging economy that has set the goal to expand its advanced human capital base (OECD and IBRD/WB, 2009, 2010).

This paper examines student mobility in southern Chile from a case study perspective. Data were drawn from semi-structured surveys and grade records to analyze the experience of 100 local and international students who participated in an exchange program at the Universidad de Los Lagos (ULAGOS) from 2006 to 2010. This exploratory case is considered of interest for several reasons. First, scientific literature on student mobility in Latin America is scarce. Second, it is presented in the context of an emerging destination: Chile, whose HE system has been recognized as a successful example but still faces many challenges (OECD and IBRD/WB, 2009). Third, the lack of scientific studies on student mobility in Chile, a country which international student population is rapidly growing, concedes great value to this exploratory study. Finally, it is explored from the optic of a young public regional university, with a distant geographic location, a particular student population, and virtually unprecedented in aspects related to student mobility.

Methodology

A single-case design with two embedded units of analysis is presented (Yin, 2009, 2012). The first unit refers to ULAGOS students who participated in international exchanges during five cohorts (2006 and 2010). The second alludes to international students who visited ULAGOS during the same period of time. Both groups of students participated in the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP), which is one of the strategies included in the internationalization plan developed at ULAGOS. The academic performance and experiences of students during their exchange visits were analyzed.

This exploratory study presents a unique case and a planned situation, limited in time, which results cover several dimensions. Case study methodology has particular advantages over other social science research methods in certain situations

because it provides versatility and helps the investigator analyze contemporary phenomena in depth, within a real-life context, where he has little or no control, relying on multiple sources of evidence, and where the visions of the actors are relevant (Berg, 2004; Yin, 2009, 2012; Stake, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The case

ULAGOS is a public, autonomous and regional HEI, certified by Chile's National Accreditation Commission (CNA). Founded in 1993, after the restoration of democracy in Chile, ULAGOS offers technical, undergraduate, and graduate programs in the areas of education, science, social sciences, health and engineering, to more than 11,000 students in three main campuses – Osorno, Puerto Montt, and Santiago. Osorno and Puerto Montt are cities located 560 and 620 miles, respectively, south of Santiago, the country's capital. Faculty at ULAGOS comprises 250 full- and part-time scholars dedicated to basic and applied research.

Most ULAGOS undergraduate students (80 percent) come from low-income households, 40 percent of which belong to the first economic quintile – e.g. the poorest fifth of Chile's population with an annual family income of less than \$1,300 USD. More than 80 percent of these students are the first generation to enroll in HE, and only 40 percent of the parents have a full time job. More than two-thirds come from public regional high schools, and almost one-quarter belongs to a native ethnic group – predominantly mapuche-huilliche (ULAGOS, 2007, 2008). Undergraduates programs are offered in almost all disciplines; however, there is a high concentration (48.5 percent) of students in the area of education.

Based on 140 partnerships with universities in 28 countries, the ISEP at ULAGOS is designed on a traditional reciprocal scheme to facilitate student mobility by waiving tuition and other associated fees at the hosting institution. Housing and other costs are financed through scholarships or by the students' families. Students who apply to the exchange program can choose from three types of plan: first, take regular courses at the host institution; second, follow an international traineeship at a placement agreed by both universities; or third, participate in research activities under the supervision of a faculty member at the host institution. ULAGOS students abroad have been able to finance their experience with support from external scholarships – Becas Chile, Becas Santander, DFAIT Canada, and German universities – and institutional financial aid provided by ULAGOS Office of International Affairs, Office of Student Development, and Academic Departments.

Methods and participants

Local students abroad considered in this study totaled 55, of which 42 were women (72.7 percent) and 15 men (27.3 percent). Ages ranged between 20 and 34 years, with an average of 22.9. When divided by study area, 70.9 percent belonged to education programs and 29.1 percent to other disciplines. Most of them (80 percent) took classes abroad and only 20 percent participated in international traineeships. Students travel to Latin America (38.1 percent), North America – the USA and Canada (36.3 percent), and Europe – France, Spain, and Germany- (18.2 percent).

