Studying Abroad: Both Learning and Living

Leisure as a coping strategy for international students

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“Guard well your spare moments. They are like uncut diamonds. Discard them and their value will never be known. Improve them and they will become the brightest gems in a useful life.”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson
Foreword

In the autumn of 2011, the beginning of my second year MLE, it was time for me to choose an internship and I quickly decided I wanted to go abroad in order to develop some much needed independence. With some help I ended up in the United Kingdom for an internship at Nottingham University for a period of four months. With much reluctance I left the Netherlands, for what in the end turned out to be the best decision I ever made in my life. For me personally, my study abroad helped me to become more confident, brave and independent. However, this time was far from easy as especially during the first month I suffered from homesickness, and I often had a hard time understanding English people and their overly politeness. On top of that, I regularly stood out due to my length as in general English people are not very tall. The first few weeks were tough and there were times I really just wanted to go home. Three things changed my mind and made me stay. First, my internship was absolutely brilliant, I learned so much, felt highly appreciated, was actually contributing to the field of tourism, and I had a great supervisor. Secondly, I became good friends with two German housemates with who I undertook numerous activities. These ranged from shopping and having dinner together, to trips to Ikea, visiting tourist sites in Nottingham and going out in the weekends. Though most valuable, for me, turned out to be attending salsa classes. Here I met many English people and got to know them in a different setting. I even became good friends with some of them. Moreover, salsa was something I was always afraid to do at home and trying this new activity helped me to relax but at the same time it literally gave me more energy. Somehow it helped me accept that I was not going home for I while, and enabled me to appreciate my time abroad. Due to my personal study abroad experience, I decided I wanted to learn more about the importance of leisure for international students. Especially because even as a Dutch person I already had a hard time in England which is a country quite similar to the Netherlands. That made me wonder how my international classmates from e.g. Africa and Asia experienced their stay in the Netherlands.

I soon found out there was not much information available on this link between leisure and studying abroad. At that moment it did not entirely surprise me. I have always believed that although people appreciate their spare time, they often undervalue its importance. It is also stated by Roberts (2006) that most people do not rate their leisure activities as highly important, while a positive relation has been found between leisure and life satisfaction. Fortunately, thanks to this research I discovered that not everyone underestimates the strength of leisure. The international students who I have interviewed for this study were very clear that their study abroad would not be possible without a sufficient leisure life. Though, it strikes me a bit that specifically a group of people who mention not being able to function without leisure, is underrepresented in the field of leisure. Luckily, thanks to these participants, I have been able to make a start with an initial exploration on how leisure could function as a coping strategy for international students dealing with stressors and difficulties. I only hope others will pick up on this important matter and further research the importance of leisure for international students.

I would like to thank all the people, both the experts and the international students, who have been so kind to take the time to share their stories, experiences and visions with me. In addition, I want to say special thanks to one of my fellow-classmates and her cousin who together have arranged all my interviews in Delft. Without them my thesis would miss an important depth as only students from
Wageningen would have been interviewed, while now I was able to compare and link various findings. Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank all my friends, and above all, my family for their patience, support, advice, optimism, stimulation and confidence in me which allowed me to write this report.

Although I finished my thesis a year later than planned, I could have worked on it for another year and it would still not feel finished. However, now it is time to take the last step in order to graduate. Over the past years, when I told people I study ‘Leisure, Tourism and Environment’, they foremost responded by saying something in the line of “that sounds fun”. And yes, I absolutely enjoyed my study, but people underestimate the knowledge and skills that I have gained throughout this study. I developed various research skills and also my English is improved tremendous. Moreover, this study empowered me to develop my own point of view and think critically about issues that reach far beyond solely leisure and tourism matters. For this reason, I want to thank all my lecturers who have inspired me to think for myself and to not take any given information for granted. This did not only enhance the quality of my thesis report, it helped me to look at the world from another perspective. Furthermore, I especially want to thank my supervisor Karin Peters for her precision, feedback and encouragement which enabled me to, proudly, present my MSc thesis: ‘Studying Abroad: Both Learning and Living. Leisure as a coping strategy for international students’. 
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Executive summary

Most research on study travel is published in the field of education, and research regarding the difficulties that international students encounter is foremost published in the field of intercultural relationships. In leisure studies, limited efforts have been made to understand the benefits of leisure for international students (Li & Stodolska, 2006). Besides, the existing research on study travel and international students rarely focus on leisure. With this study I want to contribute to this field of interest by gaining insight into the leisure experiences, and the perceived difficulties of international students. This study focuses on exploring if and how leisure could function as a coping mechanism for foreign students facing difficulties and stressors while they are in the Netherlands. In other words, through this research I want to deepen the understanding of how leisure could minimise the difficulties- and maximise the benefits of study travel. Increased understanding of study abroad experiences of international students is important for policy purposes of governments and universities, but most of all for the students concerned. Especially for them it is important to understand their study abroad experience in all its dimensions (Brown & Brown, 2012).

This research is based on a theoretical framework which includes the difficulties and stressors international students might experience during their study abroad according to the current literature. Furthermore, three areas of coping are addressed, and the framework connects various social and psychological benefits of leisure to specific aspects which are considered important for the coping process of international students. Data is gathered through semi-structured interviews in order to receive a better understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of the foreign students. In addition, experts were interviewed to gather further general data on the link between leisure and coping, but also to verify and support the data that was provided through the interviews with the international students. The data from the interviews was analysed and structured using the thematic analysis (Boeije, 2010). This type of analysis was a valuable method for this qualitative research because of the explorative nature (Boyatzis, 1998; Boeije, 2010).

The participants in this study mentioned various psychological and social benefits of leisure, and the findings highlighted that especially these benefits are important for the coping process of international students. In this research I suggest that leisure can function as a coping strategy because the coping features that are defined as vital for international students in the literature, are similar to the psychological and social benefits which have been mentioned by the participants. In addition, I argue that leisure is especially beneficial for students with a cultural background that differs substantially from the Dutch culture, in dealing with difficulties due to differences in cultural values. Difficulties due to cultural differences are foremost challenging for these students, and they therefore in particular need leisure as this provides valuable time and a relax environment for coping. Furthermore, in this research it is discussed that leisure provides valuable support for existing coping strategies, and finally, this study suggests that leisure can possibly prevent difficulties. Although the results of this study do not completely reproduce all the concepts that have been used in the theoretical framework, this research provided valuable conclusions which can be used as a basis for further research on the importance of leisure for international students.

Keywords: Leisure; study travel; international students; coping strategy.
1. Introduction

People have travelled to different parts of the world for already a long period of time, and for different reasons: for leisure, trade, provide aid, learn or even to conquer (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Therefore, an ancient history of contact between individuals from different cultures exists (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Over the past years travel has become easier, cheaper, and faster, this has resulted in many more people using this opportunity to live, study and work in societies different from their own (Ward et al., 2001). These days, many young people are interested in experiencing time abroad in order to interact with people with a different background. A good way for them to realise this ambition is study travel because this often involves a high level of security and provides them the possibility to earn credits for their education program (Ward et al., 2001). Furthermore, students are often pulled to study abroad by factors such as: better academic systems, the feeling of prestige, by the country itself or the aim of staying in the host country to work (Altbach, 2004).

