



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

MASTER THESIS IN EUROPEAN STUDIES

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## We Love the 'Nordic Way of Life'

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A study on How International Students' Perception of Europe and the Nordic Countries Influenced their Study Abroad Decision

Author: Martha Koppen

Supervisor: Eva Ossiansson

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## Abstract

This study combines theories about how international students evaluate different study abroad destinations with research regarding the Nordic Model, sometimes also referred to as the Nordic brand, and Brand Europe. The aim of this study was *to explore how shared perceptions among international students about Europe and the Nordic countries can be exploited in order to market Nordic higher education globally*. In particular this study, however, aimed at answering the following more specific research question; *how the study abroad decision-making process of international students, choosing to study in Sweden, is influenced by their perception of Europe and/or the Nordic countries*. In order to answer this question semi-structured interviews with international master students, studying in Sweden, were conducted after which the study's conceptual framework was inductively generated from these interviews.

Up until now it has been assumed that the study-abroad decision-making process of international students consists out of three distinct stages: (1) the individual decides to study abroad, (2) the individual selects a host country and (3) the individual selects a host university. The findings of this study, however, suggest that a fourth stage should be added – at least for international students going to Europe. The respondents in this study namely first decided that they wanted to study somewhere in Europe, before choosing a specific host country, and during this initial stage of the decision-making process their perception of Europe thus became vital. It was primarily the respondents' perception of the quality of education in Europe and the European culture as either easy to adapt to or different and exciting, which attracted them to Europe. The respondents' perception of the Nordic countries on the other hand, was found to influence their choice of host country and found to correspond very well to different aspects of the Nordic model or brand. The respondents namely viewed these countries as well-functioning, peaceful, prosperous and egalitarian societies. In addition the respondents also found the Nordic culture and lifestyle appealing. The majority of the respondents, furthermore, stated that their perception of the Nordic region in general, in combination with their perception about Sweden and finding a suitable degree, constituted their main reason for choosing Sweden – wherefore cultivating the Nordic brand, and what it stands for, seems to be crucial to attracting international students to the region.

**Key words:** Nordic model, Nordic brand, Brand Europe, Nordic countries, 'push and pull model', 'push-pull' factors, international students, international student mobility.

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## Introduction

Today international student mobility is nothing short of a global industry, an industry catering to the needs of more than 4,5 million tertiary students enrolled at educational institutions outside their country of citizenship, and between 1990 and 2011 the number of international students increased more than threefold from 1,3 million to nearly 4,3 million. This increase represents an average annual growth rate of around 6 % – a growth rate which not even the global economic crisis managed to slow down. Most international students come from Asian countries (53%) and go to one of the following five countries; the United States (17%), the United Kingdom (13%), Australia (6 %), Germany (6 %) and France (6 %) (OECD 2013).

Europe is the part of the world which receives the most international students, even if the United States is the country who receives the largest share of these, and the benefits for the continent are vast. To begin with international students serve as an important revenue stream both for their host universities and their host countries in general – since they not only pay tuition fees but also spend a substantial amount of money on accommodation and other living expenses during their stay (European Commission 2013). One country which put effort into calculating its economic gain from hosting international students is Canada. Canada hosts 5% of all international students and in 2010 the total revenue generated by international students contributed with more than CAD 8 billion to the Canadian economy – which is more than what the exports of for instance unwrought aluminium (CAD 6 billion) or helicopters, airplanes and spacecraft did (CAD 6,9 billion) (Canada 2012). The reason for using Canada as an example, even though it's not a European country, is that it hosts approximately the same percentage of international students as three of Europe's most popular study abroad destinations; Austria, France and Germany, and far less than the United Kingdom, wherefore doing so can give an indication as to what the economic benefits for these countries might be. In addition to bringing in revenue, international students also increase the quality of teaching and learning at their host universities by enhancing the cultural, linguistic and international aspects of these (Altbach 2004; Knight 2006) – and in 2011 around one out of five students, participating in advanced research programs in OECD countries, was international. In some European countries such as Australia, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom the percentage was even higher and exceeded 30 % (OECD 2013).

From a European perspective attracting international students to the region, however, also serve as a source of talent since many stay on after having completed their studies, thus having a long-term influence on the economy, and in for instance France and the Czech Republic more than 30% choose to stay – in most other European countries around 20% stay on (OECD 2013). To attract talent is especially important to the European countries since several countries in Europe are suffering from declining or insufficient demographic growth. A situation which will create severe economic challenges within the near future since the working age population will become unable to provide for the growing number of retirees (Economist 2007). Against this backdrop it becomes clear that all countries, and especially European countries with declining populations, could benefit greatly from attracting more international students – but what is the secret behind doing so?

Today most research concerning what causes global educational flows apply a ‘push and pull model’. ‘Push’ factors are factors operating within the sending country ‘pushing’ students towards looking for studies elsewhere. A lack of access to education locally, a desire to gain an understanding for Western culture and a belief that overseas courses are better than local ones are examples of important ‘push’ factors. General awareness and knowledge about a country, the quality of education in a county, having received personal recommendations from someone studying in a country and the costs associated with studying in a country, on the other hand, constitutes important ‘pull’ factors (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

However, even though some of the most important factors influencing the study abroad decisions of international students have been pinpointed and some European countries are doing quite well, when it comes to attracting international students, some are not – the most puzzling example being the Nordic countries. These highly developed countries namely offer high quality education in English, for considerably less money than for instance the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia, but still receive a lower proportion of international students than all other OECD countries (OECD 2013) – something which makes them an interesting study subject. In two of the Nordic countries, that is Iceland and Norway, education is even offered for free – the other three Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, just recently introduced tuition fees.

Another fact which makes the Nordic countries an interesting study subject is their strong

regional identity and the fact that they for a long time have been conducting joint Nordic marketing efforts; aimed at promoting Nordic higher education in general. The implementation of tuition fees in some of the Nordic countries, has, however, led some of these countries, in particular Sweden, to opt out of such efforts (Oxford Research 2013). Whether this is wise or not is, however, due to a lack of research addressing this issue difficult to say. Existing ‘push and pull models’ namely only account for factors influencing an individual’s decision to study abroad, which are connected either to that individual’s home or host country, and not to the potential existence and impact of supranational brands on this process – or of more general perceptions of certain regions and parts of the world (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar; Eder et al. 2010; Lee 2007). In order to address this issue the current study therefore combined literature on current ‘push and pull models’ with research on the Nordic model, later also referred to as the Nordic brand, and Brand Europe – and after reviewing this literature the following aim was chosen; *to explore how shared perceptions among international students about Europe and the Nordic countries can be exploited in order to market Nordic higher education globally*. Due to the limited scope of this study the following more specific research question was, however, chosen; *how the study abroad decision-making process of international students, choosing to study in Sweden, is influenced by their perception of Europe and/or the Nordic countries*. In order to answer this question semi-structured interviews with international master’s students, studying in Sweden, were conducted after which the study’s conceptual framework was inductively generated from these interviews.

## Outline of Thesis

After the introduction a section on previous research will follow. This section will provide a general description of international students studying in Nordic countries after which research on the Nordic model and Brand Europe will be presented. Thereafter a theoretical section will follow, where factors influencing global educational flows on a macro level and a model for factors influencing international students' study abroad decision-making process, will be presented. After this the aim and research question of the study will be presented. Hereafter a methodology section will follow. After the methodology section the analysis and the results of the study will be presented. In the final section the conclusions of the study, a discussion of these and some ideas for further research will be presented.

## Previous Research

*This section will start with providing a general description of international students and the higher educational sector in Nordic countries – particularly focusing on the consequences of these countries moving towards a fee-paying model for the intake of non-EU/EEA students. After this research discussing the existence, or non-existence, of a Nordic and/or European brand, which could serve as a common platform for Nordic countries when marketing themselves as educational nations, will be presented. The reason for presenting research on these issues is that they provide an insight into why it is interesting to look at how the perception of international students of the Nordic countries and/or Europe is related to their decision to study at Nordic universities instead of solely conducting studies focusing on a national context.*

### International Students in Nordic Countries

The five Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden receive a lower proportion of international students than all other OECD countries, and in 2010 there were only 68.256 international students studying in the area, something which is surprising considering that Nordic countries offer high quality education and charge low or no tuition fees for international students (OECD 2013;). The trend were, however, for a long time positive and the number of international students in the region where increasing rapidly and between 2005 and 2010 they were up by 117% and accounted for 5,8% of the total Nordic student population of around 1,18 million. At that time Denmark had the highest proportion of foreign students (8,6%) while Sweden had the highest number – 27.856 (Myklebust 2013). After the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students, that is for students not from an EU member state or from Norway, Lichtenstein, Iceland or Switzerland, in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, this positive development was, however, halted – something which underlines the importance of the Nordic countries finding new ways to attract international students besides from offering education for free. The majority of international students in Nordic countries are from Asia, as in the rest of the world, whereas the rest of the international student community is comprised of students from Africa, North America and European countries from outside of the EU/EEA. International students in the Nordic area are here defined as students from outside of the EU/EEA area (Oxford Research 2013).



## Nordic Higher Education and International Students

For a long time none of the Nordic countries charged any tuition fees for international students, which gave them a competitive advantage compared to other Western countries trying to attract such students. In 2006 Denmark, however, decided to implement tuition fees and in 2010 Finland introduced such fees on a trial basis and one year after Sweden implemented a model similar to the Danish one. Norway and Iceland, nevertheless, still offer free education for all – but recent research suggest that the introduction of fees elsewhere in the region has led to additional pressure on the educational sector in these countries which might force them to reconsider not charging any fees, no matter their political stance, and Iceland already introduced a smaller administrative fee in order to cover some of the additional cost pertaining to the increase of international students (Oxford Research 2013).

The main reason for the Nordic countries implementing tuition fees for international students has been economic. Nordic countries feature on the top of both EU and OECD spending lists, concerning the percentage of a country's GDP spent on higher education, and implementing fees has been a way to limit costs and redistribute public expenditure within the higher education sector. The consequences that this will have for the intake of international students in the long run has, however, been fiercely debated. Those in favour of tuition fees argue that these serve as a valuable revenue stream for the state and that students link payment with quality wherefore charging tuition fees will signal that Nordic countries offer high quality education. In addition those in favour also believe that tuition fees will ensure that only the most 'attractive' students choose to come to the region – that is students who either are interested in working within a sector where there is a shortage of skills and specialization, and thus are willing to pay for their education since they will become 'reimbursed' once they start working, or those talented enough to receive a scholarship (Oxford Research 2013; Cai and Kivistö 2013;). Those opposed instead stress that Nordic countries will be unable to attract enough talented students if charging tuition fees since they now have to compete over these, on the same conditions, as countries with advantages such as having lower living costs, higher ranked universities or with countries where the native language is English – the latter being an advantage since it makes it easier for international students to enter the labour market since many of them already master English (Brooks and Waters 2011).

If it is the critics or the advocates of this policy change, who turn out to be right is, however,

still tricky to predict. Denmark and Sweden are the only two countries who already introduced tuition fees on a large scale, Finland is still in its trial period, and even though Denmark implemented their fees a couple of years ago Sweden is just now starting to see the effects of their implementation. It is, nevertheless, possible to conclude that the number of non- EU/EEA students decreased severely in both Denmark and Sweden shortly after the implementation of tuition fees for these students. In Denmark, however, the number of non-EU/EEA students started to rise significantly again – something which happened two to three years after the implementation of fees and which is believed to be due to increased marketing efforts and widespread systems of scholarships targeting these students (Oxford Research 2013). Sweden, nevertheless, suffered an even worse fall in international students; the last intake of international students, before the introduction of tuition fees in 2011, where greater than any year before and a total of 46 800 students arrived. Out of those two thirds were free movers, organizing their studies on their own, and half came from outside of Europe. And even though the introduction of tuition fees did not affect the number of exchange students coming to Sweden to any significant degree the number of free mover students, from outside of EU/EEA, declined from 7600, during the autumn of 2010, to only 1600 during the autumn of 2011 – representing a decrease of 79 % (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2012a). Sweden, as Denmark, has tried to counteract this negative development by intensifying marketing campaigns and increase funding for scholarships – it is, however, difficult to predict whether or not Sweden will be able to reach pre-tuition levels (Oxford Research 2013).

In the Nordic countries who still offer free education, that is Norway and Iceland, the number of non-EU/EEA students have instead increased sharply during this period suggesting that students are now choosing these countries to a larger extent than before due to the implementation of tuition fees elsewhere in the Region (Oxford Research 2013).

