International students’ experiences of cultural differences in Sweden
A research study of German and Chinese students at Malmö University

Internationella studenters upplevelser av kulturella skillnader i Sverige
En studie om tyska och kinesiska studenter på Malmö Högskola

Bachelor thesis within International Migration and Ethnic Relations
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Abstract
The research study aims at exploring the relationship between international students’ motivational factors to study abroad and the choice of Malmö University, Sweden, considering each student’s main “push” and “pull” factors. The research study seeks to examine the international students’ experiences of cultural differences while studying in Sweden. Furthermore, the study investigates whether the international students cultural identity are being reinforced or weakened. Not much previous research on international students’ motivations, cultural differences and cultural identity has been done; however, some related researches provided me with knowledge and acted as guidelines for the research study. The research study is based on an inductive, qualitative research method, and the data was collected through semi-structured and focus group interviews. In respect of the implications to define culture and cultural identity the data will be explored through a theoretical framework of intercultural communication and the theory of asserted and assigned identity and thick and thin identity, respectively. The findings of the research study showed different motivational factors affecting the international students’ reason to choose study outside their origin country. The cultural differences experienced were explained as being caused by everyday encounters in the Swedish society and educational system. The students studied experienced that their cultural belonging became more evident as they were living in Sweden. I believe that an unfamiliar social surrounding, along with the circumstance of being international students in a society that is different from the one at home, make culture and cultural identity more important and evident to the people living there.

Key Words: international students, `push-pull` factors, intercultural communication, culture, cultural differences, cultural identity.
Sammanfattning


Nyckelord: internationella studenter, `push-pull` faktorer, interkulturell kommunikation, kultur, kulturella skillnader, kulturell identitet.
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1 Introduction

I am a student at Malmö University and in 2010 I had the opportunity to spend the whole spring semester (February through July) in Perth in Western Australia. Before I went there, I tried to figure out what studying in a foreign country would be like, especially in a nation like Australia where two quite different cultures meet. After having returned to Sweden, I applied for one additional exchange study semester (spring semester 2010), this time in another city in Australia, Adelaide, in South Australia, which I did not know very much about until a few months back. I found it very interesting to study in a society so different from my home country, Sweden. I gained a wider understanding of what living in a society with a different educational system is like. Also, I experienced a new culture and this taught me how to communicate with people from a society quite different from Sweden. This experience made me want to learn more about the motivational factors for international students and to study intercultural communication more in dept.

1.1 Background

In contemporary society, studying abroad is a growing phenomenon, facilitated by the easiness to travel, by cultural interaction and it is also driven by economic need. Globalization makes the world smaller; changes are seen everywhere and it is now easier than ever to move across borders. Additionally, political changes such as the establishment of the European Union have provided young people with the opportunity to study in another member state quite easily and through political encouragement toward universities, several countries are now seeking international students (Byram 2006:1). Studying abroad has not only shown that the period that students spend abroad enriches their academic experience, but has also meant that students attain self-reliance and the future prospect of employment (The ERASMUS programme – studying in Europe and more, 2009). Many students choose English-speaking countries as their destination; however, international students coming to Sweden, which is not considered an English-speaking country, is an increasing trend. According to Högskoleverket, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, there were 27 900 persons studying at one of the Swedish higher education institutions during the academic year 2006/7, of which 16 700 were free-movers and 11 200 exchange students. The incoming students were mainly (two-thirds) from Europe and the Nordic countries, but an emerging trend showed that the number
of Asian students was increased by the current number of 5 900 students. One survey referred
to on the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education webpage shows some significant
factors for what motivates students to study abroad, known as “push” and “pull” factors.
“Push” factors— half of the international students wanted to improve their career
opportunities, and one third came for the personal experience. “Pull” factors— the students
chose Sweden as their destination, as many programs are taught in English and also as the
tuition is free of charge (Ejsing, Höskoleverket, 2008).

As long as encounters between individuals from different cultures take place, interactions
across cultural borders are being practiced. Today, traveling is part of the everyday life of
many people and it is getting increasingly popular among young students at university level.
Nowadays, travel for study is almost seen as an extension to travel for pleasure. Contacts of
an intercultural range are normal today for people all around the globe and student mobility is
increasing (McDaniel, Porter & Samovar 2006:1). When people move to new countries, this
produces a mixture of individuals coming from different traditions, religions, societies, as
well as political systems, and people speak different languages and have different cultural
practices. This leads to a reshaping of the receiving society and produces economical and
political effects (Castles & Miller 2003:14). The focus on intercultural communication,
therefore, becomes increasingly important today; learning how to communicate with people
across cultural boundaries needs to be addressed. Furthermore, the sociology theorists
Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, claim that a person´s cultural and ethnic identity
depends solely on the context, and therefore, apply a theory that builds on the concepts of
thick/thin identity— what role ethnic identity plays in a person’s social life, and on
asserted/assigned identity— what we ourselves claim to be and what others say we are
(Cornell & Hartmann 2007:75).

1.2 Aim and Research Questions
The aim of my research is to investigate international student’s motivational factors to come
to Sweden and their experiences in the country. In order to examine this I have posed the
following research questions;
• What were the motivational factors to study abroad and to choose Sweden and Malmö University?
• How do the international students experience cultural differences in Swedish society?
• Do the international students experience their cultural identities to be reinforced or weakened?

I wanted to examine international students’ experiences of cultural differences and encounters with Swedish society. I have chosen to examine the experiences of students coming from one country, Germany, which is geographically close to Sweden, and another country, China, which is geographically distant to Sweden. I chose to examine this in a context where I thought that it would be especially evident – at Malmö University, one of Sweden’s international Universities that promotes student mobility (Admaren, Malmö University, 2010).

1.3 Previous Research
There are a few studies of motivational factors for student’s choices to study abroad, their experiences of cultural differences and cultural identity. Mark Bray and Mei Li (2007) studied cross-border flows in relation to push and pull factors determining motivational factors for Chinese students in Macau and Hong Kong. In the bachelor thesis of Rafia Muntasira, Mingming Jiang and Tien Vo Mai Thuy (2009), “push” and “pull” factors in relation to motivational factors to study abroad as well as the choice of region and institution is discussed. In their findings the initial push factor was shown; the sending institutions’ role in respect of the provision of relevant information, promotion to study abroad, and encouragement for students. The major pull factors were argued as; geographical location, weather, culture, and the economic and social position of the receiving institution (Muntasira, Jiang & Vo Mai Thuy 2009:ii).

It is important to draw attention to the fact that cultural differences and culture shock is often related to differences between sending and receiving society, as well as a phenomenon based on communication. Bojana Dukic explores communication as a cause, a symptom and a solution for cultural differences. She stated interpersonal and organizational communication as well as the host culture quality and quantity of interactions to be the influential part for the intensity of culture shock experienced (Dukic, 2010). Additionally, in Lijuan Guan’s Master
level thesis, she studied cultural differences in relation to intercultural encounters between Swedish and Chinese students. In her findings Guan argued, to avoid cultural misunderstandings, people need to understand and discuss intercultural communication as a process (Guan, 2010).

Many angles of migration have been studied, but, surprisingly only a few research studies concerning students’ cultural identity. The complicated relation of cultural identity to cultural belonging, however, is discussed in the bachelor thesis by Yasmin Aweida (2010). She explores encounters for young Swedish-born women, whose both parents are born outside and now live in Sweden. An underlying structure of cultural belonging is that several factors interact and overlap each other, i.e. external, internal, family, and network, and these structures are hard to change as people define themselves and others from the stance of cultural belonging (Aweida, 2010).

The previous researches mentioned above are important and relevant to this research study. As far as I have been able to establish, there has been no previous research that has addressed the issue of students’ motivational factors in relation to cultural differences and cultural identity.

1.4 Empirical Background
The individuals studied in this research are German and Chinese students currently studying during the autumn semester of 2010 at Malmö University. According to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, Högskoleverket, the common definition of a international student includes both incoming students within an exchange agreement (exchange students) and incoming students coming on their own (free movers), “International student that came to Sweden for studies and is registered within a Swedish higher education institution” (Utländsk student som har kommit till Sverige för att studera och som är registrerad vid ett svenskt lärosäte) (Kahlroth, Högskoleverket, 2010).

Malmö University is in the centre of Malmö, southern Sweden, and was founded in 1998. Today the university is co-operating with both developed and developing countries across the globe (Ksmasp, Malmö University, 2010). Through the concept of Internationalisation at
Home, the International Office at Malmö University works for the ongoing internationalization process at the university (Adtobo, Malmö University, 2009). The ambition of Malmö University is that “all our students shall get an international and intercultural dimension during their studies, i.e. broadmindedness, maturity, understanding and respect for other people and their cultures etc” (Admakr, Malmö University, 2009). Furthermore, Malmö University is a member of the SOCRATES-program with approximately 150 different bilateral university agreements, foremost in the field of student and teacher mobility, as well as Inter-University co-operation programs. Also, Malmö University takes part in TEMPUS projects with East and Central European partners and the NORDPLUS-program with Nordic universities and is developing further collaboration with universities in North America, Australia, Asia, and Africa (Admaren, Malmö University, 2010).