In the literature the term 'overseas students’ is often used to indicate this group of people who study abroad for a limited period of time. However, this research uses the term ‘international students’ or ‘foreign students’ to indicate students who are not citizens of the country where they study as some of these students might not come from overseas. Another frequently used term for this unique group of students is sojourners by which is meant travellers who temporary stay at a new place (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Yet, this study does not use this term either because sojourners also includes e.g. business people, diplomats, the armed forces and voluntary workers, while international students have some features which distinguishes them from these travellers. Furnham and Bochner (1986: 112) mention some of these unique features: “they tend to be young (e.g. twenties), well educated, highly motivated and adaptable”. They furthermore mention that international students are often well-prepared before departure (e.g. speak the foreign language), and have a good understanding of what to expect during their journey due to the possibility to attend trainings and courses (e.g. culture shock training) and thanks to technological developments (e.g. Internet).

Study travel is not a new concept, Hoffa (2007, in Orpett Long et al., 2010: 91) mentions “the long history of travel abroad by elite young men as preparation to take their places in society as worldly rulers”, which is more commonly known as ‘The Grand Tour’ (Kalinowski & Weiler in Weiler & Hall, 1992). Towner (1984: 215) describes this tour as “an educational and cultural circuit of Europe which developed in the mid-16th century and continued until the early 19th century”. This form of travel later facilitated the development of study abroad as an important part of education in Europe, and thereafter in the United States and other parts of the world (Ibid.). Study travel represents traveling abroad for the main purpose of obtaining a degree or credits (Ward et al., 2001), in other words studying outside one’s home country (Dolby, 2005). Formerly, study travel was only available for people with the money and leisure to afford it. However, the fast flows of ideas, technology, people, and information has speed up the process of globalisation (Institute of International Education, 2012), and the contemporary global economy facilitates price reductions which led to an increased access to the experience of travel (Wahab & Cooper, 2001). These days, international students represent around 10 per cent of the student population on many campuses around the world and there are more than 3 million students studying abroad (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Koomers, 2012). In countries that receive large amounts of international students (e.g. the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia), international students have become part of their export industry (Ward, et al., 2001). Even though study abroad is only a small part of the...
current global movement (Dolby, 2005), it is expected that in 2025 over 8 million students worldwide will study outside their home country (Altbach, 2004). This is partly due to the increasing importance of today’s global society and marketplace (Lough, 2011). Students are practically expected to expand their global consciousness and gain experiences in other countries for them to function in today’s economy (Altbach, 2004). Feinberg (2002) mentions that it is important for students to become familiar with the nuances of cultural differences in this interconnected world. According to a study done by the American Council on Education, students agree with this as over 50 per cent of the participants indicated that they believe that knowledge of international issues is important for their career during the next 10 years (Lumkes Jr., Hallett and Vallade, 2012). Students consider study abroad experiences as vital because it enriches their personal- and academic life and broadens their cultural perspective (Ibid.).

Although culture is everywhere in this globalising world, it is very difficult to determine what it really means (Smith, 2009). A useful notion of culture is provided by Williams (1958 in Smith, 2009: 1) where he describes culture as “being about the whole way of life of a distinct people or social group with distinctive signifying systems involving all forms of social activity, and artistic or intellectual activities”. Another useful explanation is given by Geertz (1973, in Smith, 2009: 1), “culture is about the past and traditions (e.g. history and heritage), creative expression (e.g. works of art, performances) and also about people’s way of living, their customs and their habits”. The latter corresponds with the conception of culture provided by Burns (in Wahab & Cooper, 2001: 294) “culture consists of behavioural patterns, knowledge and values which have been acquired and transmitted through generations”. However, societies take up new ideas and adapt to changing global conditions, and therefore cultures are dynamic and a snapshot at a given moment (Burns in Wahab & Cooper, 2001). According to Sarup (1996 Smith, 2009: 5) culture is “a process of constant struggle as cultures interact with each other and are affected by economic, political and social factors”. Especially in this globalising world, culture is not tied to the borders of a country because e.g. recreational travel, business travel, study travel, immigration and refugees have created tighter networks of connections between different cultures in one country (Ward et al., 2001; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). Ward and her colleagues (2001: 4) state that “contact between culturally diverse individuals is as old as recorded history”, and that “the difference between now and then is merely one of scope”. The interaction between people from different cultures is referred to as ‘intercultural contact’ (Lucas, 2003), and in intercultural research it is often discussed that study travel generates both self- and cultural awareness, because these students create networks outside their national boundaries (e.g. Uehara, 1986; Bennet, 2004). This awareness can contribute to the ‘culturally competence’ of students, meaning “a long-term change of a person’s knowledge (cognition), attitudes (emotions), and skills (behaviours) to enable positive and effective interaction with members of other cultures both abroad and at home” (Otten, 2003: 15). However, “intercultural encounters do not automatically increase the intercultural competence of students” (Ibid.: 15), these encounters could also increase prejudices and reinforce stereotyping (Ibid.). Moreover, the growing numbers of international students create specific and often unexpected challenges for both students (foreign and domestic) and faculties concerned (Stevens, Emil & Yamashita, 2010).

According to Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002), foreign students experience added difficulty compared to host students because they are confronted with other forms of stress. Such as “culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to unfamiliar social norms, eating habits, customs and values,
differences in education systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness, and a loss of established social networks” (Church, 1982; Furnham & Tresize, 1983; Jensen & Jensen, 1983; Leong & Chou, 1996 in Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002: 364). In addition, international students often experience practical problems, discrimination, stereotyping (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), decreased self-esteem and lack of assertiveness (Sapranaviciute, Perminas & Pauziene, 2012). Moreover, international students experience changes in their behaviour, attitudes and identity (Ibid.) “as a result of sustained first hand contact between individuals of different cultural origins” (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936 in Ward et al., 2001: 43). This is referred to as the acculturation process and is considered a major stressful life event (Sapranaviciute et al., 2012). As Lewthwaite (1986, in Gu & Maley, 2008: 232) states, “the differences in values, attitudes and beliefs between home and host cultures were seen as great and coupled with the sense of loss of the familiar (including food) put considerable pressure on the student”. According to Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001: 79), “sojourners are powerless to change entire cultures, and in many cases they have limited resources for modifying the troublesome features of their new cultural milieux”. These difficulties affect both the work environment and the leisure lives of international students (Li & Stodolska, 2006), and are felt academically, emotionally, psychologically and physically (Stevens, et al., 2010). So, although connections and experiences across national boundaries are mentioned as central in this globalising world, studying abroad is far from easy for these students. Yet, study travel is considered beneficial for international students as these experiences “impact students’ intellectual and international perspective, and their personal development” (Lumkes Jr. et al., 2012: 152). In addition, study travel is said to result in more mature and objective perceptions of one’s own culture (Carlson & Wideman, 1988) and their place in the world (Lumkes Jr. et al., 2012). Moreover, a very important outcome of studying abroad is the students’ understanding of themselves (Ibid.). As Lucas mentions (2003: 305), “in a study abroad program, student experience can become the most important source of learning in the course”. The study abroad experience is a valuable addition to both personal and academic development of students, and for this reason it is vital for international students to have an effective experience abroad. Therefore, it is important to research how to minimise the difficulties- and maximise the benefits of study travel.