### **Whether to Opt for Joint Nordic Marketing Efforts or Not**

One consequence of the Nordic countries moving towards a fee paying model is that some of these countries started to opt out of joint marketing initiatives, in particular Sweden, and instead put their efforts into marketing the own nation and its universities (Oxford Research 2013). If such actions are wise or not is, however, difficult to know due to a lack of research investigating this matter. One argument is, however, that Sweden is opting out at a time when

joint Nordic marketing efforts are more important than ever, due to the fall in international students following the implementation of tuition fees, and that:

*“Just as the overall marketing of a country as an educational nation can give HE providers a basis on which to build, strengthening the Nordic Region as an education region would give the institutions a better starting point from which to market themselves globally. It would help to create a platform both for the countries and the universities”* (Oxford Research 2013,p.47).

Due to the mentioned lack of research it is, nevertheless, difficult to draw any certain conclusions about the benefits with joint Nordic marketing efforts targeting international students. It is, furthermore, important to ask if the region is perceived as a unit to start with. Since, if the surrounding world does not see it as such, there might be less of a foundation to build on when trying to promote it as a common education region – and it might make less sense and require more economic resources, to do so. The just stated question can, nevertheless, be related to research discussing whether or not a phenomena initially referred to as the ‘Nordic Model’, and later also referred to as the ‘Nordic Brand’ (Browning 2007), still exists – this question, however, lacks a straightforward answer. Research on the subject can, however, give some guidance as to the potential properties of such a brand – which further research, can build on, addressing how the Nordic region is evaluated as a study abroad destination. The Nordic Model or brand first emerged on the world stage during the Cold War and can be described as follows:

*“Central to the Nordic brand have been ideas of Nordic ‘exceptionalism’ – of the Nordics as being different from or better than the norm – and of the Nordic experience, norms and values as a model to be copied by others”* (Browning, 2007,p.27).

Initially the Nordic Model, because during its early years it was perceived as such and not as a brand, had both an economic dimension, highlighting the unique socio-economic organization of the Nordic countries and their focus on a strong welfare state providing equal opportunity for all citizens regardless of their financial standing, and a foreign policy dimension – highlighting the Nordic countries tendency to act as bridge-builders during the cold war era, when they represented one of the few peaceful regions in a ‘conflict prone’ Europe (e.g. Mouritzen 1995; Wæver 1992). The belief in this Model – representing a ‘Nordic way of doing things’, meaning a different, better, more progressive and modern way, has been pivotal

both for the identity formation within Nordic countries and for the Nordic countries viewing themselves as a unit (Lawler 1997). It was, however, also an effective way for the Nordic countries to position themselves on the international arena – and this model was known not only to those in the Nordic countries but also to the surrounding world (Browning 2007, Kharkina 2013).

However, due to changes in the political landscape of Europe, and the world becoming increasingly globalized, the Nordic countries have started to move away from this ‘Nordic way of doing things’ – becoming less critical towards the use of military force and making cuts in the once so generous welfare state (Browning 2007; Rasmussen 2005; Rieker 2006). One example of such a cut being the above discussed implementation of tuition fees for international students – a cut which its critics believe will lead to a gradual erosion of Nordic welfare states since it normalizes the idea that education is something which one has to pay for – instead of viewing it as an investment in the individual which in the long run will benefit not only that individual but also the society, and its companies, at large (Oxford Research 2013; Imsen and Moos 2014).

That Nordic countries have started to implement policy changes which are incompatible with the essence of the Nordic model has, however, not necessarily resulted in the dismantlement of this Nordic model. It is namely possible that it instead has led to the transformation of this model into a brand – that is a separation has occurred between the actual product, the way that Nordic countries organize their political and societal affairs, and the idea about how the Nordic countries go about doing this; the brand. A consequence of this is that the importance of the quality of the initial product decreases since the brand itself has now become the product – a product representing a certain way of life or political philosophy (Browning 2007; Klein 2000). Another way to describe this transformation is as follows:

*“The ‘Nordic Model’ has developed elements of this about it, where it is not so much what the Nordic model actually is that counts, but rather what it is seen to stand for” (Browning 2007,p.29).*

The above sentence also points to the difference between identities and brands – a brand is something particular, a version of something targeting primarily external audiences, whereas an identity of a region is multiple and fluid in character and thus changes more easily. Nevertheless, since policy makers and scholars have started to question the viability of the

Nordic model, that is the viability of the actual socio-economic and political model, it becomes questionable whether the brand it has given birth to can survive or not (Patomäki 2000). Since, even if the brand and the actual product, that is the way that Nordic countries function in practice, are separated, they are at the same time closely connected – and dismissing the former thus have the potential to damage the reputation of the latter (Browning 2007). One way to save the reputation of the Nordic brand is, nevertheless, to transform it into something which corresponds better to the actual product and thus become subject to less criticism within the academic and political debate – something which Nordic policy makers are now trying to do. Today joint Nordic marketing efforts thus try to promote the Nordic region as one which focuses on innovation, sustainability and on putting the creative industries, such as the fashion and food industry at the heart of Nordic cooperation – while somewhat less emphasis is put on highlighting the socio-economic organization of Nordic countries (Kharkina 2013).

The Nordic brand is, however, facing other challenges as well, since it has been argued that it is becoming increasingly outdated, not primarily due to the fact that the Nordic countries are no longer adhering to 'the Nordic way' of doing things, but due to the region becoming increasingly Europeanized. Since, three out of five Nordic countries now are members of the EU and it therefore is possible that what was once viewed as 'typically Nordic' is starting to merge with what is 'typically European' – resulting in the Nordic countries becoming less 'exceptional' (Browning 2007; Rasmussen 2005; Rieker 2006). One example of this is that for instance the Nordic social model today has merged with what is referred to as the European Social Model (Browning 2007). If the just stated turns out to be true, also when it comes to how international students view Nordic countries, it would perhaps make more sense to conduct marketing efforts on a European level.

If the Nordic brand has become weakened, or merged with what is viewed as 'typically European', it is however possible that these countries are associated also with other aspects of Europe than with those that initially were viewed as Nordic – but which other aspects are there? Little academic research has been written about what 'typically European' means or whether or not for instance a European brand exists. Ljungberg (2006), a prominent brand strategist from the United Kingdom who advises corporations and governments regarding how to brand themselves, has, however, written an article about what he refers to as Brand

Europe. According to Ljungberg (2006) Brand Europe is actually comprised out of two different brands, something which poses a challenge to anyone trying to conduct marketing efforts at a European level, Brand Europe and Brand EU:

*"Europe is very diverse, with a "real" and long history, ever-evolving social, cultural and political traditions, religions and rituals. Nation states - and often regions - are fiercely proud and independent. The EU has only a short history, recently invented institutions, a series of treaties and protocols. It is perceived as conveying a mood of bureaucracy, ever-shifting compromise and interdependence"*

(Ljungberg 2006,p.36)

An additional problem raised by Ljungberg (2006) is that to brand Europe at all might prove difficult since people living in Europe might be unwilling to accept a new identity – as Europeans rather than as nationals of their nation state. It is, nevertheless, possible that such loyalties are already 'in the making'. One scholar who address issues related to branding and identity is Aveline (2006) and she argues that the introduction of the European flag, Euro coins and banknotes are examples of means used by politicians in order to build and strengthen supranational identities; means which are becoming increasingly effective in today's post-national reality, where ideas about citizenship and loyalties are becoming increasingly fragmented – or put in other words:

*"In this fragmentation, a metaphorical transfer is operating, which generates, in a 'marketplace of ideas', a model of citizenship updated by the format generated by loyalty towards brands (...)"*

(Aveline 2006,p. 334).

Explicit marketing efforts at a European level are, however, close to none existing – one exception being a campaign launched by the European Travel Commission (ETC) with the aim to unify Europe's two different brands and 'rebrand' it under the slogan 'Europe unlimited' (Ljungberg 2006;Therkelsen 2010). This initiative was, nevertheless, focused on attracting tourists and not at building a more 'overarching' European brand (Therkelsen 2010). As a consequence of this, it is difficult to predict if a shared perception of Europe among international students even exists, and if it does, another question is whether or not this perception can be related to Brand Europe, and thus also whether such a perception could be exploited in order to market Nordic higher education globally or not.

Regardless of if the perceptions that international students have about the Nordic countries and Europe can be related to the characteristics of the Nordic brand and/or Brand Europe or not, they might, however, have perceptions about both, which affects their decision to study in a Nordic country. To investigate whether this is so or not would of course primarily be of interest to Nordic policy makers, and institutional leaders, since knowledge about such issues would increase their chances to effectively market Nordic higher education globally. Whether or not the study abroad decision of international students, choosing to study in a Nordic country, is affected by their perception of Europe, is however, of interest also to European policy makers, and institutional leaders, since if this is the case, it indicates that marketing efforts on a European level perhaps would be wise.

## Definitions

There are several different groups of international students wherefore these will be defined below. This study uses the definition provided by the OECD, when defining the term international students, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Eurostat, however, use the same definition (OECD 2013).

**International Students** – are students who are residents in another country than their country of study or completed their prior education in another country (OECD 2013, p.1). International students in the Nordic area are here defined as students from outside of the EU/EEA area (Oxford Research 2013).

**Foreign Students** – are defined on the basis of their citizenship. International students are thus viewed as a subgroup of foreign students – when data on international students are missing data on foreign students has been used instead (OECD 2013).

### **Exchange students**

Exchange students are students who take part in exchange programs between countries or educational institutions (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2012).

### **Free mover Students**

Free movers are students who organize their studies on their own – that is they are not part of an exchange agreement (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2012).

## Theory

This section will start by depicting overall trends in global educational flow, and factors influencing these on a macro level, in order to give an understanding for the context surrounding individuals' study abroad decisions. After this a model accounting for the study abroad decision-making process of individuals, and factors influencing this process, will follow. This model does, however, not consider the potential existence and impact of supranational brands on this process, or of more general perceptions of certain regions and parts of the world, since it is this gap in current research and theory which this study aims to address. It does, however, provide an insight into which other factors influence the study abroad decision-making process.

### From the Global South to the Global North

Fifty three percent out of the 4,5 million foreign students enrolled at universities around the world today are Asian – out of which most come from either China, India or Korea. The Asian group is followed by Europeans (23%) and Africans (12%), while students from the rest of the world only account for twelve percent of all international students. The biggest receivers of international students, on the other hand, are the following five countries; the United States with 17% of all students worldwide, the United Kingdom (13%), Australia (6 %), Germany (6 %) and France (6 %) (OECD 2013).

The overall pattern is thus that students travel from the global South to the global North –the most simplistic explanation for this being the lack of access to higher education in many Asian and African countries. However, if not settling for the most simplistic explanation, it is also possible to conclude that global educational flows are interconnected with the political, economic and cultural order of our world (Altbach 1998;Chen and Barnett 2000;Weiler 1984). Or to put it differently; it is the political, economic and cultural hegemonic powers, meaning the richer more highly developed countries in the North who hold knowledge and resources desired by others, which receive the greatest number of international students (Chase-Dunn 1989). A concrete example of the impact that international power relations has had on global educational is that it is possible to observe that:

*“Historical or colonial links between host and home countries have played an important role in determining the direction of much of the international students flow” (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002, p.82).*



A couple of additional factors which have been found vital to explaining global educational flows, during the second half of the twentieth century, are; Commonality of language, the range of science or technology-based programs, geographical proximity and the relative wealth and GNP growth in home countries and finally - the expected benefits with studying abroad (Lee and Tan 1984; Agarwal and Winkler 1985).