1.5 Delimitation
Due to the time limit of ten weeks I decided to restrict the research study by conducting a research study on one institution, Malmö University, as it is an international university working for the internationalization process. In respect of the analysis of cultural encounters in international students’ social world, I limited the research study to two groups of informants, which included German and Chinese students. Furthermore, the research study was restricted to a qualitative research approach, as the aim was to explore the international students’ choices and experiences from studying abroad. The standpoints of the interviewees in the semi-structured and focus group interviews, respectively, represent a typical selection of the international students’ standpoints. Since the findings were based on solely international students, conducting studies during the autumn semester 2010 at Malmö University, the findings might not be generalized to other universities on a larger scale. However, I believe that the collected findings from the chosen group of informants effectively provide a valid and reliable result for the research study.

1.6 Outline of the Study
This research paper is structured in the following way. The introduction gives an overview of the background and the topics discussed in the research. The first section contextualizes the aim and research questions and brings up previous researches and delimitation of study. The following section gives an outline of the methodological choices and the reasons for choosing
them as well as a presentation of the data analysis and ethics for the research process. Section three summarizes and explains the theories applied in the study and defines the concepts of identity and culture. The fourth section outlines an analysis of the research results and the main results are presented under five sub-headings connected to and discussed according to the theories and concepts used in the research study. Section five provides the main and summarizing conclusions and an interpretation of the research questions connected to the research results. The discussions and recommendations section outlines the implications of the research findings and reflects on future research possibilities. Finally, the last section contains a detailed reference list.
2 Empirical Method

In this section the methodological framework and the reasons that were chosen for the research are discussed. Also, a data analysis and ethics will be mentioned.

According to Tim May, the research methods take a central part in social science (May 2001:1). To conduct and fulfill the aim of this research paper, I chose an inductive approach, so as not to base the study on a theory decided on beforehand, which, otherwise, is what the deductive approach suggests. The inductive approach is described as a “discovery” approach, and in this approach the research process comes before theory and it opens up with as few pre-conceived sentiments as possible. I wanted to go out into real life, and to observe and question it, then draw conclusions, and thereafter bring these conclusions together to arrive at which theories to use, and therefore, the inductive approach was applied (Svensson & Starrin, 1996:106; May 2001:32). Furthermore, I wanted to describe the feelings, values and behaviors of the international students studying at Malmö University, so a qualitative research would be the most suitable approach, as this method explores the human elements of a given topic and it relies on the opinions, thoughts and beliefs of individuals. The qualitative approach explores how individuals perceive and experience the world and often includes interviews with people from specific markets. In this study, the specific market is the international students studying at Malmö University (Given, 2008; May 2001:32).

2.1 Interviews
To collect reliable research material, I chose to conduct interviews. Interviews contain the whole context of social relations, the process of social dynamics, and they are a valuable way to use in order to see and hear the exchange students´ own perceptions of and opinions on experiences in Malmö. Interviews can give a deep insight into peoples´ “biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings” and they can be used as a resource to understand how people make sense of their social life and act within it (May 2001:120, 142). Moreover, both semi-structured interviews as well as group and focus interviews (focus group interviews) was conducted. Both the interview methods are used in the study, as they can give a diverse perspective on the same topic. The use of different interview methods facilitates the research process of collecting the diverse data needed, and also gives the author a wider understanding of the research topic (May 2001:126). With the
intention of more in-dept discussions and in order to increase the validity of the experiences of the international students I began the study with two focus group interviews. Thereafter, to enter into a more specified dialogue with the interviewees, and to facilitate for me to get beyond the answers, four semi-structured interviews were conducted (May 2001:123). All interviews for the study lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. All interviews were under the guidance of me; however, the interviewees were given the opportunity to discuss the given topics for consideration on several occasions during the interviews. I adopted an overt role, i.e. the role of participant as observer, since this role makes the presence and the intention of the interviewer known to the interviewees, although the intention still is that the participants serve as respondents and informants (May 2001:155-157).

2.1.1 Group and Focus Interviews

The focus group interviews gave me the possibility to interview a number of persons at the same time, and to gain a wider understanding of the participants’ overall norms, values, and believes around a specific topic (May 2001:125). The first focus group interview was conducted with five German, and the second one with five Chinese students. The balance between the number of group members in each group participating in the discussion is of importance for the study, as the author, in order to collect much valuable information must be in control and get each participant involved in the group discussion (May 2001:126-127). Focus group interviews were an excellent opportunity to interact and to get clarifications from the participants. Throughout the interviews I was in control and asked general overall questions, and saw to it that the respondents were free to comment and discuss, still under the guidance of me myself who encouraged them to in-depth discussions that focused of the given topics. The discussions provided me with valuable information for the research task (May 2001:125). Throughout the focus group interviews a questionnaire (Appendix 1) with overall and general topics was used, and the topics discussed were; motivational factors, expectations, experiences of cultural clashes or differences, and how the participants experienced that their individual identity was affected.
2.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews

To be able to conduct a reliable research the interviewer must have a free role. This is necessary when it comes to asking for clarifications and elaborating on specific topics when entering into a dialogue with the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews provide the interviewer with enough flexibility to ask specific as well as follow-up questions, as this interview method usually involves a questionnaire of open-ended and follow-up questions like; Who? Why? When? Where? as well as purpose related questions (May 2001:123). Four semi-structured interviews were conducted in the research, of which two with German and two with Chinese students, respectively, and no one of the four students had attended the focus group interviews. In all four interviews the same questionnaire (Appendix 2) with specified questions was used, however, depending on the participants’ answers, different follow-up questions were asked. The questions were all closely connected to the aim of this research paper, and the questionnaire addressed the topics of what motivated the decision to go abroad; experiences of culture differences; with whom do the students socialise; and do the students experience any differences in their cultural identity.

2.2 Finding Interviewees- Snowball and Strategic Method

There are different strategic methods to determine which interviewees to choose. In this study a mix of two methods have been used, on the one hand, the snowball method, i.e. finding one person to interview and through this person finding more participants, and on the other, the strategic method, i.e. considering beforehand choosing those persons who it would be most tactic to interview in order to get the information needed. Combining the two strategies provides me with suitable participants for valuable information on the research purpose, as well as the opportunity to understand the different experiences of the interviewees (May 2001:119). All interviewees were full-time students, both female and male, at Malmö University during the autumn semester 2010. As I currently studies International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Malmö University, I am acquainted with several international students; however, through a German friend I came in touch with several German students (snowball method). All German interviewees originated from different parts in Germany, all studying different programs at Malmö University (strategic method). I came in touch with one Chinese student through a board meeting at Interact, a student union organisation that provides activities to newly arrived exchange students at Malmö University. This Chinese
student was interested in this study and she helped me to find more suitable Chinese students to interview (snowball). Coincidentally, the Chinese students came from different regions of China, a factor which gives the research a broader perspective (strategic) than if they had come from the same region. The German and the Chinese students bring valuable and reliable information in relation to the research questions, as they are international students at Malmö University and talk from own experiences.

2.2.1 Interviewees

The interviewees (fictive names) were: Maria, a 22 year old female German student currently studying Human Rights; Patrick, a 24 year old male German student, currently conducting English Studies; Raven, a 21 year old female Chinese student, currently conducting English Studies; and Chong, a 22 year old male Chinese student, currently conducting International Relations.

Two focus group interviews were conducted. The German focus group interview included two male students (G3 and G5), and three female students (G1, G2 and G3). All German participants were 22-24 years old, student G1 and G4 were conducting Language and Culture Studies, respectively, and students G2, G3 and G5 were all conducting English Studies. In the Chinese focus group the interviewees were one male student (C5) and four female students (C1, C2, C3, and C4). The Chinese students were 21 to 23 years old. Students C1 and C2 were both conducting English Studies, student C3 International Relations, student C4 Global Political Science, and student C5 International Migration and Ethnic Relations. As all interviewees were of the same age, I had the opportunity to find comparable similarities and dissimilarities between the various answers, which also gave the research study more reliability and validity. (May 2001:92). Additionally, since many of the interviewees studied different programs at Malmö University, the research study produces true knowledge, a better understanding and deeper knowledge of the international students’ respective backgrounds and situation, as different thoughts and opinions were given (May 2001:74-75).
2.3 Data Analysis
Being a student at Malmö University having an experience of one semester overseas gave me an understanding of and insight into what kind of encounters international students may face in a new society. Furthermore, being a student at International Migration and Ethnic Relations for five semesters has given me a rather wide knowledge of the concepts of culture and identity as well as a deeper insight into the complexity as to how to use these terms. This pre-existing knowledge will be used to analyze the study material. As, a social researcher wants to analyze and investigate the social world in an as unbiased way as possible, difficulties in relation to objectivity could arise when analyzing the collected data. Objectivity can be hard to obtain, as the researcher self is part of this social world and makes her or his own interpretation and is acting within it (May 2001:9). May discusses the factor that researchers need to utilize hermeneutics principles—the theory and practice of interpretation. To use this principle, the researcher uses his or her own understanding and interpretation of the social world as a necessary procedure of conducting the social research (May 2001:15).