In the literature several strategies can be found that focus on how international students deal with stressful and difficult situations they encounter during their study abroad. This research refers to these strategies as ‘coping mechanisms’ or ‘coping strategies’. Coping is defined as “behavioural and cognitive efforts made by a person to respond to internal or external demands, which are perceived as demanding a lot of effort or even exceeding resources available to them” (Sapranaviciute et al., 2012: 335-336). Almost all strategies for international students include social contact, and the development of friendships in particular, as an important contributor for coping (e.g. Tanaka et al., 1997; Cemalcilar, Falbo & Stapleton, 2005; Hendrickson, Rosen, Aune, 2011; Williams & Johnson, 2011). International students spend a great deal of time outside schools and universities and in their leisure time they “engage in varied activities that may include individual and team sports, hobbies and creative pursuits, shopping, socialising, use of social network sites, and hanging out with friends” (Bradley & Inglis, 2012: 1167). So, social contact and friendships are an important part of leisure as it can bring people together and contribute to the development of trust, cooperation and bonding (Arai & Pedlar, 2003 in Roberts, 2006). Additionally, leisure is said to generate psychological outcomes that are considered beneficial for coping, and these will be addressed later. For these reasons, it is surprising that there is limited effort made to understand the leisure life of international students and how it affects their study abroad experience. Even though it is well known that leisure is important for people, only a few studies have examined international students in regards to their activities and life in an out-of-class context (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). Roberts (2006: 7) acknowledges the importance of leisure for people by stating that “in leisure people can experiment
and take risks without failure having devastating consequences”. He (2006: 7) also mentions that “through leisure activities, children and adults can develop motor, language and social skills, which may then be transported into other areas of their lives”. The increasing number of students experiencing difficulties has resulted in an increased attention that is given to a variety of coping mechanisms (Xia, 2009) but, leisure to serve as a buffer to help foreign students to cope with the pressure and tension produced by study and work is still under researched (Li & Stodolska, 2006).

The next chapter further elaborates on this latter mentioned problem, and highlights the importance of exploring the strength of leisure for international students. Thereafter, in the scientific objective, the relevance of this study for the Dutch Government is discussed. In the scientific objective it is also explained why this research is a valuable addition to both the current research on study travel, and to leisure research in general. This chapter ends with an overview of the research questions. Next, the theoretical framework is outlined and this chapter focuses on explaining, discussing and comparing relevant concepts. These relevant concepts are brought together in a conceptual model and this model has been used as a tool to guide the research. After that, the data collection method, the participants, the research analysis and possible limitations are discussed in the methodology. Then, the findings are presented that are gained from this study. Followed by a discussion of these findings which provides an initial overview of the importance of leisure for international students. Finally, the conclusion of this study is given by answering the main research question.
2. Problem statement

The number of students studying outside their home country is growing rapidly and this is accompanied by an increase in international students experiencing difficulties (e.g., Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Newly gained travel possibilities have enabled students to travel to less traditional destinations, and made it possible for various students from less developed countries to study abroad (Institute of International Education, 2010; Rienties et al., 2012). This leads to many different cultures at universities which often causes a large cultural gap (Ward et al., 2001). According to the culture-distance hypothesis, the greater the cultural gap, the more difficulties students will experience (Ibid.). This necessitates a detailed and comprehensive research on study travel, the exact difficulties international students face, and the required coping mechanisms to ensure an affective time abroad. This is vital for foreign students as they travel for the purpose of obtaining a degree or credits and thus have to operate effectively in their ‘work’ abroad (Ward et al., 2001).

Although extensive research is vital in order to gain more knowledge about, and insights into all features of study abroad experiences, research regarding study travel is underrepresented in the field of tourism and leisure. This is surprising because deepening the understanding of leisure as a coping mechanism can shine new light on this longstanding topic. Despite the interdisciplinary point of view in leisure research most study travel research is published in the field of education. Likewise, most articles about the difficulties that international students encounter are published in the field of intercultural relationships. In leisure studies, over the past two decades the value of leisure for immigrants is increasingly acknowledged, and yet limited efforts have been made to understand the benefits for international students (Li & Stodolska, 2006). Besides, the existing research on study travel and international students rarely focus on leisure, and only occasionally mention some of its features such as social activities and the development of friendships.

 [...] for international students engagement in extracurricular activities is considered an important social context in which they may develop social networks and learn social skills, values and customs in the host society. (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002: 366)

Furthermore, there is a positive link found between international students’ engagement in out-of-class experiences and their adjustment to the host country (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). Yet, these are examples of how leisure could contribute to existing coping strategies as opposed to the potential of leisure by itself for international students. This is surprising because as Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002: 376) state, “many students seek out the experience of studying abroad because they expect that it may provide valuable opportunities to broaden their worldviews, to search for identity, to explore abilities and interests, or to clarify future goals”, and they acknowledge that international students do not just encounter these opportunities in classroom settings. Leisure is even defined as important for graduation by Tinto (1975, 1998 in Rienties et al., 2012: 687) who state “students not only need to persist in their study in order to graduate, but they also need to participate in the student culture, both within and outside the immediate context of the learning environment”. Leisure of students represents an important part of their life abroad, and “it is evident that leisure is an important context for human development and well-being” (Caldwell, 2008). As Hoffa (2007) mentions, the study abroad experience is not just about learning, but also about living.
3. Scientific objective

Since the Second World War, governments and numerous foundations have enabled students to stay abroad, a varying amount of time, in order for them to attend different institutions abroad (Ward, et al., 2001). Many politicians perceived international education as a way of solving the world’s problems or as a method to extend foreign policy, and governments almost unanimously supported educational exchange by providing funds to international students (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Nowadays, many students have to pay fees in order to study at colleges and universities abroad and this form of income for higher education institutions have created a fierce competition between these organisations to attract international students (Ward et al., 2001).

This study focuses on the Netherlands where the degree of internationalisation in higher education is relatively low, and where there are relatively few international students (Dutch Ministry of Education, 2010; Rienties et al. 2012). In the period of 2000 until 2007 only 5% of the student population consisted of international students, however, in that same period the amount of international students in OECD countries doubled and the growth in Netherlands was even higher (Dutch Ministry of Education, 2010; OECD, 2009 in Rienties et al., 2012). So, the Netherlands are increasingly attracting international students (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2012 in press) and in 2012, 87,000 international students studied in the Netherlands at a college or university (ANP, 2012). The Netherlands perceives study travel as a major contributor to the development of the knowledge economy they strive for. According to the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Jet Bussemaker, international students could contribute to the enhancement of the knowledge production of the Netherlands (Bussemaker, 2012). Moreover, she believes that the presence of international students prepares Dutch students for the international labour market. She also mentions the importance of internationalisation of education in order to establish international economic, political and cultural relations in the future. Bussemaker concludes that the presence of (successful) international students at Dutch colleges and universities can significantly contribute to an ambitious learning culture, and an excellent quality of education and research. This corresponds to the notion of Altbach (2004: 2) that “international students do not just fill seats, they also contribute to the nation’s global competitiveness by swelling the numbers of highly trained people in key disciplines”, and to the perception of Ward, Furnham and Bochner (2001: 146):

The unspoken assumption is that word of mouth accounts for successful market penetration and that the student who feel that their study abroad has been worthwhile will provide favourable publicity for the country and the institution where they obtained their education.