To analyze the academic performance of local students abroad results of grade averages achieved before, during, and after the exchange are analyzed. Certain variables were considered: "age," "gender," "study area," "type of program" (classes or traineeship), and "host region" (North America, Europe, or Latin America). Grades were standardized according to conversion tables used by HEI

members of the Erasmus Program. In Chile, grades are assigned with a numeric scale from 1.0 to 7.0, including at least one decimal; 7.0 is the highest mark and 4.0 the lowest passing grade.

The experience of ULAGOS students abroad were also recorded using an open-ended survey (Seidman, 2006) administered to 32 of them upon their return. This survey was designed to characterize the participants, evaluate their perception of the exchange experience, and report their awareness on learning outcomes in three dimensions: disciplinary/career competences, personal competences, and intercultural competences (Yang *et al.*, 2011).

A total of 45 international students were considered in our study, of which 28 were women (62.2 percent) and 17 men (37.8). Ages ranged between 20 and 27 years, an average of 22.7. Students visited from three main regions: Latin America (53.1 percent), Europe (28.7 percent), and North America (15.5 percent). When divided by study areas, 35.6 percent belonged to business, 33.3 percent to humanities, 26.7 percent to social sciences, and 4.4 percent to other disciplines. Most of them took classes (77.8 percent) and few participated in the traineeships program (22.2 percent). For more than half (53.3 percent) Spanish was their mother tongue, and the remaining (46.7 percent) had a different language of origin. International students chose accommodation from host families (60 percent) or rentals (40 percent).

To analyze the experience of international students who visited ULAGOS, a semi-structured survey was applied. The aim of this survey was to characterize the students and evaluate their perception of the exchange program in several dimensions (program management and administrative support; interaction with professors, local students and course organization; and, complementary matters – housing and transportation). The effect of certain variables was observed on students' answers ("region of origin," "language of origin," "type of accommodation," "gender," "study area," and "age"). Open-ended questions of this survey helped compare their experience to that exposed by local students in the in three dimensions abovementioned.

Data analyses

Data were analyzed with qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative Content Analysis (Holsti, 1969; Morse and Field, 1996; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) was conducted on the information obtained from the open-ended questions. The process included: repeated reading of the information; highlighting key concepts; writing notes; coding key concepts; classifying codes into categories; reducing categories; defining categories; and revising frequencies.

To examine quantitative information, data were transferred to SPSS. Grade averages showed a normal distribution, but numeric data from the survey applied to international students was right-skewed, as this tends to be common when using Likert-scale measures (Jamieson, 2004). Consequently, we selected different statistical methods. Grade averages were analyzed with paired *t*-tests to discover any significant differences before and after the experience abroad; independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA (with *post hoc* Tukey HSD and Games-Howell) were undertaken, according to Mendenhall *et al.* (2006), to determine the influence of variables. Numeric data from the international students' survey was analyzed with Mann-Whitney *U* and Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric tests, to observe significant differences among groups. A reliability test of this survey produced a Cronbach's α score of 0.823.

Results

Academic performance of local students abroad

Significant statistical differences were observed in the grades of 55 local students before and after their experience abroad ($t = -3.496$; $gl = 54$; $p = 0.001$). The general average of 63.63 percent increased after the exchange. Degrees of improvement varied from 0.1 to 1.7 points in a 1-7 scale. Performance differed according to the type of program (classes or traineeship). Significant differences were observed in students before and after they followed a traineeship program ($t = 2.064$; $gl = 14$; $p = 0.044$), but not among those that attended classes ($t = -0.493$; $gl = 42$; $p = 0.624$).

Only 54.5 percent of the students who took classes received complete validation of their coursework abroad. Average grades of students who were fully credited were higher than those that received partial or no credit ($t = 3.927$; $gl = 42$; $p = 0.0001$), even when the grades of these two groups showed no difference before ($t = 0.398$; $gl = 42$; $p = 0.692$) and during the exchange ($t = -0.196$; $gl = 42$; $p = 0.846$). Therefore, lack of validation resulted in a decrease in averages after the experience abroad of those students who were not credited.