The global educational landscape is, nevertheless, not stagnant and even if the overall trend in global educational flows has been, and still is quite persistent, fluctuations are taking place. An example of such a fluctuation is that the popularity of some big study abroad destinations, such as the United States and Germany are declining, while countries such as Canada, with 5 % of all international students worldwide, Japan (4%) and the Russian Federation (4%) instead experienced a rise in popularity. One explanation behind this is likely to be that an increasing amount of countries have realized the benefits with hosting international students, something which has led to increased competition on the global educational market – and students choosing cheaper alternatives over more costly ones (OECD 2013). An additional explanation is, however, that not only the price of education in a country, but also its reputation, has become increasingly important due to hardening competition on the global educational market – and that for instance the terrorist attack of 9/11 has had a negative effect on the ability of the United States to attract international students – due to students now viewing the United States as increasingly unsafe and less open and positive towards foreigners, and thus also towards students from abroad, due to subsequently implemented policies, aiming to protect the nation from terrorism, which they perceived as 'humiliating and unnecessary responses to 9/11' (Lee 2007,p.314). Another trend, affecting the functioning of the global educational market, is the fact that Asian governments, in for instance China, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand, have started to spend more on higher education – something which has led to an increase in the local supply of education and fewer students having to go abroad in order to pursue higher studies (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

The just stated shows that the popularity of host countries varies over time and that not even the most popular host countries can rely on receiving the same number of international students as before if not making any efforts to attract these. It, however, also underlines the fact that it is possible for less established host countries to increase their intake of international students by for instance charging less than the more established ones – that is by finding their own competitive edge. It is, however, insufficient to solely consider overall trends in global educational flows, if one is interested in understanding why some host

countries are chosen over others. Since, the more ‘products’, that is host countries, a student can choose between, the more he or she will evaluate its different properties in order to determine which one is the better one – resulting in the number of factors influencing this process constantly growing – and not all of them operate on a macro level. As a result of this a more sophisticated model for how students evaluate different study destinations, and which factors influence them during this process, will be presented below – the ‘push and pull model’.

### **The ‘Push and Pull Model’**

Deciding to study abroad is a complex process. A process influenced by several different factors and consisting out of several ‘smaller’ decisions. It is furthermore a decision that is time consuming, a wide range of alternatives need to be considered, and involves a high degree of risk-taking; the individual invests a considerable amount of money and the decision is of high personal relevance – since where to study, and which field of study to pursue, are likely to have a great impact on ones future life (Kemp and Madden 1998; Kumar 2008; Lawley and Perry 1997; Shanka, Quintal and Taylor 2005; Yang 2007). Factors which have been found influential on this decision include the views of, and potential recommendations from, family and peers (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Pimpa 2005) and the reputation and global ranking of universities of host countries (Cantwell et al. 2009 ;Li and Bray 2007; Marginson and van der Wende 2007). Quality of education, tuition fees, cost of living, safety and job opportunities in potential host countries are a couple of additional factors which have been found important (Gatfield and Hyde 2005;OECD 2013). Regarding job opportunities English speaking countries have a natural advantage, since it is easier for students to find a job in countries where the working language is English. English speaking countries also seem to be more attractive in general due to the number of prospective students, who master this language – and today Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States host 36 percent of all international students worldwide. A growing number of non-English-speaking countries have, however, started to offer courses in English, in order to make up for their linguistic disadvantage, and it thus remains to see whether English-speaking countries will continue to dominate the global educational market or not (OECD 2013).

However, even if a lot has been written about which factors that influence individuals’ study abroad decisions, there is still little consensus regarding which factors it is that matter the

most – perhaps due to this being contextual. One example of this is that studies conducted at high ranked universities conclude that the international ranking of universities is crucial to individuals’ study abroad decisions (e.g. Lee 2007). While studies conducted at less prestigious universities instead conclude that students primarily consider the general reputation of a country, and its educational institutions, and put less effort into researching the potential difference in quality between different universities in that country – that is to the ranking of these (e.g., Yang 2007). In addition to this, students might also consider different factors more or less important due to where in the world they come from – since for instance the possibility to migrate to a host country is likely to be dependent on for instance labour market opportunities in the home country etc.

In a comprehensive four country study Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), however, made an effort to construct a framework for how students evaluate different study destinations – regardless of their country of origin and final study destination. These two scholars found that individuals’ study abroad decisions can be separated into three stages: (1) the individual decides to study internationally; (2) the individual chooses which country to go to and (3) the individual chooses which university to attend – three decisions which are influenced by a set of factors which can be divided into ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. The difference between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors, and their influence on the decision-making process of individuals, can be described as follows;

*““Push” factors operate within the source country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake international study. “Pull” factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students.” (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002,p.82).*

The importance of ‘push’ respectively ‘pull’ factors varies throughout the decision making process. During stage one “push” factors are crucial while “pull” factors become increasingly important during stage two and three. Together ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors form the ‘push-pull’ model (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). There are, of course, other theoretical frameworks or models, which can be applied when analysing how individuals decide where in the world to study. The ‘push and pull’ model is, however, the most frequently one used – both by studies looking at overall educational flows, by performing mathematical flow analysis based on statistical data, (e.g. González et al. 2011; McMahon 1992) and by studies based on data from interviews with, or questionnaires for, international students (e.g., Bodycott 2009; Eder et al.

2010; Mazzarol and Soutar; Park 2009; Yang 2007). There are, furthermore, many variants of this model but the study by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) are one of the most comprehensive studies within the field, and most subsequent studies make references to their work.

These are the five 'push' and 'pull' factors, affecting the choice of host country, which were identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002);

### **Push Factors**

**Quality of Courses:** This factor is related to the perception among students regarding overseas courses being better than local ones.

**Desire to Understand Western Culture:** This factor is associated to students' belief that studying abroad will give them a better understanding of Western Culture.

**Desire to Migrate to a Host Country:** This factor relates to the importance of a student's intention to migrate to a potential host country.

**The Range of Courses Offered:** This factor relates to the importance of a potential host country offering a study program which the home country does not offer.

**Problems with Accessing Education at Home:** This factor is associated with how hard it is to enter a specific study programs in the home country of a student.

### **Pull Factors**

**Knowledge and Awareness of a Host country:** This factor is associated with the importance of having knowledge about a host country, the quality of education in that country, the ease with which one can obtain information about it and whether or not qualifications gained there are recognized in the home country of a prospective student.

**Recommendations from Relatives and Peers:** This factor relates to the importance of recommendations from parents, relatives, friends and agents. In addition to this it also relates to the importance of getting a word-of-mouth referral regarding the institution where a student plans to study.

**Cost:** This factor is associated with all costs related to studying in a particular host country such as living expenses, tuition fees and travel cost.

**The Local Environment:** This factor is related to the lifestyle and climate of a country – and to whether a country is perceived as having a quiet studious environment or not.

**Geographic Proximity and social links:** This factor has to do with the importance of the geographical distance between the home country of a student and a potential host country – and of having friends or family living in, or having studied in, a potential host country.

### **Pull Factors Seem to Matter the Most**

Nevertheless, even if all the above listed factors have proved important to the study abroad choices of students, there are some factors which are more influential than others, some which are likely to become more important in the future and some which are likely to become less important. Out of mentioned ‘push’ factors the perception that overseas course are better than local ones was found to be the most important one followed by the desire to understand Western culture and the possibility to access education locally. When it comes to identified ‘pull’ factors general knowledge about a host country, the quality of education in a host country and personal recommendations, or word-of-mouth-referrals regarding a specific institution are the most important ones. Out of these the awareness and knowledge of a country, and the reputation of its educational institutions, are likely to be the most critical. However, it is important to note that it is the general reputation of the quality of educational institutions in a host country, not the reputation of any specific universities, which is measured. In the future it is, however, likely that a country's ability to attract international students will become increasingly dependent on above listed 'pull' factors, while the importance of traditional 'push' factors will decrease – the primary explanation for this being the above mentioned trend among Asian governments to invest more in the educational sector (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). When concluding that 'pull' factors are becoming increasingly important, it however seems appropriate to mention, that while an individual's desire to understand western culture is treated as a 'push' factor by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) for instance Eder et al. (2010) instead refer to culture as a ‘pull’ factor, either attracting students because they believe a specific culture to be similar to their own or because they seek to experience something new, wherefore the importance of this factor perhaps might increase as

well.

In addition to above listed 'push' and 'pull' factors, influencing the choice of host country, there are also a couple of factors which Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found to be influential on a student's choice of university such as; an institutions reputation for quality, its alliances and links with other universities familiar to the student, the quality of a university staff and whether a university has an active alumni network, providing word-of-mouth referrals, and finally if a university recognizes a student's qualifications or not. It is, nevertheless important to note that Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) only surveyed students, who choose to attend a university in Australia, which might have affected the 'universal' applicability of this part of the study. Identified 'pull' factors, influencing the selection of a host country, and 'push' factors initiating the decision to go abroad, can, however, be regarded as more 'robust' since these conclusions were based on material from interviews with prospective students who still were deciding where to go. Another possible objection towards Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'push and pull' model is however, that it fails to consider the influence of structural factors on the study abroad decision-making process – that is factors which might stand in the way of students going abroad such as for instance visa issues, which the aforementioned and more recently conducted study by Eder et al. (2010) found to be important. All respondents, furthermore, originated from Asian countries, wherefore it is possible that the study would have reached different conclusions, if students from other continents would have been included as well. This study does however, as mentioned, constitute one of the most comprehensive studies within the field and its 'push and pull' model is one of the most used.

## Presentation Aim and Research Question

In sum, it is easy to see how the above described Nordic Model, or Nordic Brand, could comprise a suitable foundation for Nordic countries and their educational institutions, when marketing their higher educational sector globally – especially since their idea of providing high quality education fits nicely together with the essence of the Nordic brand which depicts these countries as being ‘exceptional’ or ‘better’ than others. The benefits for Nordic countries with conducting joint marketing efforts will, however, continue to be speculative until research addresses if international students even look at the Nordic countries as a unit and if their perception about these countries can be related to their decision to study in a Nordic country. Such research should, furthermore, take into account that the respondents’ perceptions of Europe might affect this decision as well. Since, if the Nordic brand has become weakened, or merged with what is typically European, these countries might instead be viewed primarily, or at least partly, as European – and if this is the case, the respondents might for instance have chosen to study in a Nordic country due to being attracted by the more positive dimension of Brand Europe. It should however, also be taken into account that international students might have general perceptions about Europe and/or the Nordic countries, which affect their study abroad decision-making process, but which are unrelated to existing descriptions of Brand Europe or the Nordic brand. In addition to this, it is furthermore probable, that some of the perceptions of the students, both about Europe and the Nordic countries, are more ‘study specific’ – that is related to these as study abroad destinations. In order not to be limited by the just stated the following more ‘inclusive’ aim was chosen: *to explore how shared perceptions among international students about Europe and the Nordic countries can be exploited in order to market Nordic higher education globally.* Since, the scope of this study is limited, this study will however, only explain how these perceptions influence international students going to one of the Nordic countries – Sweden. In particular this thesis aims at answering the more specific research question; *how the study abroad decision-making process of international students, choosing to study in Sweden, is influenced by their perception of Europe and/or the Nordic countries.*

Finding an answer to this question would of course primarily benefit the Nordic countries, since it would make it easier for Nordic policy makers, and institutional leaders, to make informed decisions regarding how to market their higher educational sector globally. It would, however, also enrich existing research regarding how international students choose where in

the world to study. Existing theories namely primarily focus on the national context, that is on the impact of the characteristics of different host countries and their universities, on this decision – and not on the potential existence and impact of supranational brands – or if explicit such brands do not exist of general ideas about supranational entities. Answering such questions would, furthermore, in the long run be profitable for other European countries as well; since if a shared perception of Europe among international students exists, which can be exploited in order to attract these, such knowledge is valuable not only for the Nordic countries.



## Research Design

In this section the research design of the study will be presented. The overall research approach is abductive and the research question was answered by conducting semi-structured interviews with international master's students, in Sweden, from outside of the EU/EEA. In this section questions regarding validity, reliability, ethics and generalizability will, furthermore, be discussed. Lastly, a description of how the conceptual framework of the study was generated from the data will be presented.

### An Abductive Approach

This research process started with an interest in how Nordic countries market their higher educational sector globally – and in particular whether or not they should do so together. First the knowledge field of international education, and in particular research related to global educational flows and how students evaluate potential study abroad destinations, were reviewed. When reviewing this literature, it occurred to me that existing theories regarding how international students evaluate study abroad destinations only look at how the characteristics of different host countries, and their universities, affect this decision (e.g. Mazarol and Soutar; Eder et al. 2010; Lee 2007) – that is they do not consider the potential existence and impact of supranational brands, or more general perceptions of certain regions and parts of the world. As a consequence of this literature on the Nordic model or brand, and Brand Europe, were reviewed as well – and since this research indicated, that it is uncertain to what extent the Nordic countries still are perceived as a unit, separated from the rest of Europe (Browning 2007), I decided to take that into account as well when formulating my research question. Existing theories, however, only served as a starting point; as an inspiration for my initial research question, and in order to obtain an in-depth understanding for how the respondents' decisions to study in Sweden were influenced by their perception of Europe and/or the Nordic countries, the study's conceptual framework was inductively generated from the data; consisting out of interviews with international students. The approach of this study, iterating between deduction and induction, is thus best described as abductive (Heritier 2008).