Although the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science acknowledges the benefits of international students for Dutch higher education institutions (and its students), there is still an ongoing political debate whether or not these students are advantageous for the Netherlands. Even though there are different opinions regarding this matter, there is a general believe that is of great importance for the Netherlands to bind current international students to the Netherlands because this can provide financial profits (ANP, 2012). According to Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy.
Analysis (CPB [Centraal Planbureau], 2012) international students can contribute to the prosperity of the Netherlands and to the financial position of the government due to future (tax)incomes. However, they mention that this latter depends on the scope of the ingoing and outgoing flows of students. The incoming flow of students bring higher costs during their study in the Netherlands, yet according to the CPB, these costs will be compensated by future incomes of these highly educated graduates who remain to work in the Netherlands. For this reason it is extremely important to bind the international students who are already studying here, to the Netherlands (Ibid.). Many international students want to stay after graduating, but in the end only few actually remain in the Netherlands (Bussemaker, 2012). Bussemaker mentions, amongst other things, the importance of integrating students both socially and academically within the program, institution and the city where they live. Partly through social activities and participation in, and active introduction to the Dutch language and culture. So, the leisure activities international students perform during their study abroad could be viewed as a valuable contribution to the binding of these students to the Netherlands. Therefore, this research is a valuable asset in the present-day discussion whether or not growing numbers of international students are a positive development for the Netherlands. Despite the relatively low academic internationalisation of the Netherlands, the numbers of international students are increasing rapidly. For this reason it is important for the Dutch Government to gain a better insight into the study abroad experience of international students attending a course or study in the Netherlands. Leisure forms a major part of the life of these students and is therefore an important aspect of their overall experience.

Increased understanding of study abroad experiences is important for policy purposes of governments, universities, providers of culture trainings etcetera, but most of all for the students concerned. Especially for them, it is important to understand their study abroad experience in all its dimensions (Brown & Brown, 2012). However, leisure is, to my knowledge, not been explored as a focus point of the study abroad experience, even though nowadays leisure makes big difference to the overall quality of the lives of people (Roberts, 2006). The purpose of this exploratory study is to gain a better understanding of the leisure experiences and the perceived difficulties of international students, but the focus is on exploring if and how leisure could function as a coping mechanism for international students facing these difficulties and stressors while they are abroad. So, to gain insight into the experiences of foreign students, and how leisure could minimise the difficulties- and maximise the benefits of study travel.

This research is a valuable addition to both the current research on study travel and to leisure research in general as this study focuses on leisure as a key dimension of the study abroad experience, and in specific as a separate coping mechanism for international students. The field of leisure will be used as a foundation for this research and as a means to link all other fields of interest such as education, intercultural relationships, psychology and tourism.
Main question:

*Can leisure function as a coping mechanism for international students facing stressors and difficulties during their study abroad, and if so how?*

Sub questions:

- How do international students experience their study abroad? What difficulties and stressors do international students face while being abroad?
- How do international students cope with these difficulties? What coping mechanism do international students use during their study abroad?
- What are the leisure pursuits of international students?
  - What leisure activities are international students involved in?
  - Why do international students pursue these activities?
  - How do international students evaluate the role leisure plays in their life?
- Which relations are developed during leisure activities? What do international students consider as benefits of these relations?
- How do their leisure activities make them feel? What do international students consider as benefits of their leisure activities for their psychological well-being?
- Do international students perceive these benefits/outcomes of leisure as beneficial for coping with the difficulties they face?
4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter focuses on explaining, discussing and comparing relevant models, theories and concepts, and at the end this will be brought together in a conceptual model. In order to explore if and how leisure could function as a coping mechanism for international students, it is important to elaborate on the elemental concepts. This chapter will start with an overview of possible difficulties and stressors foreign students might experience during their study abroad. Some of these have already been mentioned before in the introduction, however, it is important to further examine these as they have the potential to indicate which coping strategies are needed by international students and why. Secondly, coping will be addressed and this study refers to coping as what international students do, so their actions, in order to overcome or deal with difficulties and stressors. A distinction is made between three areas of coping; 1) adjustment to the host culture, 2) acceptance of cultural differences, and 3) maintenance of identity. Furthermore, an explanation is provided on why all three are valuable for international students. Thirdly, a general explanation of leisure is presented, and attention is given to the distinction between serious and casual leisure. Thereafter, various social and psychological outcomes of leisure are connected to specific aspects which are considered important for the coping process of international students in order to explore if there is a potential link between coping and leisure. Finally, a conceptual model is provided in order to visualise how these concepts are intertwined. The conceptual model will function as tool to help explore if and how leisure can function as a coping mechanism for international students dealing with difficulties and stressors.

4.1 Stressors and difficulties

This chapter begins with providing a general description of the stressors and difficulties that require various methods of coping by international students. The study discusses these possible problems by first providing an explanation of the separate stressors and difficulties, followed by a general section on how these problems can (negatively) influence the study abroad experience of international students.

Culture shock

No matter how broad-minded or full of good will international students may be (Oberg, 1960), during social interactions they often don’t fully understand the ideology and behaviour of local people and they could therefore be unable to determine how to behave (Xia, 2009). The term culture shock is used to “draw attention to the fact that such interactions can be, and usually are, difficult, awkward and stressful” (Ward et al., 2001: 270). Culture shock is experienced by most international students because during social encounters, with either citizens of the host country who are referred to as ‘host-nationals’, or with international students from other foreign countries referred to as ‘multi-nationals’ (Hendrickson et al., 2011), their familiar culture-context is invalid. Culture is based on values people acquire early in their lives and these values are displayed in certain rituals, heroes and symbols (see figure 1, Hofstede et. al, 2010). These displays of culture are used to orientate oneself in daily life situations (Ibid.) and they indicate how to behave and what to say during social interactions (Xia, 2009).
Culture shock was originally defined by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1960, not surprisingly around the same time foreign exchange programs became well-known (Ward et al., 2001). Oberg viewed culture-shock as “a medical condition describing feelings of disorientation following entry into a new culture, feelings often so strong as to degenerate into physical symptoms” (Anderson, 1994: 294). In the 1980s a different view on culture shock emerged and this view is based on two core propositions (Ward et al., 2001). First is the notion of learning experiences as a new model for cross-cultural contact. This means that appropriate intervention for the culture traveller changed from therapy, to preparation, orientation and the acquisition of culturally relevant social skills (Ward et al., 2001). Second is the idea that the journey is an on-going, dynamic experience and not just for the international student but also for the members of the host culture.