Two other factors influenced academic results: the level reached by students in their undergraduate program prior to the exchange (seventh, eighth, or ninth semester), and the host region (North America, Europe, and Latin America). Students from the more advanced levels—i.e. eighth and ninth semester registered higher grades (Table I). In regard to the host region, students who visited Europe (Germany, Spain, and France) received the lowest grades at the host university; but after their reincorporation into ULAGOS, this group achieved the greatest increase. In contrast, those who visited North America (Canada and the USA) and Latin America (Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico), improved their averages while abroad, but did not maintain them upon their return (Table II).

The experience of local students abroad

Content analysis applied to the perception of Chilean students abroad resulted in 21 recurring concepts, which were grouped into three categories of competences (Table III). Quality of the experience and academic/professional development were the two most outstanding concepts.

In the category of disciplinary/career competences, differences were observed between students who took courses and those on a traineeship program. The first

Table I.
Comparing ULAGOS
students' academic
performance by
semester abroad

	7th semester	8th semester	9th semester	F	p
Average grades before exchange ($n = 44$)	5.50 ($n = 13$)	5.30 ($n = 14$)	5.25 ($n = 17$)	1.016	0.371
Average grades during exchange ($n = 44$)	5.55 ($n = 13$)	6.46 ($n = 14$)	5.97 ($n = 17$)	7.836	0.001
Average grades after exchange ($n = 44$)	5.32 ($n = 13$)	5.38 ($n = 14$)	6.05 ($n = 17$)	4.642	0.015*

Notes: Grades averages on 1-7 scale. *Significant at $p \leq 0.05$ and highly significant at $p \leq 0.01$

Table II.
Comparing ULAGOS
students' academic
performance by
geographical
region visited

	North America	Europe	Latin America	F	p
Average grades before exchange ($n = 44$)	5.53 ($n = 20$)	5.39 ($n = 14$)	4.89 ($n = 10$)	6.688	0.003
Average grades during exchange ($n = 44$)	6.12 ($n = 20$)	5.54 ($n = 14$)	6.41 ($n = 10$)	6.647	0.003
Average grades after exchange ($n = 44$)	5.16 ($n = 20$)	6.16 ($n = 14$)	5.77 ($n = 10$)	8.859	0.001

Note: Grades averages on 1-7 scale

				Student mobility in southern Chile
Categories	Contents	<i>n</i>	%	
Disciplinary/career competences	Achieves academic and professional growth	25	78.1	87
	Compares education systems and teaching strategies	17	53.1	
	Reflects on his/her future career	15	46.9	
	Reports higher professional expectations	14	43.8	
	Reappraises his/her home institution	13	40.6	
	Visits schools and observes teachers' performance	12	37.5	
	Strengthens and practices previous knowledge	9	28.1	
Personal competences	States his/her experience was enriching, unique or unforgettable	26	81.3	
	Achieves personal and emotional growth	21	65.6	
	Mentions having a new life perspective or had broadened his/her vision	16	50.0	
	Overcomes fears and challenges	10	31.3	
	Revalues his/her own family/friends/and country	11	34.4	
	Practices tolerance/responsibility/maturity	13	40.6	
	Mentions that the experience completely changed his/her life	9	28.1	
	Travels and participates on other academic or cultural activities	23	71.9	
	Appreciates learning about a new country/culture/traditions	21	65.6	
	Appreciates communicating in a different language proficiency and improves	12	37.5	
Intercultural competences	Values interaction with other international students	12	37.5	
	Values interaction with professors	12	37.5	
	Values interaction with local students/families	10	31.3	
	Learns and appreciates aspects of culture that will continue to practice	4	12.5	

Table III.
ULAGOS students'
perceptions on learning
competences acquired
abroad (2006-2010)

indicated that the exchange offered them the possibility of experiencing and adapting to new learning environments, and comparing teaching strategies and educational systems. In contrast, trainees focussed on the opportunity of reinforcing their previous knowledge, practicing their abilities, and reflected on their career and identity as future professionals. In particular, Education students engaged in internships indicated a high level of satisfaction with having practiced their teaching abilities with different student populations, an opportunity that, according to their reports, allowed them to test different pedagogic strategies.