### Case Selection

The reason for choosing to conduct the current study in Sweden is that Sweden receives the largest number of international students out of all Nordic countries (Myklebust 2013). The

fact that Sweden receives more international students than any other Nordic country could of course have several explanations. One possible explanation is, however, that Sweden is a more popular destination due to having a stronger international reputation than other Nordic countries. If the latter is true, Sweden, if any Nordic country, is most likely to be chosen solely due to its country characteristics – and not due to the fact that it is a Nordic and/or European country. Or put in other words; if it is concluded that international students choose to study in Sweden, not solely due to their perception of Sweden, but also due to their perception of the Nordic countries in general and/or of Europe, it is more likely that students choosing to study somewhere else in the Nordic area do so as well - since these constitute less popular study destinations. This selection follows a 'least likely case selection logic' (Eckstein 1975). An additional reason for choosing Sweden is, that Sweden already implemented tuition fees – wherefore the possibility that a student solely choose Sweden due to the fact that education is for free is excluded.

### **Selection of interviewees**

Only respondents from outside of the EU were interviewed, since the starting point for this study was how to attract more international students not only to the Nordic countries but also to Europe at large. Another reason however was, that it only is non-EU/EEA students who have to pay tuition fees, since EU/EEA students are exempted from having to do so, wherefore finding new ways to attract the former are acute – since this group of students, as mentioned earlier, decreased sharply after the implementation of tuition fees (Oxford Research 2013). To only interview master's students were motivated by the fact that most non-EU/EEA students studying in Sweden choose to pursue master's (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2012b). The respondents who were interviewed attended a master's either at the social science faculty at the University of Gothenburg or at Chalmers – and since existing research indicates that students first choose a host country and then a host university (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) I settled for interviewing students from only two different institutions. I, however, aimed to get as much of spread as possible when it came to variables such as; gender, country of origin, field of study and whether or not a student had a scholarship or not. The reason for choosing my units strategically, and take these variables into account when doing so, was that I was aiming to investigate as many different perspectives as possible, that is to maximize the variation of units, and avoid only interviewing one type of international students (Esaiasson 2012). All in all ten respondents from one of the following countries were interviewed; China, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan,

Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, the United States and Uganda– six women and four men. Out of these ten respondents, four students were studying engineering and six were pursuing master's within the social science discipline. Four of the respondents financed their studies on their own while six had received a scholarship.

## **Choosing Life World Interviews as a Method**

In order to answer my research question life world interviews were used – a method which seems suitable considering that it is the perception of international students that this study is interested in. Life world interviews are defined as follows:

*”It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p.1).*

The interviews were, furthermore, semi-structured in nature – that is predetermined questions were used but the interview guide was not strictly followed, instead interesting statements and thoughts were followed up in order to gain a fuller understanding of what the respondent was trying to communicate. The strength of semi-structured interviews is that they allow for flexibility without being disorderly (May 2001). Using semi-structured interviews seemed suiting since the goal of the study was to explore the impact on the study abroad decision-making process of international students, of two already predetermined factors, that is the respondents' perceptions of Europe and/or the Nordic countries, and not just freely explore a previously unstudied phenomenon.

## **The Interview Guide**

The interview guide was composed mainly out of open ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions in order to avoid mere descriptions of events and experience. The guide started with an open question encouraging the respondents to speak freely about when they first decided to study abroad and why they ended up studying in Sweden. Depending on the respondents answers to this first question, the interviews then preceded somewhat differently – since some respondents already covered some of the subsequent questions, when answering this first question. The interview guide however, contained questions related to how (1) the respondents' choice to go abroad, (2) the respondents' choice of host country, (3) the respondents' choice of university (4) the importance of previously defined ‘push and pull’ factors, Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) ‘push

and pull model' was used as inspiration for these questions, (5) their perception of Europe and/or the Nordic countries (6) how many stages they perceived their study abroad decision-making process to consist of and (7) which countries the respondents considered going to. The latter question aimed at determining, if the respondents could have seen themselves going to any Nordic or European countries.

When asking the respondents how they perceived Europe/the Nordic countries, this was done not only by using that exact formulation but also by asking the respondents, what they knew or thought about Europe/the Nordic countries before choosing to study in Sweden. All questions related to this matter were, furthermore, followed up by a question regarding if and in what way, this affected their study abroad decision. The reason for asking questions not solely related to the impact of the respondents' perception of Europe and the Nordic countries, but also regarding the importance of other factors, was that this allowed me to attain an overview of this process.

## **Conducting the Interviews**

All the interviews were taped and took between 30-45 minutes. In total ten interviews were conducted. The aim was to conduct interviews until I obtained theoretical saturation – that is when no new relevant aspect of the phenomena in question arises (Esaiaasson 2012). Or expressed slightly different; when enough high quality data to support your emerging categories have been collected. It is impossible to say how many interviews one needs to conduct in order to obtain theoretical saturation. However, if the sampling procedure has been well thought out, fewer interviews are needed than if not (Thornberg and Charmaz 2011).

A weakness with using interviews as a method is, that there is an asymmetric power relation between the interviewer, asking all the questions, and the respondents solely 'reacting and adapting' to the initiatives of the interviewer. In addition to this, the interviewer also acts as the sole interpreter of the data. Even though this is less prominent when using semi-structured interviews compared to structured ones, this still constitutes a problem (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In order to diminish the unequal power relation, every interview started with the respondents being encouraged to express their own views as much as possible and to express potential thoughts on the formulation of a question. In order to ensure that the respondents would feel as comfortable as possible, something which perhaps could help to diminish this asymmetry further, the interviews were, furthermore, conducted at the university – that is in

an environment which was familiar to the respondents. In addition to this, the respondents were also given the choice between being interviewed at their own faculty or at mine. The latter option meant being interviewed in a group room, where no one could hear the respondents in order to ensure their privacy.

Another limitation with using interviews is that something referred to as 'lip service' might occur – that is that the respondent tells you what you want to hear – or withholds the truth (Bragason 1997). In order to avoid this, at least to some extent, the interviewees were told that they could say whatever they wished about Europe, the Nordic countries and Sweden without me taking any offense. This was done in order to ensure them about the fact, that I for instance would not take it personally, if they started to talk about stereotypes associated with Sweden etc.

## **Ethics and Validity**

Regarding ethics, it is important to get the consent of all the participants – and inform the respondents about the overall aim and design of the study. In addition, respondents should also be informed about any potential risks with participating (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). To participate in the current study does, however, not include any risks. Since the respondents however, as mentioned earlier, might talk for instance about stereotypes, which they associate with the Nordic region or its people, they might not want anyone to be able to trace their statements back to them. As a consequence of this, the interviewees were ensured that no data would be disclosed, which could lead to the identification of them – something which is important not only from an ethical perspective, but also for the validity of the research, since it is impossible to measure what one sets out to measure if the respondents for some reason withhold the truth or at least modifies it due to not feeling comfortable enough to speak freely (Esaiasson et al. 2012). The just stated can be related to the above discussed phenomenon occurrence of 'lip service' as well, wherefore it is important to hold a critical position when performing interviews (Bragason 1997).

Ensuring good validity is important since it indicates that the results of a study are trustworthy. Validity is frequently defined as follows:

*'(...) a good agreement between the theoretical definition and the operational indicator and that what is being said to be examined, really is what has been examined' (Bryman 2008,p.151).*

In order to obtain a good validity, all interviews were transcribed the same day as they were conducted, or the day after, so that impressions and thoughts from the interviews, which might be of importance, when analysing the data, were recorded as well. To avoid systematic faults, that are in order to ensure reliability, only one interview at a time was transcribed so that a high level of concentration could be maintained during the entire process (Bergström et al 2005).

## **Generalizability**

When only a few, strategically chosen, units of investigation are examined, this generally means that the generalizability and transferability of a study is limited. However, even if studies like the current one cannot be statistically representative, it is possible to do theoretical generalizations. This means that by analysing the results and then lifting them to the theoretical level, the researcher is able to say something about if the results are applicable in similar cases (Yin 2009). As a consequence of this, the results of the current study might for instance be able to say something about how international students, choosing to study in Sweden, in general are influenced by their perceptions about Europe and the Nordic countries. It is, furthermore possible that at least some aspects would be applicable also for international students in other Nordic countries – and perhaps even, at least some aspects of the results, to students in other European countries. In order to ensure that this is the case more research needs to be conducted.

## **Data Analysis and Evaluation**

In order to draw meaningful conclusions from qualitative data a structured approach is necessary. My analysis consisted out of several stages of qualitative analysis. First the data went through a process of reduction – that is the data was simplified, focused, selected and transformed. Secondly, the data was displayed, and organized, in such a way that themes, going beyond initially coded categories, could be identified – and finally conclusions were drawn – that is what the analysed data was trying to communicate was determined (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Since my interview guide mainly consisted out of open questions, I started with conducting an 'open coding analysis'. During this stage everything which could be related to the students perception about either Europe or the Nordic countries, was coded. This also included

everything the respondents knew or thought about the Nordic countries and Europe – since the word perception from time to time was operationalized by asking the respondents about this. When analysing the data, it however turned out, that the respondents also expressed having feelings in relation to either the Nordic countries or Europe, wherefore everything the respondents felt for these also was coded. The interviews, which had been transcribed in their entirety, were analysed line by line and word by word (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in order to identify concepts which fitted the data (Strauss 1987). Before starting this process the interviews were read a couple of times in order to highlight significant issues (Patton 2002) and get an overview of the material. The strength with using this technic is, that the categorization for the data emerges from the data instead of being predetermined (Strauss and Corbin 1998)

In a second stage the interviews were reread in order to identify which stages of the decision-making process, that these factors could be related to. Current literature assumes that international students' decision-making process consists out of three stages, (1) the decision to go abroad, (2) which host country to go to and (2) which host university to attend (Mazzarol and Soutar). When analysing which stages identified factors could be associated with, the data however, revealed that the study-abroad decision-making process of the respondents had an additional fourth stage; the respondents namely made a decision to go somewhere in Europe before deciding which host country to attend. During this stage it became evident that all factors which could be associated with the Nordic countries could be related to the respondents' choice of host country. Factors related to the respondents' perceptions of Europe on the other hand, could be related either to their decision to study in Europe or to their decision to study abroad. After having identified that this was the case, all the interviews where coded again in order to detect all additional factors influencing the same stages of the decision-making process as the respondents' perceptions of Europe and the Nordic countries. The latter was done in order to get an overview of all factors influencing these stages so that the impact of the respondents' perception of Europe and the Nordic countries could be put into a larger context. This was, furthermore, done with the aim to get an idea about how factors influencing these stages related to each other – something which gave me a better starting point for answering *how* the respondents study abroad decision-making process was influenced. In a next stage, all factors related to the respondents perceptions about Europe and the Nordic countries were displayed so that factors with similarities could be identified

and put together in groups, who then were given an overarching theme. Additional factors, influencing the same stages of the decision-making process, then underwent the same procedure. The latter factors were, however, not included in the final conceptual framework, since this would have made the model overly complicated. All factors related to the respondents' perception of Europe the Nordic countries, and their overarching themes, are presented in table 1 and 2 below.