There are different stages associated with culture shock, and many writers have claimed that these stages follow an U-shaped curve or W-shaped curve (Ward et al., 2001). For example the five stages by Adler (1975 in Furnham, 1984) that characterise the stages visitors might experience while abroad: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. Another example of the stages is provided by Oberg and these stages are represented in figure 2, with a short explanation of each stage in figure 3.
The stages by Oberg illustrate a U-curve, however, some believe that the curve has a W shape because visitors also experience difficulties back home. This process back home is called a ‘reverse shock’ or a ‘re-entry shock’ and is presented in figure 4.

![Figure 4. W-curve Culture shock](image)

**Language difficulties**

While studying abroad students often come across intercultural encounters where the involving parties speak different native languages. According to Hofstede and his colleagues (2010), it is important to establish a more fundamental intercultural understanding by acquiring the host culture language. They state: “having to express oneself in another language means learning to adopt someone else’s frame of reference” (Ibid.: 389), and they find the essence is that “without knowing the language, one will miss a lot of the subtleties of a culture and be forced to remain a relative outsider” (Ibid.: 390). Lough (2011) agrees with this by stating that culture-shock is often reduced by sufficient language abilities. According to Smith and Khawaja (2011), a lower level of language skills is a predictor of depression. This study believes that speaking the host language is not always necessary while studying abroad because these students might only spend a short period of time in the host country. However, not knowing the host language could result in some difficulties both academically and socially. In the academic domain the language difficulties can impact writing, lectures, exams, and the ability to ask questions (Ibid.). In the social domain language barriers can hinder attempts to make friends and interact with host-nationals (Ibid.).

**Acculturation difficulties**

The terms adaptation, adjustment, acculturation and accommodation have been used interchangeably (Searle & Ward, 1990), but all refer to “the process of change that takes place as result of two or more cultures coming into contact” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011: 700). The acculturation model of Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001, see figure 5) is most commonly used, and here acculturation refers to the difficult and stressful process which is experienced by (inter alia) international students in order to accomplish adjustment or adaptation. How severe foreign students are effected by the changes that take place during the study abroad experience, is determined by both micro and macro level variables. The micro level refers to the individual variable which deals with the characteristics of both the person and the situation. At a macro level there are societal variables which refer to the social, political, economic and cultural factors regarding both the society of origin, and the society of residence.
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Figure 5. The acculturation process (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001)

Academic stress
Academic stress is experienced by all students, however, international students generally experience added stress due to the previous mentioned language barriers and the notion that they have to cope with a new educational environment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). They need to adjust on an academic level to the local teaching and learning culture (Gu & Maley, 2008) and they have to deal with new educational organisations, systems, behaviours and expectations (Zhou et al., 2008). This is especially difficult when the student is unaware of these differences in advance (Ibid.). Smith and Khawaja (2011: 703) connect this by stating “international students may expect to perform academically as well as, if not better than, what they did in their home country”, however, their performance may be below their expectations due to various stressors. Moreover, they may feel pressured by family and the sponsoring university in their country of origin to achieve well, which could in turn have negative consequences for their academic achievement (Ibid.). In addition, international students may also have different expectations in regard to the quality and efficiency of academic services (Ibid.). According to Smith and Khawaja (2011), academic stress is found to be a significant predictor of life stress and therefore an important component of the experience abroad.

Homesickness
Homesickness is referred to as a “longing and desire for familiar environments and can sometimes take the form of depressive symptoms” (Hendrickson et al., 2011: 285). According to Hendrickson and his colleagues (2011), especially international students are affected by homesickness and this often results in loneliness, sadness and adjustment difficulties. They mention that these individuals often “display poor decision making and studying skills, are in constant communication with home, display anxiety towards social situations, and withdraw from otherwise enjoyable activities” (Ibid.: 285).

Loss of social networks and feelings of loneliness
International students “necessarily experience a disruption or loss of social support systems and the familiar means by which support is socially communicated” (Ong & Ward, 2005: 638). According to Ong and Ward (2005), social support serves four core functions. First is emotional support which includes display of love, care, concern and sympathy. Second is social companionship, which means...
that someone feels belongingness to a social group that provides company for a variety of activities. The third function is tangible assistance, and by this is meant concrete aid in the form of financial help, required services or material resources. Finally, informational support consists of the communication of opinions and facts relevant to a person’s current difficulties. These core functions indicate the importance of friendships in satisfying deep personal and emotional needs (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Hendrickson and his colleagues (2011) also indicate the importance of friendships by mentioning that friendships fall into Maslow’s third level of needs, which is the need for love and belonging. International students have to leave their friends and family back home and therefore experience a loss of these important networks (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Research suggest that there is a variety of variables that may impact on the ability of international students to form new friendships and therefore affect their feelings of loneliness (Ibid.). Smith and Khawaja (2011) mention the personality variable of attachment style, trait-anxiety and extroversion as an example.

**Discrimination and stereotyping**
Discrimination is “a judgment that one has been treated with prejudice because of one’s racial and ethnic membership” (Major, Quinton & McCoy, 2002 in Duru & Poyrazli, 2011: 448). Many international students experience prejudices and discrimination in their interactions with locals of the host country and some studies have indicated that increased contact can intensify stereotyping and discrimination (Zhou et al. 2008). According Smith and Khawaja (2011: 704), “international students from Asia, Africa, India, Latin America, and the Middle East often report significant discrimination perceived compared to domestic students [American students] or European international students”. Discrimination can include feelings of inferiority, direct verbal insults, discrimination when seeking employment, and physical attacks (Ibid.). “Perceived discrimination is viewed as a significant life stressor, with adverse effects on the adjustment, wellbeing and health” (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011: 448).

**Decreased self-efficacy**
Self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1995 in Yusoff, 2012: 358). Self-efficacy is a personal capability to address stressful situations effectively (Schwarzer, 1992 in Yusoff, 2012). It is a resource that can influence a person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviours and it is believed to help an individual facilitate goal setting, effort investment, persistence in face of barriers, recovery from setbacks, and emotional adaptiveness (Yusoff, 2012). However, the study abroad experience is stressful for international students and according to Moeini and colleagues (2008 in Yusoff, 2012), greater stress is associated with lower general self-efficacy. As perceived efficacy is a source of human agency and the fundamental basis of motivation (Bandura, 1997 in Yusoff, 2012), a lower level of self-efficacy can lead to a decreased self-esteem and lack of assertiveness.

**Practical stressors**
Financial problems is one of the practical stressor experienced by a majority of international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Many students have to deal with this problem due to work restrictions in the host country and substantially greater tuition fees (Ibid.). Other examples of practical or lifestyle stressors are accommodation and transport issues. The impact of these stressors depends on how they are appraised and coped with by each individual international student (Ibid.).
All international students experience a wide range of stressors and difficulties. However, as mentioned by Ward et al. (2001: 166) “because research samples and methodologies differ so widely across studies, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the prevalence, seriousness and consequences of student sojourner problems”. Moreover, when using the term ‘international students’ it refers to a group of people with some shared characteristics, yet at the same time, it refers to individuals who all have unique personalities and circumstances. Nevertheless in general, the impact of these difficulties and stressors on the lives of international students are great, as these problems can negatively affect their academic performance (Rienties et al., 2012) and can create psychological distress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Therefore it is vital for the international student to cope effectively with these stressors and difficulties. How students cope is discussed in the next paragraph.