During all the interviews a tape recorder was used, and after each interview a word-for-word transcription was made. It is of relevance to become familiar with collected data to be able to analyze it (May 2001:139). To collect valuable and informative data and to be able to analyze the data coding was used. Through coding I read through the transcribed texts from the interviews to find reoccurring themes and words, as well as interesting quotes for the research topic. Among other things, reoccurring codes and categories in the data were: everyday problems, encounters with the educational system and discussions about language difficulties. Both semi-structured and focus group interviews were used, and this broadened the understanding of the data and the possibility to attain first-hand experience gave the research positive effects such as objectivity and reliability.

2.4 Ethics
To collect the data needed, it is of importance to keep an ethic perspective in mind. The researcher needs to consider what is just and right; both for the research project and for the participants in the research (May 2001:59). The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees, the role as an impartial scientist or a friend that the interviewer has and what effect he or she has on the interviewee, can influence the collected data (May 2001:127). As
the interviewees were friends of friends of me (snowball method), a central role toward reliability and trustworthiness was considered at all times. I chose the role of participant as observer to have the opportunity to control the interview and to still have the chance to let the interviewees discuss freely. Additionally, consideration was given the fact that I was from Sweden and currently a student at Malmö University could influence the answers. Therefore, the interviewees were all told at the beginning of each interview to speak freely and unhindered. Furthermore, as I have a pre-existing experience of studies abroad, the research meant a wider understanding between me and the students interviewed. Throughout some parts of the interviews, me and the interviewees were discussing unhindered; nevertheless, I avoided argumentation that could influence the answers of the participants (May 2001:121). Moreover, the participants were asked about anonymity, whether they allowed their real names to be mentioned in the research study. The interviewees allowed their names to be used in the study, however, for the students´ own anonymity, all names are fictive, and with respect to that the informants do not see the final analysis. Before each interview, the interviewees were asked if they allowed the use of a tape recorder. All of them agreed to this and a recorder was used. To use a recorder increased the reliability and confidence of the findings in the research study, as I got the opportunity to listen through the interviews once again to see that everything was right understood (May 2001:92). Each interviewee was offered to read through the transcribed interview after the finished interview with the intention to correct and approve the discussions.
3 Theoretical Frameworks

In this section the theories applied in the study will be described. A theory of `push’ and `pull’ factors will be discussed, and to avoid misunderstandings, a definition of the concept of culture will be given, followed by a definition of the theory of intercultural communication. Thereafter, to examine the students´ experiences of their cultural identity being reinforced or weakened, a definition of cultural identity will be presented, followed by a definition of the theory of asserted and assigned identity and thick and thin identity.

3.1 Theory of Push and Pull factors

There is no coherent single theory that explains international migration, but rather a variety of theories divided by different disciplinary boundaries (Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Massey, D. S., Pellegrind, A., & Taylor, J. E. 2006:35). Migratory movements arise from the existence of links between sending and receiving countries with the grounds of colonization, trade, political influence, investment, and with cultural ties (Castles & Miller 2003:26). One general theory that emphasizes tendencies of people moving from one area to another is known as the “push-pull” theory. According to this theory the causes of migration is a combination of two factors; “push” factors, such as low standard of living, unfavorable economic opportunity, political situation; and “pull” factors, such as opportunity for better living and economy, and political freedoms (Castles & Miller 2003:22).

3.2 Concept of Culture

There are several definitions of the concept of culture; hence, this presents particular difficulties when it comes to explaining it. The concept of culture needs to be understood as something always changing, under construction, and never fixed “continually creating, re-creating, and renegotiating” (Benhabib 2000:1). The following statement is in agreement with my understanding of culture, i.e. a processual approach: “Culture is two things at once, that is, a dual discursive construction. It is the conservative “re”-construction of a reified essence at one moment, and the path finding new construction of a processual agency at the next moment” (Baumann 1999:95). Baumann argues that culture is processual, it is remaking, and all culture that people have is culture in the making, and challenges the essentialist approach that claims that culture is something universal and “tied” belonging to a specific group of
people, and claims that culture is not a “spur-of-the-moment improvisation without roots and rules” (Baumann 1999:86, 90, 94-95). Baumann, however, states two advantages with essentialism, i.e. on one hand, the imitation process for children and for dissenters, respectively, who learn to “do as your culture says” and, on the other, the facilitation process which enables people to stereotype others, which can be illustrated by the way an American can act like an American (Baumann 1999:83-84). Essentialism cannot, however, explain the fact that cultures constantly change all the time and also the fact that many individuals practice more than just one culture, which can be illustrated by the way an African American Muslim will behave as an African, an American or as a Muslim (Baumann 1999:84, 87). To be able to acquire a deeper insight into how culture is perceived differently, sets up boarders, and separates people, I chose to use the understanding of culture as processual.

3.3 Culture as Intercultural Communication
James W Neuliep (2009) contextualizes the concept of intercultural communication, i.e. all cultures are different and people need to learn about people from different cultures to understand them better. He argues that a message (verbal or non-verbal) could mean one thing for one person but something else for another person, i.e. culture filters messages, and the “process of encoding, decoding and interpreting is filled with cultural noise” (Neuliep 2009:5, 29, 33). The same understanding of intercultural communication is shared by Gudykunst and Kim who state that to communicate with strangers people need to challenge their understanding of the cultural backgrounds of strangers and their communication patterns (1997:385). In other words, people need to understand strangers to make the communication more effective.

Holliday, Hyde and Kullman argue that a key concept to understanding intercultural communication is to consider all communication where people communicate within and across social groups as intercultural and contextual, that cultural differences do not exist as real and tangible entities, rather as “intersubjective and negotiated processes” (2004:XV). Furthermore, they claim that “much intercultural communication is married by prejudice” and that people need to understand each other to make interaction between different people in different contexts possible (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2004:2). They give an example of differences between university seminars in different cultural settings. At American
universities, students usually actively discuss and critically examine their seminars, having their professor as a moderator. In Japan, on the contrary, students listen actively and do not usually ask questions; it is the professor that lectures and the students that listen. In this example that they give the importance of being aware of intercultural communication is very clear, it would not be very easy to be an international student going to his or her first seminar not knowing about the differences (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2004:14).

I chose to use the theory of intercultural communication to examine the cultural experience of international students in the host society, since this concept seems to offer a wider understanding of communication between people from different cultures, and it concentrates on the importance of context.

3.4 Concept of Identity
Identity, as well as culture can in many senses be a complex concept to define. The concept of identity means different things in various contexts. Identity, as culture has to be viewed in processual terms. According to McDaniel, Porter and Samovar, identity is discussed as “socially constructed through a cultural lens” and they suggest that through communication people identify what type of identity is socially appropriate depending on interactions (2006:50). Identity can vary depending on various influences such as geography, history, fantasies, religion; and time and scenario dependent forms like nation, state, religion, ethnic origin, gender, socioeconomic status, profession, etc. (McDaniel, Porter & Samovar 2006:50). A similar statement of identity as contextualized is suggested by Hutchinson and Smith “a group or an individual has no one identity, but a variety of possibilities, that only incompletely or partially overlap in social time and social space” (1996:24). However, the definition to be used throughout this research is the one suggested by Eric Clark and Bo Petersson who see identity as boundary-drawings and as a construction of social space. They claim that individual identity is being increasingly challenged by contemporary globalization, and that the increased flows of people across national borders and the increasing mobility result in a mix of identities (Clark & Petersson 2003:8-9). Identity is built upon boundaries; people define themselves (i.e. common characteristics, tastes, beliefs) by defining others. I find that the concept of identity is important to the examination of the construction of the self-images of the international students and of their images of others.
3.5 Identity as Asserted/Assigned and Thick/Thin
There are several different ideas on explaining the concept of identity. Cornell and Hartmann suggest that all human beings are themselves parts/members of different groups, and identify themselves through similarities with and differences from other people (2007:213). In order to understand the complexity in the shaping of identity, Cornell and Hartmann suggest that people need to consider two factors; on the one hand; assertion— what a person self claims to be; and on the other, assignment— what other people claim the person to be (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:75). Furthermore, to understand the different roles that identity plays in the organization of people’s social life, Cornell and Hartmann make a distinction between “thick” and “thin” identity. When an individual’s identity organizes and influences much of his or her social life and actions such as marriage, place to live, type of job, and political stand, the identity is described as comprehensive or “thick”. When a person’s identity does not shape or influence the everyday life, this person’s identity is considered as less comprehensive or “thin” (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:76-77).

Cornell and Hartmann argue that identity is constructed, not rooted in nature, it is “situational precipitates, products of particular events, relationships, and processes that are themselves subject to change” (2007:81). They claim migration to be an influential part of a person’s individual identity, as the construction of a person’s identity is very evident throughout social changes or social upheaval. Migration creates new situations, groups of people get into contact with other groups which alters a forced understanding of who other people are as well as who they themselves are, and what their place in the social order is (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:231). Moreover, they argue that people’s social identity is constructed by the drawing of boundaries; people distinguish between “us” and “them”. They explain that these categorizations and boundaries as drawn from established norms of an arena, the arena being described as certain places or organizations which should be understood as micro-societies where people establish and normalize specific values and behaviours (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:169). What they mean is that culture can be understood as a way to distinguish between “us” and “them”, to ascertain your own identity or to assign one to someone else, “they” do not share the same as “we” do (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:20-21).