<b>The Respondents' Perception of Europe</b>	
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subsumed Categories</b>
<b>Provider of 'Competitive Edge'</b>	High Ranked Universities High General Quality of Education International Experience
<b>Best Available Option</b>	Wide Selection of English Degrees Attractive Scholarships Affordable Tuition Fees Acceptable Living Costs
<b>Appealing Culture</b>	Culture Easy to Adapt to Culture Different and Exciting Several Different Cultures

<b>Table 2 - The Respondents' Perception of the Nordic Countries</b>	
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subsumed Categories</b>
<b>Peaceful Region</b>	Personal Safety Absence of Crime Absence of Terrorism Absence of War
<b>Prosperous Region</b>	High standard of Living Highly Educated populations Strong Economies
<b>Egalitarian Region</b>	Equal Distribution of Wealth
<b>Well-Functioning Region</b>	Effective Educational System Absence of Corruption Effective Institutions
<b>Appealing Culture</b>	Gender Equal Flexible Rules Openness towards Foreigners Friendly and Helpful People
<b>Appealing Lifestyle</b>	Relaxed Way of Life



## Analysis and Results

*This section will be devoted to presenting how the respondents believed that their study abroad decision-making process was influenced by their perception of Europe and the Nordic countries. The impact of the respondents' perception of Europe, respectively of the Nordic countries, takes place at different stages of the study abroad decision-making process. Their perception of Europe was namely found to have an influence during the initial stage of this process whereas the respondents' perception of the Nordic countries influenced their selection of a host country. As a result of this, the impact of the respondents' perception of Europe on their study abroad decision-making process, will be presented first after which a description of how the respondents' perception of the Nordic countries affected their selection of a host country will follow. In order to provide a fuller understanding for how the respondents' perception of Europe, respectively of the Nordic countries, influenced their study abroad decision-making process, other factors affecting the same stages of this process, as these perceptions, will also be accounted for.*

### The Perception of Europe: Important during the Initial Stage

All the respondents described that the first step in their study abroad decision-making process was to decide to go abroad in the first place. This is how one of the respondents described this decision:

*"I guess it was about two years ago now that I started thinking about going back to graduate school. I had been working for a couple of years in an office after my undergraduate, and thought it was time to take the next step and move along my career and I needed a master's degree to do that and I wanted to go outside the United States for my master's so I started to do some research looking at different options" (Female 26 years old from the United States).*

The decision to go abroad is, however, closely related to the subsequent decision regarding where to go. A decision which initially can be described as 'unspecific' or 'vague' – eight, out of ten, respondents namely first decided that they wanted to study somewhere in Europe before looking closer at which host country to live in or which university to attend. Besides from Europe half of the respondents, not including the two respondents originating from the United States, also considered going to the United States – one respondent also considered going somewhere in Asia but could not find any programs in English which attracted her

there. This initial decision is, however, even if it can be described as unspecific or vague, extremely important, since once it has been taken none of the respondents explored any options in other parts of the world than those that they were interested in from the beginning. The following quote illustrates how one of the respondents described this initial or 'vague' decision regarding where in the world to go:

*“I was looking at master programs in Europe and I was looking for something which maybe was related to development studies. I was thinking about doing a master's program probably in Sweden, the Netherlands or in the UK”* (Female, 30 years old from Kyrgyzstan).

This is how another respondent described this decision:

*“Well, actually I had several options when I first started to apply to different universities – some of them where in America and some of them where here in Europe”* (Male, 25 years old from Mexico).

And this is how a third respondent describes this decision:

*“I looked into several countries like Canada, the United States, Germany, Italy and Sweden – actually I applied to all of them - but then I also looked at countries like Norway and Finland”* (Male, 25 years old from Iran).

Most respondents did, however, as illustrated by the quotes above, have an idea about a group of European countries which they were more interested in exploring than others – but at this stage nothing had yet been decided and many respondents later on explored additional European countries. When choosing which part of the world to study in, it seemed as though factors related to the respondents' desire to gain a 'competitive edge' is what mattered the most. Around half of the respondents, again not including the respondents from the United States, namely believed that having a degree either from the United States or Europe would make them more attractive on the labor market due to the quality of education being better there than at home – that is they believed that they would gain a competitive advantage as job applicants. This is how one of the respondents expressed this belief:

*“Of course a western degree is always a plus on your CV and, I mean, our market is also quite*

*competitive and a lot of people apply for jobs every year and if you received your education abroad then I think that you have a better chance of finding a job” (Female, 30 years old from Kyrgyzstan).*

This is how another respondent expressed the same belief:

*“I mean it is a huge boost to your CV, or your further studies, if you have a degree from abroad. But it is also that you experience things on a whole other level, because if I would have been studying for my master's or PhD back at home I do not feel like I would have gotten very far, because the quality of education within my area is definitely better here” (Female 25 years old from Pakistan).*

All respondents, including the two respondents from the United States, however, believed that having a degree from abroad in itself would make them 'extra' attractive on the labor market, since having such a degree signals that you are able to communicate well in English, this mattered only to the respondents who had another native language than English, and that you are able to adapt to new circumstances and work with people from other cultural backgrounds – something which, accordingly to the respondents, is becoming increasingly important in a global world:

*“Yes, yes the international experience is more important for the Chinese companies now – and I think that is because there is a lot of companies that want to explore the Chinese market so they want employees who can speak good English and also have international experience” (Male 25 years old from China).*

This is how another respondent expressed a similar thought:

*“I think that when you can prove to an employer that you lived in another country for a longer period of time they are going to be more likely to employ you since they know that you are able to work internationally and are adaptable to the different situations and people (...) ” (Female 34 from the United States).*

The ‘value’ of this international experience was, however, viewed as dependent on being able to show that you also obtained a degree of high quality – since it was the combination of the two that the respondents believed would ‘optimize’ their attractiveness on the labor market. The main reason for the majority of the respondents only looking into studying in Europe or the United States was, that it was there that they expected to find high quality master's

degrees. This expectation was dependent on two things; firstly, all respondents but one had looked at university rankings online and reached the conclusion that the majority of the world's high ranked universities were located either in the United States or Europe, and secondly, they relied on a general perception in their home countries regarding the quality of education in these parts of the world:

*"I mean back in India if I want to work for example as a professor at a good university, like the one where I studied, they give more preference to people who did their PhD in the US that is kind of well-known . I mean, a degree from everywhere else, I mean from Europe, is then maybe the same as the six best universities in India – so it's still really good" (Male, 25 years old from India).*

The aim to obtain a high quality master's degree, and gain international experience, can thus be viewed both as a motive for going abroad in the first place, for those respondents who were unsatisfied with the quality of education in their home countries or had few universities to choose between, and a selection criterion for where to go – a fact which underlines the interconnectedness of these two decisions. In line with this some of the respondents expressed that they would have had no problem with going somewhere else than to Europe or the United States, if they would have found equally good programs in other parts of the world:

*"(...) I think that I could have gone anywhere – I mean the main thing is if the university holds a good position, you know, and if they have good research collaborations" (Male, 25 years old from Mexico).*

The above stated, however, only answers why the respondents were attracted by the idea to study either in the United States or Europe but not why they ended up choosing Europe. During the selection between these two options a couple of additional factors namely became important. The respondents for instance mention that the culture of the part of the world where they were going was of importance to them – and even though they were appealed by both the European and the American culture, they talked more about the European culture. This was perhaps simply due to the fact that they now live in Europe, and thus know and think more about the European culture, but it is also possible that it was due to the respondents being more appealed by it, than by the American one and thus paid more attention to its characteristics. Around half of the respondents found the European culture attractive, because they perceived it to be easy to adapt to – while the other half instead described that they had an urge to experience something new and that the characteristics of

the culture itself mattered less – a conclusion which has been reached by other scholars as well (e.g. Eder et al 2010). Some students did, however, seem to be appealed by the fact that Europe is composed of several different countries and cultures, something which they perceived made Europe an exciting place to live and travel in. The main reasons for choosing Europe and not the United States, however, seem to be practical – at least at first glance; tuition fees and cost of living where namely considered too high in the United States and the admission process too complicated. The functioning of American universities were, furthermore, overall perceived as harder to grasp than systems at European universities – and corresponding with these, or applying for degrees and scholarships at them, were thus viewed as time consuming and exhausting. In addition to this the respondents also found scholarships in the United States to be less attractive than the ones available in Europe, since they covered less of the cost related to studying abroad, and students had to either do a PhD or work as a research assistant to qualify. This is how one of the respondents expressed this.

*"No, I mean in the United States I just looked at the universities and there is no such scholarships available as here – there you have to work as a technical assistant, or something like that, and I wanted to do a master's and then not do, or at least first think about if I wanted to do, a PhD and most of the scholarships in the United States are for doing both" (Male 25 years old from India).*

And this is how a respondent described the work it entailed to apply for a scholarship in the United States:

*"So, for the North American universities you first have to make some contacts, because that is how the application process works, and then you have to find a supervisor for your financial assistance and then you have to work with teaching or research at the university in order to get a scholarship. So, for those North Americans universities I tried to make some contacts but it is tricky to find some supervisors abroad – but from some universities I got a response but the most scholarship that I could get was like from a professor and it was 8 000 dollar per year and that was not enough if I considered the whole cost for both the university and living expenses" (Male 25 years old Iran).*

Visa issues, on the other hand, did not seem to concern the respondents – but perhaps only because they never thought about them, since they already disqualified the United States as a study abroad destination due to the just stated since other scholars instead have found this to be of importance (e.g. Eder et al 2010). It is, however, interesting to note that Europe was

perceived as having better scholarships, a lower cost of living, lower tuition fees and less demanding procedures for applying for different degrees and scholarships than the United States, not only by the respondents who actually explored studying in the United State but by the rest of the respondents as well. One possible explanation for this is that the general knowledge about the difficulties with studying in the United States has led some students to ‘automatically’ perceive Europe as the ‘better option’ – and if this is the case, it is not only practical issues per se which are steering students towards choosing Europe, but also their negative perception of the United States as a ‘complicated’ alternative. On the other hand it also seems as if the popularity of the United States among international students, being the number one recipient of these, has led studying abroad to almost become synonymous with studying in the United States in some countries:

*"I looked at some universities in the US as well, because a lot of my friends go to the United States, you know it is like; "If you want to do high studies you go to the United States". It is like most of the people they do that but it is difficult also to get a scholarship or to study there – to get some financial aid. So, then I started to look at Sweden and you look in countries like Germany and I got a scholarship here in Sweden" (Male 25 years old from China).*

In line with this, some of the students also stated that a degree from the United States generally was perceived as somewhat more prestigious in their home countries than one from Europe. Being a ‘famous’ study abroad destination is, however, in itself not enough, something which the quote above illustrates, since other factors, such as for instance price of education and availability of scholarships, might result in students choosing other study abroad destinations. The level of knowledge about a continent, and about the quality of education provided there, however, seem to be a crucial point – especially since it is a prerequisite for a student considering a destination in the first place. The following quote illustrates, how general knowledge about Europe, together with having friends who studied there and the possibility to do a PhD, and get paid better for doing this then in the United States, influenced a respondent’s choice to study in Europe:

*"Like you see on the television and of course my friends they came for internships, when they were at their third year of their bachelor, to other European countries like Germany, the United Kingdom and France and from them you come to learn – you see pictures and so on. And another factor is that if I*

*do a PhD here I get more money than if I do one in the US, so that is also important, yeah" (Male 25 years old from India).*

It is however, important to note that there is a difference between the respondents, and even though the majority thought about going abroad for several years, before actually deciding where to go, and explored several different alternatives, one of the respondents for instance instead 'jumps' at an opportunity which happened to present itself to her; a friend namely recommended a program in Sweden, and then guided her through the application process, and thus the decision to go abroad and where to go almost seemed to merge. As a result of this, the perception, that she had about Europe seems to have mattered less, since she never made any conscious choice to go to Europe, but instead immediately decided to go to Sweden, the Nordic country she ultimately chose, or at least to a Nordic country:

*"I had a friend here who studied here, about two or three years ago, and he had a master's from Malmö University and he knows about scholarships here in Sweden, and other Nordic countries, and he told me about the scholarship, and kind of pushed me towards applying, and I applied – and yeah. First I applied for admission at the University of Gothenburg and then I applied for the scholarship and got it" (Female 25 years old from Pakistan).*

In line with this an additional respondent, who had ancestors from Sweden, had a special interest in going to Sweden wherefore she only explored that option. In these two cases the importance of other factors thus seem to result in the respondents 'skipping' the above described initial step in the study abroad decision-making process, that is the decision to go to Europe, and instead go straight to evaluating the host country they were interested in. The majority of the respondents, however, first decided that they wanted to study somewhere in Europe and not that they wanted to study specifically in Sweden, or a Nordic country, wherefore the respondents' perception and knowledge of Europe as a whole seem to be crucial during this initial state – especially the respondents' perception about the quality of education in Europe, and the European culture as one which it is easy to adapt to – but which still is exciting enough for those seeking an adventure. Finally, the perception of Europe as 'the better option' compared to the United States, also seemed to have had a great impact on the respondents' decision to study in Europe – since the majority of the respondents perceived the United States and Europe as the only two available options, which they believed could offer high quality degrees, Europe, however, also becomes 'the best available option'.

## The Perception of Nordic Countries: Important for the Selection of Host Country

When deciding to study in Europe most respondents already had an idea about one or a couple of countries where they might want to study. In a next step they, however, started to explore these options and sometimes a couple of additional countries, if the initial ones for some reason were found unsatisfactory – and it is during this stage of the study abroad decision-making process, that is during the selection of a host country, that the perception that the respondents had about the Nordic countries seems to matter the most.

The respondents were primarily interested in the following European countries; Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom – half of the respondents, however, researched studying in Norway, Finland and Iceland as well. These countries, and their universities, were all explored and then the pros and cons with going to any of them were weighed against each other – but which factors then were important during this stage of the decision-making process?