ULAGOS students attributed considerable significance to personal competences, arguing that the experience resulted in emotional and personal growth. More than 80 percent of the students described the experience as "enriching, unique or unforgettable," and 40 percent indicated that it helped them learn tolerance, responsibility, and maturity. In their written comments, students expressed they felt obliged to learn how to use their time and personal finances appropriately, to face new challenges and overcome their inner fears. This was closely related to the acquisition of self-confidence, improvement of self-esteem, appreciation of their family and country, and a renewed image of their own identity.

With regard to intercultural competences, students valued having contact with new cultures. More than 65 percent indicated they enjoyed learning about

a new country, its culture, and traditions, which broadened their horizons. Students also expressed satisfaction at interacting in another language and detailed how they were able to test their previous knowledge, acquire new vocabulary and overcome the fear of expressing themselves in another language. Contact with local students and families were also valued, since students felt they improved their interpersonal and networking abilities. Finally, some mentioned having learned certain aspects from the host culture, such as, punctuality, respect, responsibility, and flexibility that they would integrate into their future professional career.

The experience of international students at ULAGOS

International students at ULAGOS reported having acquired the three types of competences in the open-ended questions, but in contrast with local students, they focussed primarily on intercultural aspects. Three concepts were highlighted: learning about a new country, relating with local students and families, and achieving tolerance and maturity (Table IV). Results from the structured questions showed international students were satisfied with the exchange program. "Interaction with the local community" and "help with problems" were the best evaluated items. "Housing conditions," "place of residence," "would recommend accommodation," and "access to student services" received the lowest scores (Table V).

Categories	Contents	<i>n</i>	%
Disciplinary/professional competences	Achieves academic and professional growth	12	26.7
	Compares education systems and teaching strategies	11	24.4
	Reflects on his/her future career	2	4.4
	Reports higher professional expectations	5	11.1
	Reappraises his/her home institution	0	0.0
	Visits schools and observes teachers' performance	1	2.2
Personal competences	Strengthens and practices previous knowledge	11	24.4
	States his/her experience was enriching, unique or unforgettable	15	33.3
	Achieves personal and emotional growth	11	24.4
	Mentions having a new life perspective or broadened his/her vision	6	13.3
	Overcomes fears and challenges	0	0.0
	Revalues his/her own family/friends/and country	7	15.6
	Practices tolerance/responsibility/maturity	22	48.9
	Mentions that the experience completely changed his/her life	0	0.0
Intercultural competences	Travels and participates on other academic or cultural activities	10	22.2
	Appreciates learning about a new country/culture/traditions	33	73.3
	Appreciates communicating in a different language	12	26.7
	proficiency and improves		
	Values interaction with other international students	11	24.4
	Values interaction with professors	8	17.8
	Values interaction with local students/families	26	57.8
	Learns and appreciates aspects of culture that will continue to practice	0	0.0

Table IV.
Perceptions of
international students on
learning competences
acquired during exchange
at ULAGOS (2006-2010)

				Student mobility in southern Chile
Category	Variable	<i>n</i>	Sum	
Program management and administrative support	Help with difficulties	45	207	89
	Home university requirements	45	202	
	Reception/orientation	45	192	
	Program management	45	187	
	Students expectations	45	183	
	Student services	45	176	
Interaction with professors, local students and course organization	Interaction with local students	45	201	
	Teamwork	45	191	
	Bibliography	45	190	
	Interaction with professors/supervisors	45	188	
	Course organization	45	186	
	Evaluation system	45	183	
	Classes	45	180	
	Research activities	45	180	
	Community involvement	45	207	
Complementary matters (housing and transportation)	Local transportation	45	204	
	Accommodation conditions/features	45	176	
	Place of residence	45	170	

Notes: Maximum accumulated value on each Likert item = 225 (Five-point Likert scale 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = totally agree)

Table V.
Evaluating variables associated with the perception of international students at ULAGOS (2006-2010)