4.2 Coping

Over the past decades, many scientists have been interested in the processes by which people cope with stress (Moos, 1986 in Weintraub, 1990). Most research on coping processes use as starting point the conceptual analysis of stress and coping provided by Lazarus in 1966 (Weintraub, 1990).

According to Lazarus, stress consists of three processes, and Weintraub (1990: 267) has described these. “Primary appraisal is the process of perceiving a threat to oneself. Secondary appraisal is the process of bringing to mind a potential response to the threat. Coping is the process of executing that response.” Lazarus emphasised that these processes do not occur in an unbroken stream, but rather that an outcome of one process may revoke a preceding process (Ibid.). In current coping literature various types of coping have been identified (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). For example, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and meaning-focused coping, but also dysfunctional coping such as denial, substance use, self-blame, venting, and behavioural disengagement are ways to cope with stress (Ibid.). According to Smith and Khawaja (2011: 705), “research in the international student literature is particularity limited on the use of positive coping strategies”. They state that the majority of research on international students focus on maladaptive coping, in order words, the insufficient ability of international students to adapt. This could be a possible explanation for the emphasis in current literature on the importance of adjustment and adaptation for international students. Yet, as Smith and Khawaja mention, there are some exceptions such as the work done by Ward, Leong and Kennedy (1998 in Ward et al., 2001) were they found that coping by accepting and reinterpretation predicted lower levels of stress and subsequently reduced depressive symptoms. Just as similar research on coping through the use of humour and an unconditional positive regard (Kennedy, 1994; Lin & Bertz, 2009 in Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These types of coping are related to positive coping and do not imply that adjustment is necessary in order to reduce stress. On the contrary, these types of coping highlight the strength of accepting differences and maintenance of identity. So, literature on coping processes of international students are divided in three areas 1) coping that focuses on adjustment to the host culture, 2) coping that focuses on acceptance of cultural differences, and 3) coping that focuses on maintaining one’s identity. Although the first area is most commonly used, this research regards the other two areas as equally important.

4.2.1 Adjustment to the host culture

The current literature on coping of international students focus mainly on adjustment (or adaptation) to the host culture (e.g. Tanaka et al., 1997; Zhou et al., 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Adjustment is seen as a process through which a person changes to fit in with the host culture (Gu & Maley, 2008),
and it is considered an active process of managing stress at both an individual and situational level (Zhou et al., 2008). In this study adjustment is viewed as necessary in order for international students to function effectively in their everyday life. International students might need to adjust to unfamiliar social norms, eating habits, customs and values, the clothes worn and the general pace of life (Spradley & Phillips 1972, in Ward et al., 2001; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). In addition, international students need to adjust academically to the local teaching and learning culture (Gu & Maley, 2008). So, for these students “adaptation involves a process of learning and integrating into not only an ‘alien’ social society (living) but also a foreign academic culture (studying)” (Ibid.: 236). However, the degree of adaptation differs depending upon personal and situational factors, such as the duration of stay, work status, attended educational institution, the host country, country of origin, previous travel experience and personality traits (Ibid.), and therefore differs for each individual student.

4.2.2 Acceptance of cultural differences
Besides adjustment, international students cope with difficulties by accepting the host culture as different from the own. Nowadays, many internationalised educational institutions intend to enable students to tolerate diversity and to embrace differences without feeling threatened to their own cultural identity (Pearce, 1998 in Otten, 2003). In order to cope with difficulties, it is important for international students to accept that culture is a context and that one’s own beliefs and behaviours are just one organisation of reality among many viable possibilities, which is referred to as ‘ethnorelativism’ (Bennett, 2004). International students can deal with difficulties by accepting their way, and the way of others as neither right or wrong but simply different. Accepting is an important part of coping because it makes people more comfortable with the circumstances, and this minimises psychological stress (Allen, Drane, Byon & Mohn, 2010).

4.2.3 Maintenance of identity
The more international students begin to understand the host culture, the less certain they may feel about their own identity (Zaharna, 1989). Besides adjustment or acceptance, this can also result in the maintenance and reinforcement of the own cultural and social identity. This coping mechanism is concerned with the way people perceive themselves; social identity, and their perceptions of the in-group and out-group members; cultural identity. Both social and cultural identity include a sense of affirmation, pride and a positive evaluation of one’s group (Ward et al., 2001). Maintenance of identity is important for coping because identification with the culture of origin is central to someone’s private and personal sense of self. Identity conflict can lead to feelings of sadness, low self-esteem, anger and defensiveness, which can undermine the well-being of the international student (Brown & Brown, 2012). However, maintenance of identity can also cause adverse effects as international students might view their own culture as central to reality, which is referred to as ‘ethnocentrism’ (Bennett, 2004). Ethnocentrism can lead to denial of problems and rejection of the host culture (Ward et al., 2001; Bennett, 2004; Sapranaviciute et al., 2012).

4.3 Leisure
In order to explore if leisure can function as a coping mechanism for international students, it is vital to define leisure in the first place. However, this is difficult because leisure is highly context-dependent, and what leisure means might vary from group to group (Roberts, 2006). According to Roberts (2006), there is a recognisable domain of leisure within any society where work has been modernised, because here, work is quite clearly distinguished from leisure time. However, there are
other things that need to be done besides work, like sleeping, feeding, bathing, household chores, homework, and other self-maintenance activities (Roberts, 2006). Roberts states that leisure is the time left over. According to Caldwell and Witt (2011: 13-14) “leisure scholars tend to consider leisure as the overall container for positive experiences and may include activity-based pursuits, as well as the state of being reflective and experiencing freedom”. Some unstructured forms of leisure, such as watching TV or hanging out, are also linked to negative outcomes (Ibid.). A few researchers claim that leisure activities related to media and the Internet have negative consequences for social skills (Ibid.). Yet, how people spend their unobligated time on a daily basis is closely related to quality of life and personal welfare literature (Yang, Hutchison, Zinn & Watson, 2011). Leisure experiences “often take place in specific places or leisure venues and the leisure experience is something we look forward to participating in with positive expectations” (Best, 2010: 3). It is said to be different from work (and other obligations), a means to fulfil pleasure and desire, and a way to construct an identity (Ibid.). Leisure is considered both as a tool to prevent negative life-events, and as part of a coping strategy to deal with negative life-events because the activities are often distracting (Caldwell, 2005 in Best, 2010). Furthermore, many researchers have investigated the role of leisure experiences in reducing work-related stress and they all found that leisure has a positive role in health promotion, and particularly as a coping strategy for dealing with stress. Moreover, Iwasaki and Schneider (2003 in Best, 2010) found “that the most common motives for leisure, such as relaxation, compensation, escapism and independence, all have stress-reducing properties” (13). In addition, they have identified three leisure-based coping strategies: 1) palliative coping; a leisure-based activity gives an individual temporary respite from an issue that is of concern to them, 2) mood enhancement; for example watching a comedy, and 3) companionship; spending time with friends in a commonly enjoyed activity. Leisure is thus quite clearly linked to coping, but in order to further elaborate on this, one of the best known definitions of the concept of leisure, provided by Robert Stebbins (1982, 1997), is used where he made a distinction between ‘serious’ and ‘casual’ leisure.