The main priorities during this stage corresponds to those during the initial stage; that is the individual is interested in finding a country, where he or she can complete a master's degree of high quality, while gaining international experience, in order to gain a competitive advantage on the labor market. This should, furthermore, preferably be done in a country with a cultural setting which the student finds appealing. Since, there, however, are several alternatives, the respondents now become more 'picky' and the initial selection criteria more 'specific' and 'elaborate' in character. The initial aim to receive high quality education is during this stage for instance replaced by the respondent's search for a host country that offers an attractive master's degree within his or her specific field of study. The respondents, however, not only look for suitable degrees, but also take what they refer to as 'the general reputation' of a potential host country into account; one respondent for instance got into an Italian university which had a higher international ranking than Chalmers, which is the university he now attends, but still chose to go to Sweden due to the fact that he perceived Sweden to have the better general reputation:

*"I got into Italy, Sweden, the United States and Canada - but I got the second best scholarship in Sweden, the best one was in Italy, but because of the better reputation of the country I decided to go*



*here" (Male, 25 years old Iran).*

The respondents furthermore, also considered whether or not a potential host country was prominent within their field of study, regardless of if they were interested in migrating after completing their studies or not, since they believed that this would 'add' competitive value to their CV:

*"Before coming to Sweden I had certain companies which were on the top of my head, and that were a decisive factor for me choosing Sweden before other countries, because I had been working already three years in Mexico and I got to know a lot of companies. I actually already had the chance to work on a project with Tetra Pak, and I got to know the company and some people working there, and I really liked it and I felt like they were one of the top engineering companies working in Mexico and also the ABB Group, even if it is like kind of half Swedish, that influenced my decision to go to Sweden. Since, I am in production engineering it is one of the biggest countries that you aim for, that you are always aware of, even though it wasn't really my plan to Work in Sweden" (Male, 25 years old from Mexico).*

Respondents studying social science gave similar reasons for choosing Sweden – that is they choose Sweden not only because they found a degree which interested them in Sweden but also due to their interest in the functioning of the Swedish society:

*"I guess I had this idea about Sweden being particularly interesting. I am interested in gender and this kind of go to my view of Sweden beforehand as you know this progressive utopia with lots of great gender equality and I'm interested in gender issues, in terms of development, so I just thought it would be an interesting context to study it in" (Female, 26 years old from the United States).*

This is how another respondent explained why he chose to study social work, which was his field of study, in Sweden:

*"Because I think it depends on which course you study. For instance if I study IT in Uganda its almost the same stuff around the world but studying social work in a country where social work is so developed, as in Sweden, gives you better options in a country where social work is not so developed like in Uganda. I think that is what would create the difference – which makes your education more worth "(Male, 25 years old from Uganda).*

It thus seems as if both a country's overall or general reputation, and a country's potential prominence within the respondents' field of study, have an impact on their choice of host. In the case of Sweden it, however, seems as though it is a hybrid between how the respondents perceive the Nordic countries, as a group of countries, and how they perceive Sweden which affect their selection of a host country. The majority of the respondents, that is seven out of ten, namely perceived Sweden as both a part of the Nordic countries and as an own country – and out of these seven, five explored studying in other Nordic countries as well, due to their general interest in the Nordic area. In line with this, these respondents also thought that not only their positive perception of Sweden, but also of the Nordic area in general, had an impact on their decision to study in Sweden. This is how one of the respondents described his view of the Nordic countries before starting his studies:

*"I would say that the whole Nordic area is quite peaceful place, no war and not as stressful as other places – the way people live here I mean, and also I know that people here are wealthy because you have quite a good society system since you support people's lifes and those things"* (Male, 23 years old from South Africa).

This is another respondent who also focused on the 'peacefulness' of the Nordic countries – and this respondent also underlined the importance of a study destination being safe:

*"Yes, yes, the safety reason is also very important because you know there is not so much conflict here in this region, and also this is a place without any conflict with other countries (...) Because in China we already heard about some news about some attacks in the US and in the UK from terrorists but here nothing happens"* (Male 25 years old from China).

Another respondent added that he had a perception of the Nordic countries as free from corruption:

*"I think that it is that everything works fine; no corruption no, how to put it, they are like perfect social countries where wealth is, at least it seems, as most equally distributed in the world there is not so big differences - and being from Mexico City I also feel very safe here"* (Male 25 years old from Mexico).

In addition to the Nordic countries being perceived as peaceful, well-functioning and egalitarian societies, they were also viewed as prosperous – something which was associated

with people in the Nordic countries enjoying a high standard of living and being well-educated. Being well-functioning societies was furthermore, also related to a perception of the Nordic countries as having an excellent educational system:

*“(...) I think that here you have a very good education system for all citizens in these countries so everyone has the right to study so you have a quite high educational level for everyone – this I also knew”* (Male 25 years old from India).

In addition, the respondents also considered Nordic countries to be more gender equal than the rest of the world – even if Sweden was perceived as the forerunner when it came to this. Sweden was, however, in general perceived as a ‘Nordic’ forerunner and the respondents for instance perceived Sweden to be more prominent within their field of study than the rest of the Nordic countries and as enjoying a stronger global reputation than these – which accordingly to the respondents, was their main reason for choosing to study in Sweden and not any other Nordic country. In line with this some respondents also viewed Swedish Universities as more well-known and regarded, and as having a wider selection of degrees in English, than other Nordic universities.

*“I mean Sweden is always on those lists you know countries to be a women in, top countries to raise a family in, and things like that but I had known that there were also some tension rising because of immigration policies being so open, and the repercussions for things like that, which is happening all over Europe. So, I was aware of that but as I said everything is relative so for me it looks like so much better picture than where I am from. And I looked in all of the Nordic countries but I knew that Sweden kind of was probably most realistically be the place – just because there were more options and I felt that the schools were generally more kind of well-known and well-regarded”* (Female 30 years old from the United States).

This is how another respondent motivated choosing Sweden over other Nordic countries:

*“I think Sweden’s reputation is what made Sweden stand out that as far as the globe concerns Sweden has a much higher reputation than the other Nordic countries or the Netherlands for that matter – just socially and intellectually. I am an intellectual, or I like to think of myself as one, or I like to become one if that is even more humble. So yeah as far as intellectuality is concerned I thought about it as the best option. I mean for example the Nobel Price is given here, and that awards great work in the intellectual field and in the social field, and that kind of explains what the country is about; that it is*

*successful in those, in that respect, as far as the educational system is concerned especially” (Male, 25 years old from South Africa).*

Another respondent stated that he chose Sweden due to having more knowledge about it and Swedish companies being more famous:

*“ I just knew more about Sweden than like Iceland for instance and yeah it is more famous, more popular because of the companies that are worldwide like IKEA and HM – and the moose it is like a symbol of Sweden and the blond girls” (Male 25 years old from Mexico).*

In line with this the respondents viewed the entire Nordic area as being strong economies but when explaining why, they mostly talked about Swedish companies and the Swedish industry. It is, nevertheless, important to note that there were several other factors, besides from the respondents’ positive perception about Sweden and the Nordic region, which influenced the respondents’ choice of host country. Firstly, ‘practical’ factors, which were important already during the initial stage of the respondents’ study abroad decision-making process, continued to be important. These factors included; the size of tuition fees, the cost of living, the availability of attractive scholarships and the characteristics of the admission process – the latter becoming increasingly important during this stage, since how easy it is to apply for different study programs, how difficult it is to get admitted and when one finds out if this has happened or not can be crucial:

*“The reason that I did end up in Germany was actually that the process of admission in Sweden is before the one in Germany so when they offered me the scholarship in Sweden, and they could not tell me anything from Germany because they were still deciding, I had to say yes – so then I came here” (Male 25 years old from Mexico).*

Furthermore, the range of courses offered in English, and the ranking of different universities also had a great impact on the respondents’ choice of host country – as did recommendations from friends. Three respondents, furthermore, mentioned being primarily interested in universities located in the city center and for one respondent the fact that people could communicate well in English, outside of the classroom, also mattered greatly. Out of the seven respondents who viewed Sweden not only as an individual country but also as a part of

the Nordic countries six, however, mentioned that they believed their positive perception of Sweden and the Nordic countries, in combination with finding a suitable degree, to be the main reason for them choosing to study in Sweden. It is, furthermore, important to note that five of these respondents had previous experience from studying or traveling in Sweden, Denmark or Norway, something which probably contributed to their high level of knowledge about and positive perception of the Nordic region – a perception which also seemed to have resulted in a desire to prolong a visit or stay:

*“Well, the story is that when I was doing my bachelor I did an exchange semester and I chose Denmark, and I went to Copenhagen for that, and I really enjoyed the ‘Scandinavian experience’ so I was looking forward to extending my stay somehow (...)”* (Male 25 years old from Mexico).

In line with this, it, furthermore seemed, as if all the respondents adapted the same positive perception of Sweden after having studied there– and all could see themselves staying for a longer period of time if not for good. All the respondents namely stated that they loved the Swedish culture and way of life – a culture, and way of life, which most of them associated with the entire Nordic area, even if they often referred to it as Swedish; possibly due to the fact that they were living in Sweden. The respondents furthermore, all appreciated that they felt safe in Sweden and that they perceived it as a country with few crimes, few homeless people and few people with drug problems compared to their home countries. All but one were, furthermore, very pleased with their studies – which interestingly enough was related not only to the quality of the education that they received but also to the ‘Swedish way of doing things’:

*“Yeah, to be honest I did not expect the teaching to be different. Like, I noticed that the system in general was like very relaxed in the Swedish society, and the Swedish system and Swedish rules are as well more flexible, I think. Like, in our country it is quite strict if you like fail one time you will probably have another chance to pass but like if you fail another time then probably you failed and then you do not have the opportunity to do it again. Here like if you fail it once you can take it another time like you can ask the teacher, the supervisor, like basically there are other chances which is good”*  
(Female, 30 years old from Kyrgyzstan).

This is how another respondent described why he appreciated living in Sweden:

*“Well when I first came here I feel like the people are very nice and quite like helpful, like they help you to adapt to your new country here, and then mostly they can speak quite good English, I did not know Swedish at that moment, and also I feel like the system is like everything is in this order, like a Swedish queue, and I can feel the safety because I know that I need to follow the order and I do not have to be stressed or so everything will be fine” (Male 25 years old from China).*

All female respondents, furthermore, mentioned feeling very comfortable in Sweden due to the country being very gender equal:

*“Actually, I appreciate the studies but also the society. Like, you are for instance not treated like a very fragile doll. I mean you have to do everything yourself and I really appreciate that because back at home I would not for instance go to the bank by myself – I would have to have my father, or my brother or my uncle with me, and they would do my bank transactions for me. And back at home I would not go to the hospital by myself or travel alone by myself and at the university you have these neat groups where girls and boys are on one side each – so we do not even sit together” (Female 25 years old from Pakistan).*

This is how another respondent expressed her appreciation for living in a more gender equal society than the one she came from:

*“Yeah, the pressure on women is quite high in my region back at home – a lot is expected if you are women there. But now I am far away, and I think that I am kind of free and I do not owe anything to anyone, so it is up to me to decide what I will do with my own life. I like that. At home, if you are like above twenty, you are expected to get married and if you are not people start questioning you like: “When are you getting married?” and then when you get married people will start questioning you like: “When will you have children? It is always like: “Mind your own business” – that is always what I wanted to say” (Female, 30 years old from Kyrgyzstan).*

Out of the two respondents who had no previous first-hand experience of Sweden, but who still stated, that the reputation of Sweden and the Nordic area was crucial to them, one had friends who studied in Sweden and were pleased with their study abroad experience and the other had an father who travelled around in the Nordic countries in association to his work – something which might have contributed to their knowledge about and positive perception of the region:

*“I had two friends who studied here and I talked to them before coming and they recommend it, actually they said they had a fabulous experience and they loved their schools, it is just two people but they both have moved on to do really interesting things in their careers”*(Female 26 years old from the United States).

It is, however, important to note that there were differences between the respondents, also during this second stage of the study abroad decision-making process, and while the majority viewed the Nordic countries as a unit, two respondents instead viewed Sweden solely as an individual country and one solely as a Nordic country – the latter respondent in addition stated that this was of no importance to him; he could have gone to any European country. These respondents had no previous first-hand experience of the Nordic area and instead choose Sweden due to a combination of the availability of attractive scholarships, the ranking of their potential host universities and finding a degree which caught their interest. All of these respondents, however, still took whether Sweden was prominent or not within their field, and the general reputation of Sweden, into account.