The students' "language of origin" determined their relationship with professors and, local students, as well as affecting their teamwork interaction. Spanish speaking students were able to establish more effective interaction with professors/supervisors ($Z = -2.360$; $gl = 43$; $p = 0.018$), and local students ($Z = -2.411$; $gl = 43$; $p = 0.016$). This group also showed better disposition to teamwork with local students ($Z = -2.207$; $gl = 43$; $p = 0.027$). Coincidences were found in the open-ended questions. Among negative impressions, some non-Spanish speaking students mentioned problems related with a deficient interaction with professors and local students. In addition, in autumn of 2008, a student strike paralyzed activities at ULAGOS for several weeks and affected the normal functioning of the exchange program. Comments of non-Spanish speaking students expressed their concern at not having classes and the subsequent extension of the academic calendar that forced them to modify their return dates.

The students' university of origin ("private" or "public") divided their opinion on how well the hosting institution had met the home university requirements ($Z = -2.148$; $gl = 43$; $p = 0.032$). Students from public universities scored higher. In addition, the type of accommodation selected ("host family" or "rental") influenced the students' opinion of the program's management and their living conditions. Compared to those who chose rented accommodation, students who lived with a host family had a better opinion of the program's orientation ($Z = -2.010$; $gl = 43$; $p = 0.044$), and of "the place of residence" ($Z = -2.407$; $gl = 43$; $p = 0.016$). Accordingly, in the open answers, some students expressed having trouble with their residence choice, especially during the winter when weather conditions worsened.

Suggestions on how to improve the exchange program indicated the need to: advise students on housing options, arrange more social activities, grant financial assistance,

offer courses specially designed for international students, establish a more dynamic coordination with the university of origin, and help with credit validation.

Discussion

Evidence abounds on the advantages associated with the internationalization of higher education, and how it benefits individuals, institutions, and even countries (Knight and De Wit, 1995; Turpin *et al.*, 2002; OECD, 2004, 2011; Knight, 2006; Lee, 2008; Oyewole, 2009; Jowi, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2009; Horta, 2010; Montgomery, 2010; Kondakci and Van den Broeck, 2009). Consequently, internationalization has become one of the main trends worldwide (Knight, 2002; Jackson, 2008; Altbach, 2008; De Wit, 2010), and, in particular, student mobility has experienced a fivefold increase over the last three decades (OECD, 2012). Accordingly, these trends are also observed in Chile (Ramirez, 2005; Lemaitre, 2007).

HEI have gradually incorporated student mobility strategies into the two facets of internationalization: at home – i.e. admission of international students – and abroad – i.e. student mobility schemes to other countries – (Knight, 2004). The most frequent approach to student mobility has involved short-period study programs abroad – between two weeks and six months – which have been documented in recent research in terms of academic and cultural results (Wang *et al.*, 2009). Recent literature on short-period study abroad programs has based results on specific study cases across countries and specializations (Langley and Breese, 2005; Kondakci *et al.*, 2008; Yang *et al.*, 2011). In consequence, there is a growing interest in exploring possible patterns in the beneficial results that these types of exchanges have on students, independent of their personal characteristics. Identifying differences in the results obtained between local and international students is becoming another popular trend. Assessment of positive and negative aspects of student exchange is not only useful to improve future outcomes, but also to verify eventual variations associated with specific factors.

The case of the ISEP developed by ULAGOS in Chile is of interest because it focusses on a new process with special features such as: students from low-income families: 40 percent belong to the lowest economic quintile, 80 percent are the first generation to access Higher Education, 50 percent belong to Education undergraduate programs, and very few have had previous experience abroad; an exchange program developed in southern Chile, a remote geographical region with adverse weather conditions, and with a young, public HEI, subject to student strikes, and internal organizational problems. Findings from this case study confirmed differences between local and international students' experiences abroad. While local students abroad focussed on the acquisition of personal competences, international visiting students placed more emphasis on learning intercultural competences.