As discussed in the relevant sections above on the concepts of culture, intercultural communication, identity, identity as asserted/assigned and thick/thin identity, the theories are
used as frameworks in order to gain an understanding of the international students’ motivational factors for their choice of institution, as well as their experiences of encounters with Swedish society, the influence of their own understanding of culture and also their cultural identity.
4 Analysis of Results

In this section the data of the empirical findings will be analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework chosen for the research.

4.1 Motivational Push and Pull factors to study abroad and to choose Sweden and Malmö University:

*I wanted to study abroad, not too far away from home, to improve my English language skills. England is very expensive and as Sweden is known to be the second best English-speaking country in Europe, and the country offers free education taught in English, I thought it would be interesting to go there”* (Patrick).

Throughout the semi-structured and focus group interviews the informants discussed the major factors motivating them to study outside their own country. Several of the informants indicated that the major motivational factor was to improve their English skills to increase their employment opportunity for the future. Patrick, quoted above, argued that English skills would be useful for better work opportunities. Furthermore, he stated, *“In the future I want to work abroad and therefore I need good English skills, in Germany there are not many programs in English”* (Patrick). As another German (G3) interviewee puts it, *”My best friend studied an exchange semester in Malmö some years ago, she said that Swedish people are very good English speakers and as I wanted to learn more English I found Malmö suitable since the University offers a wide range of courses in English”* (G3).

The Chinese students avoided the linkage between language learning as a motivational factor, and explained a reason more emphasizing the Swedish reputation and the geographical location in relation to future job opportunity. As Raven argued, *“I am the only child in my family, therefore, I need to study hard and get a good job. To study in Europe is a very good opportunity for the future. Both me and my family thought that it would be good to study in Sweden since the country has a very good reputation to have a qualified school system”* (Raven). As another Chinese interviewee puts it, *“The education is known to be better in Europe than in China. My uncle told me that Sweden has a high educational standard, is free of charge, and it is good to have a Master degree from a well-known country when I apply for*
work at home” (Chong). During the group interview student (C4) claimed, “China has a big population and it is big competition between people there, I wanted to study abroad because it will help me when I am going to apply for job in China in the future” (C4). Additionally, student (C2) argued that she chose Malmö because “The city’s geographical location is in the middle of Europe and within the European Union which would give me the opportunity to travel within the region on my student visa” (C2). Furthermore, another participant argued, “Sweden and the Swedish government are known to have a good reputation in China, the people should be friendly and helpful...I know about IKEA and Volvo and I like their style” (C1). Some of the German respondents also discussed the Swedish reputation as a motivational factor, and one interviewee stated, “I heard a lot of nice things about Sweden, the country should have a nice landscape and a nice country side and the people should be calmer than Germans, which I found positive since Germans stress too much. Maybe because Sweden does not have as many citizens as Germany” (G2).

Other factors listed as determinants for the international students’ motivational factors to study abroad were; experience of another culture, previous visits to the country, and influence on the student’s decision-making to study abroad. One respondent stated, Sweden and the Swedish culture have a very positive picture in Germany, I wanted to experience that positive thing on my own” (G1). Another interviewee mentioned, “A friend told me that Malmö University is a cultural school with students from different countries and backgrounds which I found important” (G4). Additionally, another student claimed, “I have always been interested in Swedish culture and Malmö is an internationalized and diverse city” (G3). The student explained that she got to know a lot about Sweden since her family have a summer cottage in Kristianstad, and that her ex-boyfriend is Swedish.

One point that differentiated the German and the Chinese student’s motivation to study abroad was whether this was an individual decision or a decision made by the family. Several of the German informants stated that previous visits to Sweden motivated them to study in Sweden, and one interviewees argued, “Two years ago I visited a friend who was studying in Malmö; during that visit I got a really good impression of the country and I liked the Swedish atmosphere, so when I found out that the university was for free I found a program offered in English that I liked, I decided to go” (Maria). Some of the Chinese respondents stated that the decision to study abroad was not their own, one interviewees claimed, “I did not want to
study abroad, I wanted to stay in China but my father told me I had to study at least one semester abroad. Since he had been to Sweden and Finland two times he thought that Sweden would be a good option for me” (C3). As another interviewee mentioned, “I did not have any choice to study in China, I failed some of my exams and cannot get in to any Master degree there,” she continued “Sweden offered cheap education and Malmö University offered many programs taught in English” (C2). Furthermore, another Chinese student added, “I sent my application form to many universities in Sweden but Malmö University was the only University that accepted me” (C4).

Moreover, for one of the Chinese students the Swedish weather was a motivator factor, “I wanted to study in Sweden because I like cold weather” (Chong).

Based on what is discussed above, i.e. from the stance of the interviewees, two standpoints for the motivations of the students can be highlighted as “push” and “pull” factors. The first aspect of the motivational factors includes the reason why international students chose to study abroad— i.e. the “push” factor/factors to leave their origin country (Castles & Miller 2003:22). The major “push” factor that the German informants mentioned was the lack of English-speaking opportunities at home and the fact that studying abroad would improve their English language skills in order for them to get a better employment opportunity in the future. The Chinese students also mentioned competition on the labor market as a “push” factor; however, the Chinese informants claimed that they experienced that the decision was not their own; some had their family deciding for them, others could not be accepted at a University in China. Arguably, the German students’ decision was individual, whereas the Chinese students’ decision was collective, made by big influence of their family. Furthermore, both the German and the Chinese informants argued that the experience they gain abroad will favor their future life since they collect experiences and knowledge to live in a new society and to experience another culture.

The second standpoint defines the international students’ “pull” factors to study in Sweden and at Malmö University. Castles and Milles define pull factors as opportunities for better living or to get a better economic standpoint in the future (2003:22). The major motivational “pull” factor that I noticed throughout the standpoints of the interviewees was the social position of Sweden, i.e. Sweden’s reputation. The German and the Chinese informants
mentioned that the education system at Swedish Universities is known to be good, qualified, and to have a high educational level; the Swedish population is known to be friendly and helpful; and the landscape and country side in the country to be nice. Additionally, the interviewees claimed that Sweden is known to be an internationalized country and Malmö a diverse city with citizens from all over the globe.

Furthermore, the German interviewees stated that previous visits to Sweden and the opportunity to experience Swedish culture much influenced their choice of country. The Chinese students claimed the geographical location and weather to be motivational factors to pick Sweden and Malmö. Nevertheless, on the list of motivational factors for all the participants were cheap education and the fact that Malmö University offered a wide variety of programs in English. However, some of the Chinese students did not choose themselves which University in Sweden they wanted to study at.

4.2 Cultural Differences in Swedish Society:
International students face new experiences abroad. One issue often raised is an experienced cultural difference between home and receiving country. Several topics were raised throughout the semi-structured and focus group interviews and the respondents highlighted four differences that they faced in Swedish society; namely language barrier, socialization, Swedish individualism, and food differences. Nevertheless, more or less everyday encounters with Swedish society differed between the interviewees.

4.2.1 Language Barrier
There were distinct opinions between the German and Chinese students concerning the experienced language barrier in Swedish society. The German students experienced less encounters, “Germans have an easy time to learn Swedish, it is not too hard to understand as there are many similarities between the languages...instead, students coming from another country than Germany could probably face more difficulties with language barriers” (G2). Another German interviewee claimed, “I think that Swedish people like when you try to speak Swedish with them, they like it when you adopt their language and their culture. It is easier to get around when you speak Swedish, than when you are a German English speaker” (G4).
Nevertheless, the Chinese students experienced the language barrier, one interviewee mentioned, “Sometimes it is very hard to get around in Malmö, in some places there are just signs written in Swedish. I think it is a problem at the University library as there are almost no signs in English” (Chong). “However,” he continued, “in the beginning of the semester there was an organized tour for international students in the library, it helped me a lot as they showed us for instance quiet rooms, copy machines, and where to search for books” (Chong). As another interviewee stated, “Sometimes I can guess things right, and sometimes I guess things very wrong. The hardest part is to shop groceries, as everything is in Swedish and I never really know what I have in my hand” (Raven). And another Chinese student claimed, “I think it is very hard with the language barrier, however, the best way to learn a new language is to live in the country and get forced to not speak your own language. If you compare Malmö with Copenhagen, or Sweden to other countries in Europe like Spain or Italy, Malmö and Sweden feels more international and more internationalized as Sweden use more English everywhere” (C3).

As shown above, the international students, from the stance of the interviews, faced different encounters with the language barrier experienced between their origin language and the Swedish language. The German students did not face big difficulties; instead, the interviewees mentioned similarities between German and Swedish that arguably facilitated the process to learn Swedish. Additionally, the German participants noticed that when they adapted to the Swedish language and culture they found it easier to get around in Swedish society. The Chinese informants mentioned language encounters such as difficulty to read Swedish signs, to get around at the student library, and to read texts in groceries. As Gudykunst and Kim argue, an important fact for the effective communication between individuals is the requirement to understand not just each other, but rather to challenge their own understanding to be able to communicate with strangers (1997:385).