4.3.1 Serious leisure

According to Stebbins, “serious leisure allows an individual to develop a feeling of ‘career’ within their free time” (Best, 2010: 5). Serious leisure consists of six characteristics which are central for a person’s sense of self and are therefore vital for the construction of identity (Ibid.). The characteristics are clarified by Robert Stebbins in Stebbins and Graham (2004). The first characteristic is ‘perseverance’, which refers to people’s need to meet certain challenges every now and then in order to continue experiencing the same level of satisfaction during an activity. Second is ‘following a career’, which is “shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement and involvement” (Ibid.: 6). The potential to follow a career is made possible by the third characteristic ‘personal effort’. People who are active in serious leisure make significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training and/or skill. The fourth characteristic is ‘benefits to the individual’ and some of the benefits are “self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement or self-image, social interaction and sense of belonging, and lasting physical products of the activity” (Ibid.: 6). An additional benefit is self-gratification (in other words fun), and this benefit is also experienced by people participating in casual leisure activities. Fifth is ‘ethos of the activity’, “serious leisure is distinguished by an unique ethos that emerges in each expression of it” (Ibid.: 6). Finally, ‘identification with the activity’, many participants in serious leisure tend to identify strongly with their chosen activity. Serious leisure is also frequently defined as “leisure activities that are actively
pursued to support the accumulation of experience and development of skills and knowledge” (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, Benckendorff, 2012: 912). Although serious leisure demands hard and sustained work, it is said to “deliver especially deep and sustained psychic and social benefits, which become more and more fulfilling the longer a serious leisure career is developed” (Roberts, 2006: 8).

4.3.2 Casual leisure
Casual leisure is often seen as the opposite of serious leisure, and according to Stebbins (1997), “can be understood under six headings; 1) play, 2) relaxation, 3) passive entertainment, 4) active entertainment, 5) sociable conversation and 6) sensory stimulation” (Best, 2010: 8). Casual leisure activities are generally less substantial than serious leisure pursuits and they offer no career (Stebbins & Graham, 2004). Furthermore, people often pursue a combination of the different types of casual leisure (Ibid.). For example, watching television is considered both relaxing and passive entertainment. All types have in common that they are hedonic in nature; “people participate in these activities because they bring pleasure in the form of self-integration” (Best, 2010: 8). Casual leisure is therefore valued in terms of intrinsically rewarding, pleasurable and enjoying (Page & Connell, 2010).

4.4 Leisure as a coping mechanism
These days governments around the world have become heavily involved in leisure (Roberts, 2006). This is not surprising as, according to Roberts (2006), there are many economic, political, psychological and social grounds to take leisure seriously. This study will focus on the psychological and social outcomes of leisure and link this to the coping process of international students.

4.4.1 Social outcomes of leisure for coping
In the current literature social contact is considered one of the most important factors which facilitates the coping process of students in a foreign country because when people receive support it reinforces their sense of security and decreases depression, anxiety and feelings of helplessness (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Xia, 2009). Various studies are done on the benefits (and disadvantages) of contact for the coping process of international students (e.g. Tanaka et al., 1997; Cemalcilar et al., 2005; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Williams & Johnson, 2011). However, these studies first of all mainly focus on adjusting, neglecting the other two areas of coping (maintenance and accepting) and secondly, these studies appoint contact as vital for coping, but to my knowledge, do not focus on the context where and how this contact occurs. Engagement in leisure activities is considered an important social context where international students develop and sustain social networks (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Bradley & Inglis, 2012). Leisure is in nature a social phenomenon (Page & Connell, 2010) and leisure activities can bring people together and contribute to personal health, well-being and fulfilment (Roberts, 2006). A reasonable number of authors already briefly mention leisure and its assistance in the coping process of international students. However, with just a few exceptions (e.g. Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Allen et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2011), limited efforts have been made to understand the leisure behaviour of international students, and even less attention is given to leisure and its relation to the coping process of international students. This is unfortunate because during leisure time people obtain support in the sense that they receive “consolation, caring, encouragement, advice, approval and help from others around them” (Xia, 2009: 100). Contact with others in leisure time give international students the chance to have discussions and intellectual exchange, and offer them the opportunity to share their experiences and emotions (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Moreover, this
contact helps the international student to ‘fit in’, because it may provide the student with feelings of belonging and acceptance (Ward et al., 2001) which is defined to be important for coping by Brislin (1981 in Searle & Ward, 1990). In serious leisure specifically, people often identify strongly with their chosen activity (Best, 2010) and when this activity is commonly enjoyed with friends this could contribute to their feeling of being accepted. According to Durkheim (in Allen et al., 2010: 423), “international students are able to internalise feelings of belonging [...] through participation in sport with others that share their cultural background”. However, when international students form friendships with people from the host country, leisure can function as an added value for feeling accepted by others. The interaction international students have during their leisure time could also help them with the acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviour and skills (Bochner, Lin, & Mclead, 1980; Furnham & Bochner, 1986 in Searle & Ward, 1990). This process is called ‘culture learning’ and is stated vital for coping through adaptation to the host culture (Ward et al., 2001). Culture learning occurs especially during serious leisure activities which are deliberately pursued to develop skills and knowledge (Falk et al., 2012). Another social outcome of leisure is self-confidence because this “plays a key role in decreasing anxiety and overcoming obstacles” (Xia, 2009: 99). According to Bynner and Ashford (1992 in Roberts, 2006), high levels of leisure participation bring people into contact with each other, and this enhances self-confidence and esteem. Page and Connell (2010: 90-91) mention the following social outcomes of leisure:
- Leisure has a clear relationship with our social well-being.
- Recreation and leisure contribute to our sense of identity.
- Leisure has a direct effect on both the individual and community, especially in relation to their quality of life.
- Leisure can contribute to people’s personal growth and self-expression as well as meeting their under-fulfilled needs.
- Leisure may also help to give individuals a sense of social acceptance through membership of groups.