In sum, it seems as if the respondents’ perception of the Nordic countries, at least for the majority, had a crucial impact on their selection of a host country. It was, however, a hybrid between how the respondents perceived Sweden and the Nordic countries, which steered them towards choosing to study in Sweden – and Sweden was not viewed to be just ‘any’ Nordic country; it was perceived as a Nordic forerunner. Regarding the perception of the Nordic countries, it seems as if it is an overall positive view of these as well-functioning, peaceful, prosperous and egalitarian societies which attracted the respondents to the region – whereas it was the view of Sweden as a ‘Nordic’ forerunner, in several respects including having more well-regarded universities, which lead the respondents to choose Sweden over other Nordic countries. The respondents were, furthermore, appealed by the culture of and lifestyle in Nordic countries. Other identified factors, influencing the selection of a host country during this stage, included; recommendations from friends, university rankings, the selection of degrees in English, the location of a university, the admission process, the size of tuition fees, the cost of living and the availability of scholarships – the latter for some respondents being a prerequisite for studying abroad at all.

# Conclusions, Discussion and Ideas for Further Research

This section will focus on how the respondents' perceptions of Europe and the Nordic countries can be related to the theoretical framework of this study, that is to the 'push and pull model', and to previous research regarding Brand Europe and the Nordic model or brand. After this a discussion related to the findings of the study will follow – a discussion focusing primarily on which challenges the Nordic countries, and to some extent Europe, must tackle in order to keep attracting international students. Finally, a couple of ideas for further research, which could help Nordic policy makers tackle the aforementioned challenges, will be presented

## Conclusions

This study aimed at answering the following research question; *how the study abroad decision-making process of international students, choosing to study in Sweden, is influenced by their perception of Europe and/or the Nordic Countries* – and it concluded that both these perceptions mattered. Regarding the respondents' perception of Europe, this was found to influence their first 'vague' or initial decision regarding where to go – that is it influenced their decision to decide to study 'somewhere' in Europe. The perception of Europe was thus not directly related to their choice to go to Sweden; that is, the majority of the respondents did not randomly choose Sweden simply due to the fact that it was a European country. For most of the respondents deciding to explore studying in Europe, nevertheless, constituted the first step towards choosing Sweden as a host country. It furthermore, seems as if the respondents decided to go to Europe and then stuck to that choice – that is they did not explore studying in any other parts of the world once they decided to go to Europe, even if the countries they first had in mind turned out not to be a suitable fit for them. The respondents who decided to explore studying in the United States as well, during this initial state, explored that option too – they did, however, not explore any other options – that is they instead stuck to only exploring those two options. It thus seems as if the respondents had a tendency to stick to their initial choices. If this is the case choosing Europe not only constituted a first decision which 'guided' the respondents towards choosing a Nordic country, or more specifically towards choosing Sweden, it also constitutes a necessary choice since no countries in Europe would be explored if the respondents did not have studying in Europe in mind already during



this first stage of the decision-making process.

That international students choosing European host countries first make a ‘vague’ or initial choice to go to Europe, before choosing a host country, is not something which the existing literature on individuals’ study abroad decisions focuses on (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Eder et al. 2010, Yang 2007) – that is this initial or ‘vague’ first decision of the study abroad decision-making process is not considered. Existing literature instead assumes, that this process consists of three fixed stages; (1) the individual decides to study abroad, (2) the individual chooses a host country and the (3) the individual chooses a host university – as proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). The findings of this study, however, instead indicate that the study abroad decision-making process is different for different individuals – and that it is possible to argue that it consists out of more than three stages. These stages, however, seem to be difficult to separate and it is perhaps a question of interpretation whether or not the respondents decision to go to Europe constitutes an own stage in this process, since many respondents’ already had a couple of European countries in mind, which they were more interested in than others, when this decision was made. The above mentioned existence of a potential tendency among students to ‘stick’ with their initial choice to study in Europe, regardless of if they for some reason discarded the host countries they first had in mind or not, however suggests, that the respondents first took a decision to explore studying ‘somewhere’ in Europe and not only to explore one or two specific host countries in Europe – that is, it suggests that their choice to study in Europe should be treated as a separate stage of the study abroad decision-making process. Something else which suggests that it would be appropriate to refrain from treating the different stages of the study abroad decision-making process as ‘fixed’ is, that it might lead studies to overlook important factors influencing this process, such as for instance the perception of Europe and the Nordic countries, due to these factors lacking a direct connection to any of the three predefined stages of this process.

In order to understand how the respondents’ perception of Europe influenced their study abroad decision-making process, one must, however, first understand their main motive for going abroad. All the respondents namely believed that having a high quality degree in combination with having international experience, would give them a competitive edge on the labor market – the aim to obtain this edge, nevertheless, not only constituted the main reason for the respondents choosing to go abroad, it also constituted the main selection criteria for

where to go. The respondents namely chose to go to Europe due to their perception, that Europe is the best place to obtain this ‘competitive edge’. This belief was primarily built on their perception of Europe as a continent with a high general quality of education, a perception which they based on the fact that many high ranked universities are located in Europe, together with a general perception in their home countries concerning the high level of education in Europe. This perception was, however, also closely connected to the respondents’ perception that Europe is the only available option – since the United States, which was the only other study abroad option that the respondents seemed to believe could provide them with the same competitive edge’, was discarded due to factors associated to costs, admission procedures and a lack of attractive scholarships. The respondents, however, also partly choose Europe due to finding its culture appealing; either due to the fact that it is similar to their own, and thus easy to adapt to, or due to the fact that it is different and thus exciting. Some respondents also perceived the culture of Europe as appealing due to its ‘diversity’ – that is due to being comprised out of several different cultures and lifestyles.

After the respondents decided to study in Europe, they started to explore and compare different host countries, and their pros and cons, and it was during this stage that their perception of the Nordic countries started to influence their study abroad decisions. The respondents’ view of the Nordic countries seemed to work as a complement to their perception of Sweden; the Nordic host country which the respondents finally chose. The majority of the respondents namely was appealed by and interested in the Nordic region in general, and did perceive it as a unit, and several respondents looked into studying in different Nordic countries. It was the respondents’ overall perception of the Nordic countries, as a peaceful, prosperous, egalitarian and well-functioning region with an appealing culture and lifestyle, which attracted them to the Nordic countries – whereas it was their more specific perceptions of Sweden, as for instance more prominent within their field of study, which attracted the respondents to study in Sweden. The respondents thus decided to study in Sweden not solely due to the fact that it was a Nordic country but also due to their specific perception of Sweden as an individual country – a country which they perceived as something of a ‘Nordic’ forerunner. The respondents, furthermore, perceived Sweden to have a wider selection of university degrees in English and more well-regarded universities – the latter being a part of the perception of Sweden’s educational system as superior to those of other Nordic countries. The respondent, however, stated that their perception about the Nordic

countries, in combination with their perception of Sweden and finding a suitable degree, where their main reason for choosing to study in Sweden.

Regarding the respondents perception of the Nordic countries, it is furthermore interesting to note that it corresponded very well to what the literature refers to as the Nordic brand or the Nordic model – portraying the Nordic countries as ‘exceptional’ both when it comes to their societal and economic organization and when it comes to their ability to maintain an element of neutrality in times of conflict (Browning 2007;Kharkina 2013). What is even more interesting is, that the way that the Nordic countries, and in particular Sweden, choose to organize its society in itself became a reason for the respondents choosing it as a study abroad destination; the respondents for instance stated that they wished to study gender equality or social work in a country which they perceived as a forerunner when it comes to such issues. This fact is especially interesting since it can be related to the Nordic model as an ‘exceptional’ model ‘to be copied by others’ (Browning 2007, p.27). The Nordic culture and lifestyle was, furthermore, something which the respondents were very appealed by – and they especially appreciated the relaxed atmosphere in these countries; the flexibility of rules, the fact that students were given second chances to do exams and the fact that people seemed less stressed in these countries, than in other parts of the world, and paid more attention to their private life and not only to their working life. The neutrality of the Nordic area was, furthermore, also perceived as something very positive by the respondents – both in general and in terms of personal safety. The respondents who studied engineering, however, also underlined the importance of the prominence of the industry in these countries, and in particular that of the Swedish industry, to their study abroad choice – something which indicates that also more recent efforts by Nordic policy makers to market these countries as innovative, might have been successful (see for instance Kharkina 2013 regarding these efforts). The respondents’ high level of knowledge about the Nordic countries, that is about their political system, their culture and their lifestyle, is likely to be linked to the fact that the majority of the respondents turned out to have previous experience from either travelling or studying in the region – something which underlines the existence of a correlation between having a lot of knowledge about a study destination and choosing that destination – a conclusion already reached by other scholars (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Eder et al. 2010). This study, however, supports the existence of a Nordic brand in the minds of the majority of the respondents and not solely in the minds of those who had previous experience

from the region. Those respondents who already visited or studied in the region, nevertheless, seemed to give more ‘weight’ to their perceptions of the region during their study abroad decision-making process than other respondents – and this perception also seemed to have resulted in a desire to return to the Nordic countries for a longer period of time. Whether or not the Nordic brand generally is becoming less known or well-regarded, or increasingly merged with what is perceived as ‘typically’ European, is, however, a question beyond the scope of this study. What is certain, however, is that the majority of the respondents in this study had a clear perception of the Nordic region as a unit – a perception which was separated from their perception of the rest of Europe. On the other hand this study also found that the decision-making process differed between the respondents – and one respondent for instance primarily viewed the Nordic countries as individual countries and another respondent only cared about the fact that Sweden was a European country. If the latter is an indication of the Nordic Brand becoming less known or well-regarded among international students is, however, impossible to say since there are no earlier studies to compare this result to.

Regarding the respondents perception of Europe this seemed to be quite ‘general’ or ‘unspecific’. The respondents for instance talked about the ‘European culture’ but the only characteristic that this culture was given was that it was easy to adapt to, but still different enough for those students who wanted to experience a new culture (a conclusion reached also by earlier studies see e.g. Eder et al. 2010), and that it was comprised out of several different cultures – a fact which the students appreciated since they perceived this to make Europe a more interesting place to travel and live in. The respondents, however, never mentioned the political organization of Europe, or the existence of the EU. When it comes to the respondents’ perception of Europe, it is thus perhaps best described as aligned with the ‘old’ dimension of Brand Europe – depicting Europe as:

*"(...) diverse, with a "real" and long history, ever-evolving social, cultural and political traditions, religions and rituals. Nation states - and often regions - are fiercely proud and independent"*

Ljungberg 2006, p.36).

Instead of being aligned with the new dimension of Brand Europe which has been ‘added’ to the initial perception of Europe, due to the creation of the European Union:

*"The EU has only short history, recently invented institutions, a series of treaties and protocols. It is*

*perceived as conveying a mood of bureaucracy, ever-shifting compromise and interdependence"*

(Ljungberg 2006, p.36).

A notion supported by the fact that the respondents' perceived the Nordic region as an own region with its own culture and lifestyle – and not solely as a part of Europe. This study thus shows that the proposed division of Brand Europe is something which does not seem to influence the respondents' study abroad decisions – since they solely consider the 'old' dimension of this brand. This could, however, change in the future if the other dimension of this brand becomes more prominent, due for instance to more political power being transferred to the European level. If this results in all European countries becoming viewed as 'one big Europe' this might, nevertheless, create problems for the Nordic countries since one of their greatest assets seem to be their common Nordic brand – a brand which is likely to become weakened if this happens. It might, however, also create a problem for Europe as a continent since it also might lose some of its attractiveness; the part that is due to this continent being perceived as comprised out of several different and exciting cultures. It is, nevertheless, possible that students will continue to go to Europe due to their perception of Europe as a high quality provider of education – a perception which can be connected to previous research suggesting that it is the richer economic and cultural hegemonic countries in the North, who hold knowledge and resources desired by others, that receive the greatest number of international students (Altbach;Chase-Dunn 1989;Chen and Barnett 2000;Weiler 1984).