Some of the informants related the language barrier to culture differences; they claimed that speaking Swedish facilitates it to get around in Swedish society, since the language was a part of the Swedish culture. As Neuliep states, verbal and non-verbal messages mean different things to different individuals, there is always a “cultural noise” that filters the way people understand each other (2009:29). Speaking Swedish would help the students around in
Swedish society, but, since the interviewees relate language barrier to the Swedish culture this proves the fact that there exists a cultural filter, the international students interpret the Swedish language as a cultural phenomenon.

4.2.2 Socialization

Different viewpoints were raised when we discussed the international students’ way of getting acquainted with the surroundings in Malmö. All interviewees indicated that they had a desire to get to know Swedish people; however, the majority of the informants stated difficulty to get to know Swedish friends. Furthermore, the German and the Chinese interviewees had different experiences as to whether they socialize more or less with students from their origin country. One of the German students indicated, “I think it is very easy to get to know Swedish people, I only have a couple in my class but they have introduced me to their Swedish friends and now I know many Swedish people” (G4). Another interviewee mentioned, “I speak some Swedish and I know many Swedish friends” (G4).

Several of the students experienced a difficulty to get to know Swedish people, one German interviewee stated, “It would be very fun to get to know Swedish people as we live in Sweden, but I only have one Swedish friend in Malmö. There are not so many Swedish students at our department, therefore, it is hard to find someone to get to know, I do not know where to find them” (G2). Another German informant indicated, “I usually hang out with my classmates, everyone is very open and friendly, we are 42 students but no one is Swedish and therefore I do not have much interaction with Swedish students. I want to get to know the country better and it would be fun and interesting to know some Swedish students since I am studying in Sweden, however, I found it hard to get to know them” (Maria). The Chinese students also experienced difficulties to find Swedish people to socialize with, “The Swedish students in my class usually ask me to meet up with them, they want me to come to parties and go clubbing with them. But at home students do not go out that often, and if we do, we go to the cinema or some karaoke club” (C3). As another Chinese interviewee claimed, “One of my Swedish friends invites me to parties, we usually drink and dance, or just party,” she continued “I am very bad at dancing but it is very fun to hang out with her even though I always get very drunk. I am not a party animal, but to party with the Swedish people is one way to get to know them, because I think that to get to know them is to party with them…it is their culture” (C2).
Furthermore, one Chinese informant stated that his high-school teacher had claimed that there are some topics that must be avoided in a conversation with Swedes. “Always think of that you are foreigners in their country...do not offend them, do not ask about; personal life, marriage, income, or age” (Chong). He continued “Even though there are some things I would like to know about Swedish people I do not touch the topics” (Chong). One similar statement was made by another interviewee, “I do not want to push and scare Swedish people away, therefore, I do not know what I should and what I should not talk to them about. I do not know if I can ask a guy if he is married and have kids or if that is inappropriate to ask” (Raven). “However,” she continues, “after some time in Sweden I found out that it was alright to ask questions...maybe I think too much but it seems that it just takes some time to get to know Swedish people” (Raven).

Moreover, a differentiation between the German and the Chinese informants was evident between their socializing more of less with people from their origin country. Some of the German interviewees avoided contact with other German students, and several of the Chinese interviewees socialized a lot with other Chinese students. As one German interviewee stated, “I do not hang out with any Germans, I have one good friend here that also is German, but we do not meet that often. I am in Sweden to develop my English skills and to learn more about the country and its culture; therefore, I do not want to socialize with Germans” (Maria). As another interviewee puts it, “I did not move to Sweden to get to know German people, in that case I could have stayed in Germany” (G2). A Chinese interviewee claimed, “I definitely hang out most with other Chinese students; I only have two Swedish friends in Malmö” (C3). Another respondent, “In my class it is a mix of students, the majority is from Sweden but there are many international students as well, but, I usually hang out with the Chinese students” (C5). Furthermore, another informant indicated, “I live together with one Chinese student; we both study a lot and it is hard to have time to get to know any Swedish people and therefore it is easier to hang out with the Chinese. Additionally, we have this online page for Chinese people in Malmö and every week we catch up and do something fun together like, the guys play basketball and the girls go shopping” (C4).

As discussed above, different experiences were shown between who the international students socialize with during their studies in Malmö. The majority of the informants indicated a desire
to get to know Swedish students; nevertheless, only two German interviewees claimed an experienced easiness, whereas the rest stated in one way or another experienced difficulties to socialize with Swedish people. Reasons listed were; lack of Swedish students at their University department and uncertainty as to where to meet and to get to know Swedish people. Some Chinese informants found that the Swedish students have different interests that the Swedish students seem to party during their leisure time whereas the Chinese students preferred not to drink. Prejudice can intervene in the communication of intercultural range; to understand each other and to learn about each other, people need to communicate within and across social groups, this is an intersubjective and negotiated process (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2004:2). The participants found it more or less easy get to know, and to socialize with Swedish people; this lack of communication across international borders could be argued to be caused by prejudice. Before the Chinese students went to Sweden they already had a previous understanding of the Swedish population; they were taught in school to avoid certain topics with Swedish individuals. Furthermore, the Chinese respondents experienced difficulty to find appropriate topics to talk about with Swedes. The uncertainty experienced of the Chinese students, arguably could be explained through a cultural filter of intercultural communication, as people need to learn and to understand other peoples’ culture to be able to make verbal and non-verbal communication possible (Neuliep 2009:5, 29).

Moreover, the informants argue more or less socialization with people from their origin country. The German interviewees stated less, some even avoided interaction with other Germans; the reasons mentioned were; they live in Sweden and want to experience and learn about Sweden and its culture, and to practice and improve their English skills. The Chinese informants argued that they socialize much with Chinese students and less with others, the reasons mentioned were; they live with Chinese students; they study and “hang out” just with Chinese students at the University; during their spare time they spend time with other Chinese students; and the online page for Chinese students facilitates interconnection with other Chinese people. Intercultural communication is, according to Neuliep, a matter of a “process of encoding, decoding and interpreting” (2009:33). The international students socialize more or less with individuals from their origin country, the German students want to socialize with people outside Germany and they search for “non-Germans” in their surrounding (they encode and decode) and through socializing with “non-Germans” they state that the interpreting process is accomplished. However, the Chinese interviewees socialized mainly
with other Chinese students; this socializing with people from their origin country, according to Clark and Petersson, could be claimed as boundary-drawing (2003:8-9). Depending on various influences people construct a social space which is challenged by contemporary globalization. The Chinese students chose to socialize with Chinese students; they surrounded themselves with people with characteristics that are common and familiar with themselves (Clark and Petersson, 2003: 8-9). The migration movement, students moving from one part of the world to another, produces new situations and new relations, some choose to interact and others do not (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:231). Arguably, this could mean that the German students experience more similarity toward Swedish society and the Swedish people than the Chinese students do.

4.2.3 Swedish Individualism

“Swedish people are usually a bit reserved, not very social, and sometimes they want to stick to themselves...if you approach them, of course they will answer; however, they would not start the conversation” (Maria).

The international students expressed a similar experience toward Swedish people who are seen as individualistic. As one interviewee indicated, “It is likely that you will not get to know your neighbor if your neighbor is Swedish ...I think that Swedish people want to be private, it is in their culture” (Patrick). Additionally, another German informant stated, “Everyone in Sweden are more or less doing their own stuff, they keep a distance to each other...they are not unsocial, rather the Swedish culture respect their neighbors. I like it; they have their own lives, as in Germany neighbors are always out in their gardens and nothing can be private” (G4). Another interviewee claimed, “I have done some travels in Sweden and many international people live in Malmö, I would say that Malmö is the most international city in Sweden and people are more open there than elsewhere in Sweden” (G1). The Chinese interviewees also mentioned Swedish neighbors, “In China I know all my neighbors and in Sweden I do not really know any. My older neighbors are very nice and friendly but I do not really know them. Teenagers are an exception, they are not very talkative, they do not say hi, and do not smile if you smile towards them; maybe they are in a rebellious stage” (Chong). Another Chinese student gave an example of Swedish individualism from a bus in Malmö, “Immediately the girl my roommate sat down next to started talking, she was from Turkey and
very nice. I sat next to a Swedish girl and I think that she saw my friend talking and that she wanted to make a good impression so she started talking to me, but I think that she would have preferred silence” (C2).

Furthermore, as told by one Chinese informant, “In Sweden students do not live with their parents, they live alone and have their own apartments, and the Swedish government pay one part. China has a big population and it is in our culture to live at home, we do not move before we have a proper job” (C1).

Judging from what was discussed above, the German and the Chinese informants experienced differences in Swedish society and expressed that Swedish people are individualistic and described them as reserved, non social, stick to themselves, and will not start a conversation. A similarity between the German and Chinese informants was evident; both groups mentioned difficulties to communicate with Swedish neighbors. Two of the German informants indicated that Swedish people want to be private and that they respect their neighbors; arguably they claimed that the Swedish way of behaving is a cultural phenomenon; the Swedish culture. The Chinese interviewee did not mention the connection between Swedish individualism and Swedish culture. However, one Chinese informant indicated cultural differences when discussing the fact that Swedish students move from their parents’ place in an early age, whereas Chinese students are told by their culture to live at home until they obtain a good job. To be able to understand differences of intercultural range, Holliday, Hyde and Kullman argue that the context of intercultural communication is relevant. Communication within and across social groups would provide the international students with an understanding of the Swedish way of acting, and also the other way round; Swedish people get an understanding of the international students acts (Hyde & Kullman 2004:XV).