Information on the results of student mobility programs with regard to personal competences is scarce and recent (Yang *et al.*, 2011). In the present study, local students reported that the exchange program was a unique and enriching life experience. In their opinion, the program helped them renew their appreciation of personal relationships and reinforced their adaptation skills, as well as strengthening their levels of independence and autonomy when making decisions. Similar experiences were recorded among groups of nursing students (Shieh, 2004; Green *et al.*, 2008). When compared with Chinese students from Yang *et al.* (2011), Chilean students in our study placed more importance on building up personal competences. This can be attributed to the socio-economic characteristics of this particular group of Chilean students and, eventually, it might show a superior

capacity to adjust to complex situations. Even when results on disciplinary and intercultural competences described in this study are similar to those reported in other cases (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Sutton and Rubin, 2004; Shieh, 2004; Langley and Breese, 2005; Masgoret, 2006; Leong, 2007; Johnson and Battalio, 2008; Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Pedersen, 2010), it is important to highlight the greater effect personal development had on students according to their reports.

The impressions of international students concentrated on intercultural competences. These students showed greater interest in learning and adapting to another culture. This may be due to the fact that, in contrast to Chilean students, most have already had previous international experience and had the opportunity to deal with new situations in a personal and academic sphere. Problems detected are not radically different from those already identified. Factors such as quality of accommodation, access to student services, the evaluation system, and recognition of courses have already been highlighted in previous studies (Teichler and Steube, 1991; Lee, 2008) and were also recorded in this case. International students evaluated accommodation and access to student services as the worst items; both are aspects that influence student adaptation (Kondakci *et al.*, 2008). In addition, as in previous studies, negative effects were recorded on academic and social interaction associated with language and culture (Pritchard and Skinner, 2002; Andrade, 2006) as well as difference attributable to the student's region of origin (Cantwell *et al.*, 2009). The fact that language differences and course validation were identified as recurring problems in the testimonies of both local and international students shows the considerable influence these issues have on academic performance abroad and the importance of considering the experience of students on internationalization strategies (Clifford, 2009). The same can be applied to the meaning assigned by international students to the academic consequences of student strikes. Emotional factors that have been recorded in other studies (Sawir *et al.*, 2008; Russell *et al.*, 2010; Sherry *et al.*, 2010), were not identified as problems either by local or international students, in this study. This may be due to the short period contemplated in this exchange study program.

In this exploratory study case we have also suggest the use of grades to measure the local students' academic achievement abroad and to compare their performance upon return. Significant statistical differences were observed in the grades before and after their experience abroad, and almost two-thirds were able to increase them upon return. We also observed that academic achievement of local students after their exchange experience was determined by three variables: first, the type of academic activity developed abroad, second, the validation of courses taken, and third, the host region. Students who participated in a traineeship had better results upon returning, which might show that engaging in other academic activities abroad could be as valuable as taking classes. Students who received validation for their courses showed greater improvement which means HEI interested in sending students abroad must deal effectively with administrative issues (Teichler and Steube, 1991). Finally, students who traveled to Europe obtained lower grades during their visit, but achieved better results when returning to Chile. This confirms differences in performance patterns across education systems (OECD, 2010).

Even when the use of grades can present several challenges such as measuring and transforming them effectively from different grading scales and systems, we have considered their use valuable since, in our case, it became a verifying method of academic performance that could be crossed with the students' reports. Local students who attained high grades abroad also stated that the experience: allowed

them to compare themselves to international quality standards; helped reappraised the education delivered by their own institution; and improved their self-image.

In conclusion, this study reveals that, independent of the individual characteristics of students, or the unique features of each university, some patterns recorded in international literature are similar to the results of this particular case. However, in our program, local students placed a greater degree of importance on the acquisition of personal competences abroad. We also verified an inverse relationship between the students' performance abroad and their achievement upon returning, which depended on the host region. International students, on the contrary, valued the acquisition of intercultural competences most. The greatest problems experienced were associated with variables such as language interaction and type of accommodation, both of which influenced the adaptation process. Some administrative problems were observed such as the validation of courses undertaken abroad. Findings in this study indicate that, even when results on student exchanges are reported from case studies with different sources of information, it is possible to distinguish common, recognizable patterns.

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