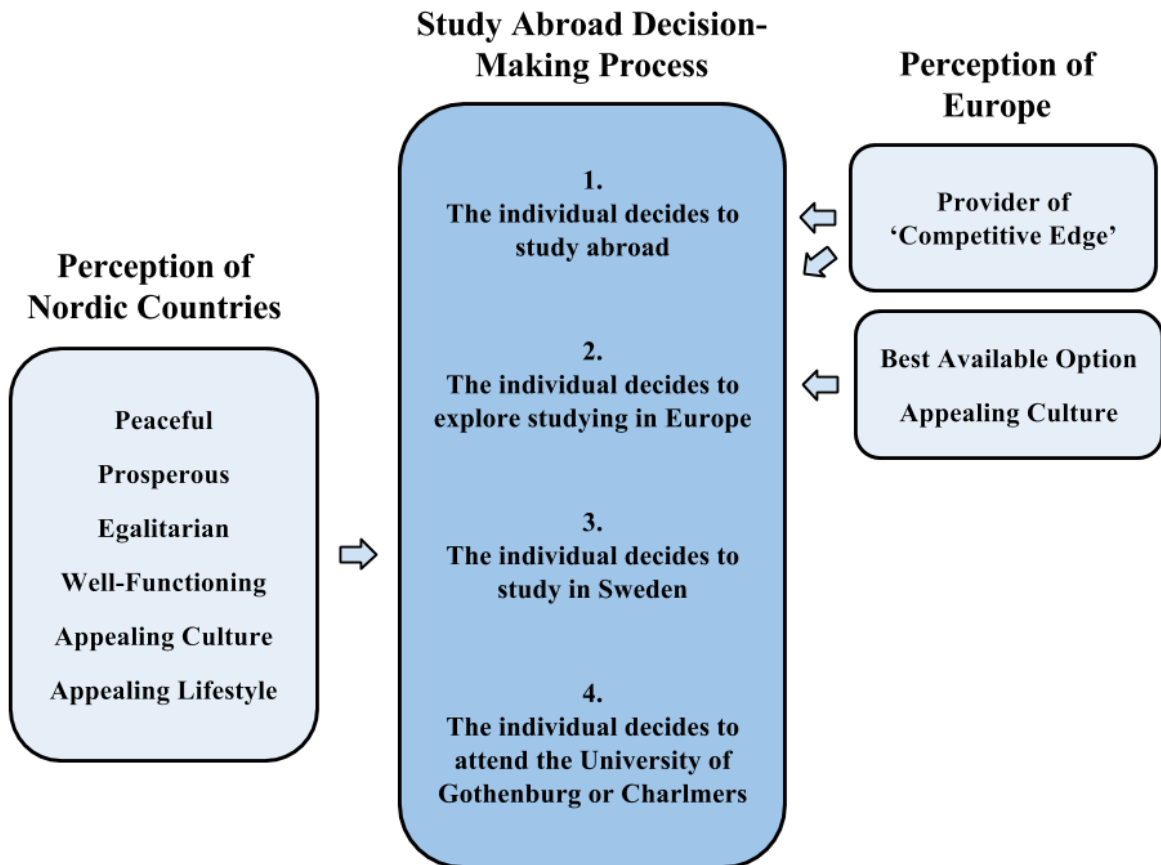
The respondents' perceptions of Europe and the Nordic countries can, furthermore, be related to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) 'push and pull' model. Since, for instance the respondents' perception of the Nordic countries, as peaceful, prosperous, egalitarian etc., can be viewed as 'pull' factors, pulling the respondents towards the Nordic region, and their aim to obtain a competitive edge, which were there reason for choosing to study in Europe, can be viewed either as a 'push' factor, pushing the students towards studying abroad, or as a pull factor attracting them to Europe. Other factors, which were found to influence the same stages, as the respondents' perception of Europe and the Nordic countries, such as; recommendations from friends, social links, cost of living, the size of tuition fees, university ranking etc., furthermore, all correspond to 'pull' factors identified by earlier studies (Lee 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Eder et al. 2010, Yang 2007). This study thus support the usefulness of the

‘push and pull model’ when it comes to explaining students’ study abroad decisions. It, however, also indicates that ‘pull’ factors can operate not only within host countries but also within regions and continents – something which suggests that the study abroad decision-making process consists out of more than three stages. To determine whether the respondents’ perceptions of Europe and the Nordic countries constituted ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors have however, not been the focus of this study. The aim has instead been to develop a model, as closely related to the data as possible, for how the respondents’ perception of Europe and the Nordic countries has influenced their study abroad decision-making process, wherefore this dimension has been left out. Some of the perceptions that the respondents had, could furthermore, be viewed both as a ‘push’ and a ‘pull’ factor wherefore adding this dimension would make the model overly complicated – and result in a model less closely related to the actual data. The conceptual framework developed in this study can, however, be viewed as variant of the ‘push and pull’ model. Since it builds on the idea, that the study abroad decision-making process consists out of several different stages – and confirms, and further develops the idea, that general knowledge and awareness of a host country affects international students study abroad decision-making process as already defined by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). The conceptual framework generated from the interviews is presented below in table 1.

## **Discussion and Ideas for Further Research**

This study has contributed to research investigating how international students choose where in the world to study by giving it a clear Nordic dimension – but also a European one, since the fact that the Nordic countries also constitute European countries, and perhaps increasingly are being viewed as such, is taken into account. This study solely focused on one of the Nordic countries – Sweden. It is, however, probable that the findings of this study are applicable also to other Nordic countries. Since, even if the respondents perceived Sweden as an individual country, they even viewed Sweden as a Nordic forerunner, they still stated that their perception of the region as a unit influenced their study abroad decision. Sweden has, furthermore, for a long time been the most popular Nordic study destination, (Myklebust 2013) wherefore it is likely to be the most known one, and if students choosing this country as their host country still view it as a part of the Nordic region, and consider this a factor when deciding where to study, it is likely that international students going to other Nordic countries do so as well.

**TABLE 1. Conceptual Framework**



The biggest contribution of this study is the conclusion that the respondents decisions to study in Sweden were influenced both by their perception of the Nordic countries and Europe – but how then can these perceptions be beneficial from a marketing point of view?

The aim of the study was; *to explore how shared perceptions among international students about Europe and the Nordic countries can be exploited in order to market Nordic higher education globally* – and this study found that at least the Nordic brand already is contributing to the attractiveness of the Nordic countries on the global educational market. The Nordic brand namely seems to be working as a ‘complement’ to the perception that the respondents had about Sweden, the Nordic country they finally chose, as an individual country. The results of this study even suggest that the perception of these countries as 'exceptional', and different from the rest of the world, is one of the region’s primary competitive advantages on the global educational market. This fact constitutes something of a paradox since it indicates, that efforts

taken by the Nordic countries aiming to adapt these to a global world, efforts which have led them to move further away from the ‘Nordic way’ of doing things (as described by eg. Browning 2007; Rasumussen 2005; Rieker 2006), might instead have resulted in the endangerment of one of these countries’ biggest competitive advantages – at least when it comes to attracting international students. Continuing to stand out as countries who have strong welfare states, ensuring that all citizens are taken care of and provided with free education, and to strive for an equal distribution of wealth – leading to a high general standard of living, in combination with continuing to be far ahead, when it comes to issues such as gender equality, thus seem to be one of the best investments that the Nordic countries can do in order to attract international students.

However, even though the respondents’ perceptions about the Nordic countries already are contributing to their attractiveness on the global educational market, more can be done – and more needs to be done if the Nordic countries wish to attract the same number of international students as before the implementation of tuition fees – and hopefully even increase their intake. Another reason for ‘stepping up’ marketing efforts, and other efforts for that matter, aimed at attracting international students is, that if further Europeanization of the region occurs, this might result in these countries ‘solely’ being viewed as a part of Europe – thus losing one of its most important competitive advantages: their ‘exceptionalism’. If this process already is taking place or not is, however, as mentioned before, beyond the scope of this study.

In order to know exactly how to ‘step up’ their marketing efforts, Nordic countries, nevertheless, first have to conduct further research – research exploring for instance the ratio between those who are influenced by their perception of the Nordic region as a unit, when deciding to study somewhere in this region, and those who are not. Such research should, furthermore, investigate to what extent, and in what way, international students’ perception of individual Nordic countries differ – since one way to improve the Nordic countries’ ability to attract international students could be to create five different ‘study abroad destination profiles’; one for each Nordic country. These profiles should then preferably target somewhat different audiences, in order to maximize the overall intake of international students in the region, avoiding a situation where the Nordic countries are competing over international students with identical characteristics. In order to determine which group of international



students which Nordic country should target, and if different target audiences even exist, even more research is, however, needed – looking into for instance if factors such as an individual's field of study, country of origin, personality, gender, ability to fund his or hers studies etc. influence which aspects of the Nordic countries, or which Nordic country, they are most attracted by. The latter would be valuable not only when constructing different 'study abroad profiles' for the five Nordic countries but also for Nordic universities when thinking about what their 'competitive edge' on the global educational market could be. An additional question, which such research must address, is the fact that there seems to be a tendency, at least among some of the international students interviewed in this study, to mix up the Nordic Countries with Scandinavia – something which makes it difficult to determine which term it is best to use when marketing this region. Whether or not just discussed measures should be combined with marketing efforts on a European level or not is, however, a more difficult question. The fact that the respondents first choose to study somewhere in Europe, before deciding on a specific host country, indicates that their perception of Europe is of importance. It, however, seems as if it primarily is the respondents' perception of Europe as a high quality provider of education which influences their study abroad decisions – and since building a strong European brand, that is a more overarching one not solely related to Europe's educational sector, potentially could damage regional brands, such as the Nordic one, constructing such a brand might do more harm than good. All efforts aiming to promote Europe as a continent should therefore proceed with caution and aim to investigate if it is possible to construct a brand which complements, rather than competes with, already existing brands on a regional or national level. Or put in other words; if a Brand Europe is created, which consumes regional brands, and perhaps national brands as well, this brand has to be so effective, when it comes to attracting international students, that it can make up for this – so that the overall intake of international students increases instead of decreases.

If Nordic policy makers choose to market themselves individually, using the Nordic brand, or opt for building a strong European brand together with other European countries, is however not solely a question about economy and efficiency. It is namely also a question about culture and identity – and the Nordic Model or brand has been, and might still be, important to the people in the Nordic countries (Lawler 1997) – something which needs to be considered. In line with this a desire or reluctance, towards the creation of a common European brand or identity, among Europeans also has to be considered.

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that even though marketing efforts can be effective, and sometimes perhaps even necessary, the most effective strategy for countries, regions or continents, who wish to attract more international students is, as follows; to invest, and continuously strive to improve its higher educational sector – since the quality of education offered in a country, region or part of the world ultimately is its most valuable competitive advantage.

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# Appendix 1. Interview Guide – Core Questions

1. Could you please tell me your age and field of Study?

2. Could you tell me a little bit about when you first decided to study abroad and how that decision-making process was?

- Why did you first decide to go abroad? (Follow up question)

- How did you choose which host country to study in? (Follow up question)

- How did you choose which university to attend? (Follow up question)

3. Which countries did you consider when first deciding to study abroad?

- What were you appealed by with those countries? (Follow up question)

4. Do you think that your study abroad decision-making process consisted out of several smaller decisions, or stages?

- Which decisions or stages did you experience that there were? (Follow up question)

5. How did you perceive Europe before you decided to study in Sweden?

- Had you ever been to Europe? (Follow up question)

- What did you know about Europe? (Follow up question)

- What did you think about Europe? (Follow up question)

(All the above questions were followed up by a question regarding if, and in what way, these perceptions affected their study-abroad decision-making process).

6. How did you perceive the Nordic countries before you decided to study in Sweden?

- Had you ever been to a Nordic country? (Follow up question)

- What did you know about the Nordic countries? (Follow up question)

- What did you think about the Nordic countries? (Follow up question)

(All the above questions were followed up by a question regarding if, and in what way, these perceptions affected their study-abroad decision-making process).



**7.** Did you primarily view Sweden as a European, a Nordic or an individual country before choosing to study in Sweden – or as a combination of these?

- Had how you perceived Sweden an effect on your decision to study in Sweden? (Follow up question)

**8.** Did you consider the costs associated with studying in a specific host country when deciding where to study?

- Which costs? (Follow up question)

- How did that affect your study abroad decision? (Follow up question)

**9.** Do you know anyone who studied in Sweden – or did anyone recommend Sweden to you?

- Did that affect your decision to study in Sweden? (Follow up question)

**10.** Could you have attended the same master's in your home country?

- Is it easier or more difficult to get admitted to a similar program?

**11.** Did you consider migrating to your host country after completing your studies?

- Which countries could you see yourself work or live in?

**12.** How do you think that the quality of education in Europe/the Nordic countries/Sweden is compared to the quality of education in your home country?