Moreover, one German interviewee stated that Malmö is the most internationalized city in Sweden and also claimed that the people living there is more open than in other places, and she claimed that the reason is that many people living in Malmö have different international origins. As Clark and Petersson indicate, increased flows across national boarders result in a mix of identities and in increasing mobility (2003:8-9). The interviewees describe a situation where people from different international backgrounds live side by side in Malmö and since they are more “open” than elsewhere this shows that people form and change according to the
situation. The statement is in agreement to Baumann’s argument that culture is re-
constructing, that there in not one universal culture; people meet, interact, and try to
understand each other which shows that peoples’ own culture is constantly remaking
(1999:95). At one moment it is “re-constructing people’s reified essence”, peoples underlying
thoughts and the acts they do thereafter, and in the next, a “path finding new construction of a
processual agency”; the acts change and new situations are constructed (Baumann 1999:95).
The Chinese girl’s thought was seen through her cultural filter; she had a pre-existing
understanding saying that Swedish women do not want to talk on buses (Neuliep 2009:29).
When people with different international origins live together, this influences the individuals’
understanding about cultures. Individual identity is built upon boundary-drawings; to be able
to define themselves individuals need to define others (Clark & Petersson 2003:8-9). The
German and the Chinese students see that Swedish people, for example neighbors, do not act
in the same way as neighbors back home; thus the international students define their own acts
through the definition of others, in this case Swedish people.

4.2.4 Food Differences

Several of the international students mentioned food differences throughout their semi-
structured and focus group interviews, respectively. As one interviewee indicated, "Food is
much more appreciated in Sweden than in Germany, Swedish people rank food very high,
food is not just food, food is a “treasure” for them” (Maria). As another German interviewee
puts it, “I think that the Swedish people pay about 30 percent more for their food than we do
in Germany” (G3). The appreciation for food is also mentioned among the Chinese
interviewees, as one interviewee stated “Food is much more expensive in Sweden than in
China. At home I can buy a meal for 10 Swedish Krona, in Sweden I can buy a falafel for 20
Swedish Krona as cheapest, therefore I cannot afford to eat out often” (C3). Another
informant claimed, “The Swedish people want “good” food and therefore they pay a lot for
food and alcohol” (C1).

Another discussed food difference was, “Swedish people are very conscious about food, and
they are crazy about fresh and healthy food. I like Malmö, the city has got everything! Malmö
is a very international city and here it is possible to buy groceries from all parts of the world”
(G2). Nevertheless, one Chinese interviewee experienced a difficulty, “I did not cook much
As discussed above, both the German and the Chinese interviewees expressed the Swedish people’s appreciation of food, among other things they described Swedish food as appreciated, ranked high, and as a treasure. Both groups of international students stated that food was thirty percent more expensive than in Germany and twice the price in China. Furthermore, one of the German students found that Swedish people valued fresh and healthy food, and indicated the positive aspect of the easiness to find groceries from all over the world. None of the informants expressed any big cultural food difference between what they usually eat in Germany or in China, respectively, compared to Sweden; instead, one interviewee stated that it is easy to find groceries from all over the globe. However, one Chinese student experienced a difficulty with ingredients since the text was written in Swedish. The international students live in a Swedish surrounding, but this does not mean that they eat the same food as Swedes do. Encounters when buying groceries are probably common when people live in a country where people speak a different language than theirs, however, as an individual practice one culture does not mean that he or she behaves the same way as other individuals from the same culture; a Swedish person does not have to like, e.g. meatballs, even though Swedish people are well-known for eating meatballs (Baumann 1999:83-84).

4.3 Cultural differences and encounters at Malmö University
Variations between different educational systems were discussed throughout the semi-structured and focus group interviews. Both the German and the Chinese interviewees indicated that they experienced one major difference, namely to undertake a University degree in English. As one Chinese interviewee stated, “At home we barley have any units or books in English, at Malmö University they offer a lot of units in English. In the beginning I struggled with the English language at school but now it is fine. I think the English educational level is better in Sweden than in China” (C1). A German interviewee mentioned, “Swedish students speak very good English, I think it is because many courses are taught in English. In Germany it is uncommon to have lectures and school material in English” (G2).
Other educational differences listed were: group work instead of individual work; take-home exams instead of classroom exams; and the number of hours of teaching time. One respondent stated, “Sweden uses a different school system compared to China. In Sweden we do portfolios, presentations, and group work, in China we never do that. I would like to learn the system as I want to stay here at least three years” (Raven). A similar statement was made by one German interviewee, “In Sweden it is much group work and essays, of course we do some in Germany as well, but the tasks are usually more individual” (Patrick).

Several of the interviewees mentioned a clear difference between the examination systems, as one of the Chinese student stated, “In China we have much homework to memorize texts and then do classroom exams, in Sweden there is not much homework as we just discuss texts and mainly do take-home exams” (C1). One German interviewee claimed, “It is different to study in Sweden compared to Germany, at home I usually do classroom exams and here it is only take-home exams” (G2).

Furthermore, teaching time was discussed and one Chinese student mentioned, “In Sweden I have three lectures, six hours in total a week, in China the school runs from morning to afternoon every day” (C4). Another interviewee claimed, “I have more spare time in Malmö than I had in China. Swedish students have time to work and international students have time to travel. At home I do not work, I do not have time and my parents do not want me to work, I should concentrate on my studies” (C2). Chong claimed, “China has a very big population, there is big competition for jobs and people study hard to get a good work. Sweden has less population, maybe less competition and therefore more spare time to work and party” (Chong). Teaching time was discussed by the German informants, Maria stated, “It is less teaching time a week in Sweden than in Germany, four hours in Sweden compared to ten hours or more in Germany. In Sweden there is just one unit at the time while in Germany usually six to seven units, even eight or nine are common at the same time, for each unit there are two lectures a week” (Maria).

Another difference mentioned by the informants was experienced at the Malmö University library, “In Sweden you are allowed to speak in the library, everyone speaks there, in China no one talks, you are not allowed to, it should be quiet since the Chinese students study on their own” (C4). As another interviewee claimed, “Orkanen is a very beautiful building, the
library has many copy machines, is easy accessible, and has many nice and clean areas to study at” (Patrick).

Moreover, some highlighted differences at the University were experienced by the international students. A common word used by both the German and the Chinese informants to describe the Swedish educational system was “relaxed” (Maria, G2, Chong, C1, and C4). Some of the German interviewees claimed that the Swedish school system is “easy to adopt” (G3 and G4), whereas some of the Chinese students stated that the school system in China is more “demanding” with more “pressure” for high grades (C1 and C5).

From the stance of the informants, five aspects can be defined about the experienced differences of the Swedish educational system. Firstly, the major difference claimed by both groups of students was that several degrees at Malmö University were taught in English. One Chinese interviewee claimed the English educational level to be better in Sweden compared to China. One German interviewee stated that Swedish students are good English-speakers. Secondly, difference to conduct group tasks instead of individual tasks. The German and the Chinese informants were not used to portfolios, presentations, and to writing essays. One of the German interviewee indicated that group work rarely exists in Germany, and the Chinese interviewee claimed that group work does not exist in China. Thirdly, examinations were discussed; both the German and the Chinese interviewees were more used to class-room exams than to take-home exams. Additionally, compared to Germany and China, discussions were more frequently used in the Swedish school system. Furthermore, two more aspects mentioned in the list were; teaching time and permission to speak in the University library. The first aspect indicates that there is less teaching time at Malmö University compared to universities in the origin country, and the second aspect, the permission to discuss and to conduct group work at the university library. Finally, the international students argued that the Swedish educational system is relaxed. The Chinese students found schools in China more demanding, with more pressure on the students, and the German students found that the Swedish educational system is easy to adapt to.

As discussed above, encounters when students study abroad can occur, and communication problems are quite a frequent issue. Communication of intercultural range could be complicated depending on the context; therefore, interaction between people could be more or
less likely to occur (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2004:2). Holliday, Hyde and Kullman state that, since university seminars are carried out in different ways in different parts of the world, the biggest encounter that international students face is their very first day, their very first seminar (2004:2). The first day at school the students are nervous and afraid to act or behave wrongly. American university students learn to discuss throughout seminars, whereas Japanese university students listen and never discuss throughout seminars (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2004:2).

As the informants argued that the Swedish university system is relaxed and easy to adapt to, they unconsciously indicated that they have learned something about the system. Claimed differences between the school systems arguably show that the international students learned and adapted to the Swedish system, hence the difficulty to compare something familiar to something completely unknown. To adapt to a new university system requires understanding, an understanding that the international students gain throughout their current studies at Malmö University, which arguably could confirm Baumann’s statement that culture is not universal and “tied”, as the essentialist approach claims, but rather processual (Baumann 1999:94-95). Individuals can comprehend a situation differently during different occasions; in the beginning of the international students’ studies in Sweden they found it difficult to conduct studies in English, however, they learned English and acquired a better basis to understand the Swedish school system.

