

# FORUM

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*Discussing international education*



## DATA IN INTERNATIONALISATION

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SATISFACTION IS  
IN SUCCESS



NOT IN  
CANTEEN FOOD

International students are a demanding group, and with good reason, as they invest heavily to study abroad. For student satisfaction to rise in the long run, universities should be less concerned with how students are experiencing day-to-day campus life and focus instead on the long-term goals of student employability and life chances. This is what they'll remember for years to come.

**I**nternational student satisfaction has become an exact science in higher education, with categories of merciless data guiding universities' strategies. Why merciless? Because pie-charts and graphs reveal the naked truth about the picky nature of international students. This means that universities are ranked not only on the quality of their courses, but on the overall scores of international student satisfaction, and that can be tricky business.

#### FOCUSING EFFORTS

Students from overseas put their personal and familial relationships at stake, invest heavily in relocation, and willingly take the risk of culture shock. It makes sense that universities want to offer the best value for their effort, time and money but the list of 'attraction factors' is endless and can get borderline ludicrous. A recent article in the ICEF Monitor discusses the direct link between the food choice at the institution and the happiness of foreign students arguing that, just like with housing, the limited choice can cloud the whole experience.<sup>1</sup> While it is absolutely true that living conditions are of paramount importance to daily happiness levels, is it really where the attention of higher education institutions should be focused? It is difficult to predict if a singular international will prefer sushi to bratwurst but various surveys show that most of them are definitely interested in two things: education quality and career prospects.<sup>2</sup>

#### EMPLOYABILITY

The possibility to get a better job after an international study is the second biggest motivator for prospective international students.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps for this reason, their institution choice is heavily influenced not only by the official university sources but also by what the alumni of the institution say. The International Student Barometer research reveals that alumni are the sixth most important source of information when choosing, whereas the university brochure ranks at number eight.<sup>4</sup> It shows that prospective students are keen to find out from your institution's alumni how they enjoyed their study and how it has contributed to their current career success and job satisfaction. In other words, it is a closed recruitment circle of happy students, employed alumni and prospective (international) students.

However, career success is not an easy one to achieve for the current generation of students – a staggering 79% of them have reported the need for help in finding employment.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to imagine that this must be especially the case for international students and alumni, since they usually don't speak the language of the host country and often do not have the same networks as the locals. Although from the employers' perspective international students have the competitive advantage of being more open-minded, mature, and in possession of great interpersonal skills, if they don't realise what they have to offer before entering the labour market,

they are going to face a long and winding road to employment. That is not to say that the development of employability skills should occupy the same place as the academic curricula but, evidently, it should not be postponed to the moment of graduation.

#### MEASURING SATISFACTION

The difficult part is actually measuring international student and alumni satisfaction. Based on the biggest motivators for prospective overseas students, study quality and successive employment are the cornerstones of the overall happiness – not necessarily *excluding* aspects like integration and accommodation, but simply higher on the priority list. Course evaluations take place throughout the studies and offer a point of reference for the study satisfaction at the given time. But where are the labour market readiness and career success metrics?

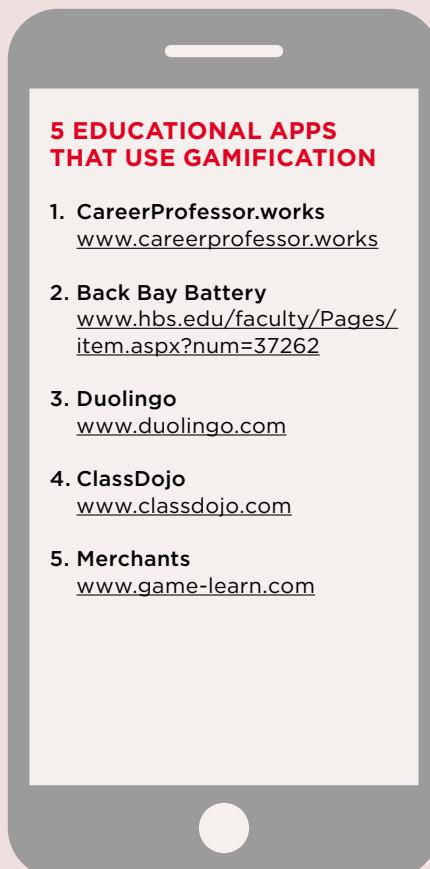
There is a need to incorporate career awareness tools with parallel questions to know what kind of career support students need during and after their studies. Questions, such as *How well prepared do you feel for the world of work?* and *Are you working in line with your studies?* are among the ones that need answering.<sup>6</sup> This way, not only would international students keep their professional development in mind during their university years, but they would also provide feedback about their career success and study satisfaction in retrospect after graduation – invaluable data for universities.

#### ENGAGING STUDENTS

Of course, it's easier said than done as any career or alumni officer could confirm – drawing a large crowd of international students into a career workshop or getting alumni to respond to e-mails have proven to be challenging. Even the most successful global student surveys struggle to get response rates above 50%. The problem is that universities are slow adapters in

a rapidly changing technological reality. International students and recent alumni – a cohort that uses a myriad of online services to arrange transportation, housing, courses and to communicate with their loved ones – are not likely to spend time filling in the questionnaires in their e-mail inboxes. They're playing and 'WhatsApping' on their tablets and smartphones, and this is where universities should be too. Below we present five examples of the various existing educational apps that use gamification to engage students.

Understandably, developing in-house gamified careers advice combined with feedback tools is not an option for every higher education institution due to high costs. Yet there are solutions online that speak the language of modern students. Gamification may sound trivial, but



games provide an interactive and appealing way for (international) students and recent alumni to learn about career opportunities while providing continuous data for universities.<sup>7</sup> In order to bridge the gap between higher education and the world of work, universities will need to step up their game to ensure (international) students turn into brand ambassadors for their institutions – in the end, their satisfaction will be based on feeling successful, and not so much on the lunch items in the university canteen.

—VERONIKA NORVAISAITE & NANNETTE RIPMEESTER

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