4.4 Cultural Identity as Asserted/Assigned
Studying abroad affects the students’ cultural identity, and reinforced or weakened self-identity could be more or less evident. The German informants’ answers differentiated among themselves and from those of the Chinese informants. One of the German informants experienced himself as “more German” during his studies abroad; “I felt more “German” when I came to Sweden. At home you are just one in a million, in Sweden you are someone...you are “the German”. If you are together with a Swedish friend, they will say “I am with the German guy”” (Patrick). However, the majority of the German informants claimed that they did not experience themselves as “more” or “less” German. One of the informants stated, “I do not feel more German when I am studying in Malmö, maybe more continental, but, if no one asks, I would not emphasize my nationality...I have traveled to
many places and I do not want to move back to Germany, I want to live abroad.” (Maria). Another German informant claimed, “When you study abroad, you experience both similarities and differences between people from different countries and backgrounds, and I think that people get more conscious about their nationality. When a German person is in Germany, he or she does not think of being German, as almost everyone is German. In Sweden, however, whereas no one else is German, German people start to think of themselves being German” (G2). As another interviewee indicated, “When you meet a German person in Sweden, you make some special jokes together because it is solely Germans that understand them” (G4). Furthermore, another German interviewee stated, “I think people learn and accept their nationality when they go abroad. I do not get offended when people say either good or bad things about Germany, I am proud of being German; however, now when I live in Sweden I would not like to be called “German” since, I do not really think of me myself, being German” (G3).

The Chinese informants mentioned that they never thought of their cultural identity, however, an experienced influence of their background being Chinese was clearly evident. One interviewee stated, “In the beginning of the semester, in the Swedish language course, I had to present myself and my home country China, however, at home I never need to introduce my hometown, and therefore, I did not really know what to say” (Raven). Another Chinese interviewee mentioned, “It is hard to explain your identity, I do not feel more or less Chinese when I am in Sweden, but when I use my Visa card the cashier always asks for my passport, then I feel very non-Swedish” (Chong). Also, another informant indicated, “I do not say that I am more Chinese in Sweden, but, I mostly hang out with Chinese people,” (C1). Furthermore, another interviewee claimed, “In Sweden I started relating everything to China, i.e. I cook Chinese food, I usually hang out with Chinese people, and I like when people are interested about China” (C3).

As discussed in the previous paragraph on more of less cultural identity, the international students expressed different opinions of their experienced self-identity in Sweden. One German student stated himself being “more” German, whereas the majority of the German students felt neither more nor less German. The Chinese students expressed a feeling of being non-Swedish, that they socialized mostly with other Chinese students and preferred to cling to familiar Chinese settings. Cornell and Hartmann discuss that an important part of people’s
self-understanding of their identities is how other people assign them. To assert an identity or to assign someone an identity is to set up a border between “us” and “them”, hence, individuals claim that “we” have something that ”they” do not share (Cornell & Hartmann 2007: 20-21).

Identity is socially constructed and can vary depending on e.g. geography, history, and time and scenario depending forms as nation, state, gender. People identify what type of self-identity is socially appropriate depending on interactions (McDaniel, Porter & Samovar 2006:50). One German student claimed herself proud of being German, however, while living in Sweden, she avoided being called “German”, she actively chose to not identify herself with other Germans, arguably, her self-identity could be seen as an unconscious process. She would rather identity herself with other people than being considered as German. As Hutchinson and Smith argue, individuals do not have one identity, but depending on social time and social space, a variety of possibilities (1996:24). Furthermore, the German students do not actively express themselves as being Germans in Sweden, however, all human beings are themselves members of different groups and through similarities and dissimilarities they differ from others (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:213). The German students, surrounded by people from Sweden and by people having another international background, unconsciously experience themselves as being “non-German”, as one student expresses it as being continental. However, the fact that the German informants interact with other German individuals and make “German” jokes shows that they ascribed themselves a cultural identity, as only Germans, “we”, and not “they”, understand the jokes and the habits discussed. Arguably, when the German informants make “German” jokes and state themselves as being “continental”, they unconsciously assert themselves an identity and assign others an identity, as “they” do not understand “German” jokes.

The Chinese informants claimed to be unaware about their self-identity; however, a perceived cultural identity is evident through the Chinese interviewees` answers. One Chinese student expressed an uncomfortable feeling about making a presentation about herself in the classroom, another student claimed to be very “non-Swedish” when using a credit card. The Chinese students get their self-identity ascribed, i.e. a forced identity of otherness. Migration creates situations where individuals get into contact with other individuals, this brings on a forced understanding to put themselves and other people in a social order drawing boundaries
between “us” and “them” (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:169, 231). The Chinese students tend to cling to and spend much time with Chinese students and less time with Swedish and other international students. Arguably, the Chinese students experience themselves as being peculiar and different, when they are together with people from Sweden and with people of other nationalities. In this way, through the differentiation of others, the Chinese students ascribe themselves an identity that they have not asked for.

4.5 Cultural Identity as Reinforced (thick) or Weakened (thin)
A common occurrence throughout the interviews was the pre-supposition of Sweden. Many of the informants made broad generalizations, “I have always had an ideal picture of Sweden and the Swedish people. The country should be wealthy and good to live in, and the citizens nice, friendly and good looking” (G5). Another interviewee claimed, “I heard so many “clichés” about Swedish people: everyone loves nature; Swedish girls are blonds, tall and beautiful; and Swedish guys are very handsome” (Patrick). Stated by another German interviewee, “My friend told me that Sweden cares about the environment, the people are fashionable, and actively play sports and go to the gym” (G3). The Chinese students perceived a similar picture of Sweden, “I heard that Sweden is a rich country with free and qualified universities” (C1). Another Chinese interviewee indicated, “Compared to China, Sweden should be a calm and peaceful country, and the people should be friendly and well organized” (C4).

Nevertheless, the German informants stated dissimilarities between the understanding of Swedish and German cultural identity, “Swedish people are said to be very nice and friendly, however, I would say that Germans are more open to new people” (Maria). Another informant claimed, “It is very hard to generalize people, but, I would say that Germans complain, are moody, and take education for granted, more than Swedish people do” (G2). As another interviewee mentioned, “Germany is one of the richest countries in the world, the people living there should be happy for what they have” (G5).

Also, the Chinese informants discussed dissimilarities between Swedish and Chinese cultural identity, “I noticed that everyone in Sweden only wears dark clothes, in China all Chinese have colorful clothes” (C3). Another Chinese interviewee indicated, “I think that Swedish
people like to hang out with each other, as do Chinese people, it is easy to understand and interpret each other” (C2). Additionally, another informant stated, “Swedish people are said to be organized, but, I think Chinese people are more structured and take their studies more seriously” (C5).

The international interviewees’ statements mentioned above show how cultural identity easily is assigned to other people. Cultural identity is challenged by globalization; people define themselves by defining others, and the mix of people that move across national boarders result in identity boundaries (Clark & Petersson 2003:8-9). Concluded similarities between the answers of the German and the Chinese informants; both groups of informants generalize a described picture of Sweden, i.e. as being a wealthy, peaceful and rich country. Furthermore, the international students expressed and assumed that the Swedish population is friendly, good looking, and active, etc. Cultural identity is noticeable in the international students’ answers; all informants expressed a pre-understanding of their own identity in relation to a Swedish identity. Construction of a person’s cultural identity is very evident throughout times of change, and migration is claimed as an influential part of a person’s social life (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:231). Thus, cultural identity can be thick/reinforced or thin/weakened depending on the context, since a person’s understanding can vary over time. In other words, the international informants’ cultural identity gets more comprehensive (thick) when put in relation to something that is new and different, as a Chinese person experiences differences in relation to a Swedish person, and less comprehensive (thin) when put in relation to a common denominator, like similarities between students from the same country. But, at the same time, a homogeneous group of people that socialize with each other can at the same time, actually, be seen as their cultural identity being thickened. This confirms that cultural identity is not universal and cut in stone. Instead, depending on different situations, people’s cultural identity is subject to change, and solely constructed by particular processes of relationships and events (Cornell & Hartmann 2007:81). The German interviewees did not state big differences between and encounters with the Swedish identity; arguably the German students experience a similarity (thin identity) with Swedish people. Nevertheless, the Chinese students expressed some encounters of cultural identity issues, arguably, the Chinese students experienced differences (thick identity) in Sweden.
5 Summarizing Conclusion

In this section the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the results of the answers to the research questions asked in the beginning of the research study will be presented.

5.1 What were the motivational factors to study abroad and to choose Sweden and Malmö University?  
To summarize, from the findings in the section Motivational push and pull factors to study abroad and to choose Sweden and Malmö University, both similarities and dissimilarities between the international students being interviewed are shown. The initial “push” factor for both the German and the Chinese informants was that their studies abroad would provide them with a better opportunity for a desired future work. However, the reason to choose to study abroad differentiated between the international students, the German informants claiming that they were lacking English learning opportunities at home, whereas the Chinese informants stated that their family and past grades affected their decision. The informants mentioned that the similar “pull” factors as the overall positive picture of Swedish society and Sweden’s population in combination with the free education offered were crucial factors. Nevertheless, the informants’ reason to choose to study in Sweden differentiated between the two groups, the German students mentioning previous visits to Sweden, whereas the Chinese students mentioned geographical location and weather conditions. One further factor motivating the international students’ choice to study in Malmö was the city’s reputation as the most internationalized city in Sweden, and the wide range of programs taught in English offered at the university.

These conclusions could be drawn; international students get motivated to study abroad for different reasons, both “push” and “pull” factors influence their decision, i.e. personal, economical and social reasons for the sending country as well as for the receiving country.

5.2 How do the international students experience cultural differences in Swedish society?  
As mentioned in the above sections Cultural differences in Swedish society, and Cultural differences and encounters at Malmö University, a summary of highlighted cultural
differences could be drawn. The main cultural differences the international students experienced in Swedish society were; language, socialization, Swedish individualism, and food differences. Language difficulty was a clear difference between the informants. The German students did not face many encounters, but rather found it easy to adapt to the Swedish language and to get around in Swedish society, whereas the Chinese students faced difficulties when shopping and trying to read signs. One similarity between the German and the Chinese informants was evident in respect of the students’ desire to socialize more with Swedish students; however, only two German interviewees stated that this was an easy process. The German interviewees claimed that they avoided socialization with other Germans; dissimilar from the Chinese interviewees who stated that they socialized more with Chinese students than with others in Malmö. Many of the international students experienced the Swedish population as individualistic, and several found communication difficulties, arguably, a cultural standpoint was discussed. Furthermore, Sweden was seen as an internationalized country and Malmö to have open people resulting from the fact that people with different international backgrounds are living together there. The interviewees reported similar evident experiences in respect of food differences, as described above. Both the German and the Chinese student claimed food to be more expensive and appreciated in Sweden compared to their respective home country. None of the interviewees stated a difficulty to find food; instead, Malmö offered a variety of groceries.

The highlighted cultural differences and encounters experienced by the international students at Malmö University were; to conduct their studies in English, group work instead of individual work, take-home exams instead of class-room exams, fewer hours of lectures instead of whole days with teaching, and permission to talk and discuss in the university library. Moreover, both groups of international students highlighted the differences of the Swedish educational system as “relaxed” and “easy to adopt”, and the Chinese students argued that the Chinese system is more “demanding” and with more “pressure”.

My study showed that German and Chinese students face more or less cultural differences and encounters in Swedish society and at Malmö University. The encounters could be explained being caused by everyday encounters of intercultural range, such as difficulties with communication and to understand and interpret other people’s similarities and differences.
5.3 Do the international students experience their cultural identities to be reinforced or weakened?

The overall impression that I got during my research study is that the cultural identity of the international students studying at Malmö University is reinforced and that a couple of reasons could be emphasized from the sections of Cultural Identity as Asserted/Assigned and Cultural Identity as Reinforced (thick) or Weakened (thin).

Since, both the German and the Chinese informants made generalizations of their own nationality and that of others, as perceiving similarities with and differences between themselves and others, arguably, they assert themselves a cultural identity. For instance, one German student mentioned that he was proud of being German; still, he did not want to be assigned as “German”. A Chinese student described himself as “non-Swedish”, and not more or less Chinese. In addition, cultural identity is in many ways asserted between the German and Chinese informants as they state the cultural identity of other persons, assumably, they are also aware of their own cultural identity. Furthermore, “thick” and “thin” identity focus on to what extent identity organizes peoples’ social life. The German informants experienced less encounters, but rather many similarities with Swedish identity, arguably, the German identity is less comprehensive and “thin” in relation to the Swedish identity; the cultural identities are seen as similar. The Chinese informants expressed differences with the Swedish identity, arguably, the Chinese identity is more comprehensive and “thick” in relation to the Swedish identity; the cultural identities are seen as dissimilar.

From the third research question I draw the conclusion that people’s cultural identity is hard to pinpoint, as many of the international students experienced a difficulty to explain whether they feel their cultural identity to be “more” or “less” evident in the new social setting studying at Malmö University in Sweden. Additionally, several of the international informants, in one way or another, related cultural identity to nationality, arguably, the international students have left everything at home and are now in a different and unfamiliar country, thus, their cultural identity becomes more evident and familiar to them, and their cultural identity is one thing they can identify themselves with and feel allied with.

Finally, from the findings in this research study, the cultural belonging is of very importance to the international students. The German students try to weaken their cultural connections
with other German students, whereas the Chinese students seem to reinforce and cling to other Chinese students, however, their acting shows that they are all aware of other people’s cultural identity, thus, their cultural identity is reinforced. Moreover, since Germany is geographically close to and in this context possibly more culturally similar to Sweden, and, China is geographically distant and in this context possibly more culturally dissimilar to Sweden, this plays a crucial part in the context of how the international students experience their cultural identity throughout various cultural differences and everyday encounters in Sweden.
6 Discussion and Recommendations

The findings in respect of the students’ motivational factors were not a surprise to me, as I myself, have studied abroad and I can relate to what motivated me to study abroad and how to choose the institution I finally picked. Talking from my own experience, being an exchange student in a different and unfamiliar country, I know that cultural differences are very likely to occur; however, they usually arise and they can be difficult in the beginning when everything is new, but it can be bridged. I found it very interesting to see the differences becoming evident between the two groups of international informants studied in this research study.

Differences between people exist, but I would argue that what actually matters is how people interpret and handle these differences.

As has been hypothesized, generally, international students need motivational factors to choose to study abroad. Both the sending and the receiving country play a vital role promoting and providing relevant information for the student. If the sending country can promote future work opportunities, this will influence the students, “push” them abroad. The receiving country can attract “pull” students through; English language skills, and geographical location, etc. The receiving country’s attractiveness should promote, e.g. cultural, traditional, and sports events, which might attract the students. The receiving university should get opinions from previous international students about what attracted them to go there, but also improve and spread information about the university world wide, and then “pull” students to their university. Furthermore, increasing the numbers of programs offered in English will only attract more international students.

Additionally, to avoid cultural differences and everyday encounters in Swedish society and the educational system, it is important to the host university to collect opinions from both previous and present international students to be able to examine differences that occur and proposed improvements. Furthermore, it is important to listen to and to gain knowledge about the international students’ situation in Sweden and studies at Malmö University will provide the receiving institution with a facilitation to provide easy information to help the international students to adapt into the Swedish society and to avoid their cultural identity being reinforced or weakened.
This research study attempts to explore motivational factors for German and Chinese students to study abroad at Malmö University in Sweden along with major experienced cultural differences and reinforced or weakened cultural identity. The learning process is a never ending process and there are always possibilities for improvements to further research. I hope that my research can inspire other researchers to conduct a bigger and more profound research, and if so, that they may broaden the research study to include: a larger number of international informants; students from other countries and continents than Germany and China; compare different Swedish university institutions with each other; a gender perspective comparing the differences between female respectively male students’ choices and influences; and maybe from a religious/secular perspective, male students coming from patriarchal structures and their encounters with a society like Sweden with a tradition of equality and equal rights. The opportunity to interview and study a larger number of international students would provide Malmö University with valid information and knowledge about students’ motivational factors and also facilitate it for the University to prepare for the future international students’ tuition fees.
7 References


**Journal articles**


Internet documents


Focus group interviews

Semi-structured interviews
X. Raven. Malmö. 5 Nov. 2010.
X. Chong. Malmö. 9 Nov. 2010.
Appendices

Appendix # 2 - Questions for focus group interviews

1. Which program are the students studying at Malmö University?
2. What influenced your decision to study abroad, what motivated you?
3. How did you choose Sweden and Malmö University?
4. What did you think about Sweden and the Swedish population before you came here, any expectations?
5. Have you experienced any cultural differences in Swedish society or at the university?
6. With whom do you socialize with during your semester, i.e. international students or Swedish students?
7. Is your cultural identity influenced, do you identify yourself more or less with your home country?
8. Anything you would like to present, or, i.e. give examples about a specific occurrence related to the research study?
Appendix # 2 - Questions for semi-structured interviews

1. Which program are you studying in Malmö University?
2. What are your major motivational factors to study abroad?
3. Why did you choose to undertake your studies abroad?
4. How did you get to know about studies abroad initially?
5. Did the education system of the country influence your decision making?
6. How did you decide on which country to study in?
7. What were the factors which influenced your decision when choose Sweden and Malmö University?
8. Is studies abroad promoted a lot at Malmö University?
9. Are studies abroad encouraged by family or friends?
10. Did you consider the reputation of the university?
11. Have you experienced any cultural differences in Swedish society?
12. Have you faced any differences or encounters with the Swedish educational system?
13. Have you experienced any difficulties being international student at Malmö University?
14. Have you been to Sweden before?
15. What did you know and think about Sweden and Malmö before coming here?
16. What did you think of Swedish people before you came to Sweden?
17. With whom do you socialize with, i.e. international students, Swedish students?
18. Do you experience any difference between Swedish students compared to international students?
19. How is your cultural identity influenced, do you identify yourself more or less with your home country?
20. Anything else you would like to present, related to the research study?