Bochner’s concept of friendship networks (1977 in Ward et al., 2001) is still used in contemporary studies to cluster these social benefits (Zhou et al., 2008). According to Bochner, international students belong to three social networks which all serve particular functions (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). First he mentions the contact with co-nationals, which is referred to as the ‘monocultural network’. This network “functions mainly to provide a setting for expressing values and engaging in practices of the culture of origin” (Kashima & Loh, 2006: 472). Friendships amongst co-nationals in specific are said to decline the stress that international students experience when crossing cultures (Kim, 2001 in Hendrickson et al., 2011). According to Ying and Liese (1994, in Gu & Maley, 2008: 234), “ethnic social networks have been found to be beneficial for psychological well-being because they provide a sense of security and facilitate the transition, particularly at the initial stages”. In addition, Woolf (2007 in Hendrickson et al., 2011: 282) reports that “co-national networks give students an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the new culture through discussions, social interaction, and intellectual exchange with other students who are experiencing the same emotions”. These networks are believed to help maintaining the cultural identity of international students (Maundeni, 2001 in Hendrickson et al., 2011). However, like said before, according to Ward and Searle (1991 in Hendrickson et al., 2011: 282), the “reinforcement of their cultural identity also makes them less willing to adapt to the local customs” and this could prevent them from forming friendships with host-nationals (Hendrickson et al., 2011), which is the second friendship network, the ‘bicultural network’. This network consist of locals and often includes academics and other
students (Kashima & Loh, 2006). This network “serves instrumental functions, facilitating students to reach their academic and professional goals” (Ibid.: 472). Moreover, international students who have sufficient contact with host-nationals are better equipped to adapt to their life in a different country because they can learn culturally relevant skills (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Zhou et al. (2008:70) mention some other beneficial outcomes of friendships with host-nationals: “fewer academic problems (Pruitt, 1978), fewer social difficulties (Ward & Kennedy, 1993), improved communication competency”. They also state that international students who participate in structured peer-pairing programs and spend more informal leisure time with their local peers, have better social adjustment than those who did not. In addition, Ward et al. (2008:70) note that “contact and friendships with local students is associated with emotional benefits such as sojourner satisfaction (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991) and lower levels of stress (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993)”. However, as mentioned before, many international students also experience prejudices and discrimination in their interactions with host-nationals. Moreover, it is important to note that although contact with locals is proven to be beneficial for international students, the majority of their friendships is with co-nationals and international students from other countries (Hendrickson et al., 2011). This latter is the third friendship network, the ‘multicultural network’. This network is “said to have a social and recreational function” (Kashima & Loh, 2006: 472) and these networks mainly provide social support (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Ties with other international students are also believed to be important for the development of new identities (Kashima & Loh, 2006) and therefore this network is possibly beneficial for accepting differences between various cultures. In addition to these three friendship networks, international students also have contact with friends and family in the country of origin. A support system consisting of family members and friends at home is considered important because “continuous contact has a positive effect on the sojourning individuals’ maintenance of home identity and perceptions of available social support...” (Cemalcilar et al. 2005: 103). This process has become easier with contemporary technical developments. Many international students use Internet-related technologies to correspond with people from their home country and to keep up with daily life at home (Ibid.). Cemalcilar and her colleagues mention that with these developments, the social networks individuals had before the journey, can still continue to act as social support mechanisms. So, people derive various social benefits from leisure activities which indicates the importance of social relationships in leisure time. Argyle (1996 in Page & Connell, 2010) identified three main reasons which summarise why relationships are so important for people. Firstly because people seek material and instrumental health, so relationships which are beneficial to us and provide us with reciprocal benefits. Secondly to gain emotional support “which is often expressed in conversations between individuals and in group, to reduce a sense of alienation or exclusion in social situations, particular where there may be different personal circumstances” (Ibid.: 89). Finally, people need social relationships in order to fulfil a desire for companionship which is considered a basic human need in order to assist with happiness and personal fulfilment.

4.4.2 Psychological outcomes of leisure for coping

Besides social benefits, leisure is also said to be beneficial for the psychological well-being of people which refers to the benefits for the individual in regards to their life-satisfaction (Page & Connell, 2010). In other words, as Aristotle acknowledged, the personal happiness, contentment and being satisfied with one’s life (Ibid.). Life satisfaction in terms of psychological well-being is defined vital for the coping process of international students (e.g. Dunbar, 1992 in Ward et al., 2001) and research has found a positive relationship between leisure activities and life satisfaction. According to Roberts...
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(2006: 177), “leisure activities can make people feel more satisfied, whatever their circumstances”. The psychological well-being of international students is enhanced through leisure activities because leisure has the ability to work distracting, and challenging activities give the participating students something else to think about (Caldwell, 2005 in Best, 2010). This way leisure can help international students to deal with (negative) life-events (Ibid.). Moreover, leisure, and especially casual leisure, is considered relaxing which provide people temporary respite from issues that are of concern to them (Mannell, 2000 in Best, 2010). According to Roberts (2006: 6), “leisure enables people to relax and refresh and literally recreate themselves so that they can return, suitably restored, to other roles in their workplaces and families” or in the case of international students, their study. This relates to the ability of leisure activities to enhance mood states (Mannell, 2000 in Best, 2010). In addition, feeling of control is mentioned several times as important for improving the psychological well-being of international students (e.g. Lonner in Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ong & Ward, 2005; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). When international students are able to predict or explain the behaviour of the host-nationals, they will experience a feeling of control (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Prediction is an important part of control because it offers people the possibility to prevent unexpected problems, and this reduces stress and psychological disorientation (Lafreniere & Cramer, 2005 in Xia, 2009). Xia (2009: 98) acknowledges this by stating that “unpredictable or uncontrollable events are more likely to cause stress”. International students who participate in a sport they also performed at home, might feel a sense of control in this experience because they are able to predict the behaviour of the host as they are familiar with the rules, appropriate attitude, way of communication etcetera. Moreover, the feeling of freedom and choice in leisure could facilitate a sense of control because students have mastery over their own decisions and actions (Caldwell & Witt, 2011). Furthermore, optimism is part of an enhanced life-satisfaction “because explaining negative events optimistically can decrease depression and anxiety” (Xia, 2009: 99). According to Xia (2009: 99), “optimism often make them [students] react better to stress, so it exerts positive effects on the reduction of psychological burden”. Positive experiences are considered a possible outcome of leisure activities (Busseri et al., 2006) and could therefore contribute to the optimism of international students. However as Xia (2009) mentions, excessively optimistic people do not prepare themselves, and this creates a lacking ability to predict which can lead to more stress and greater difficulties. Another psychological outcome of leisure which is linked to an improved psychological well-being is mentioned by Allen and his colleagues, (2010: 423) who state that “participants in sport are able to display their dexterity, strength, knowledge, intelligence, courage or self-control”. This is linked to the outcome of serious leisure in that people can enhance a feeling of ‘career’ within their free time. This feeling of prestige or accomplishment might improve the confidence of international students. Above all, it is very surprising that fun has not been mentioned in research on the coping process of international students. Both serious and casual leisure are said to be intrinsically rewarding and this is perhaps the most important psychological benefit of leisure activities for international students. Leisure is considered a mean to fulfil pleasure and desire (Best, 2010), and “it makes people happy, improves their mood and also increases their satisfaction with life” (Page & Connell, 2010.: 89).

4.4.3 Factors which influence leisure participation

In order to create a theoretical model it is important to make a distinction between various outcomes of leisure, but it is important to note that the social and psychological benefits of leisure are intertwined and not always clearly distinguished. Moreover, it is important to mention that the psychological and social benefits of leisure can also constrain international students. With constraints
this study refers to “something restricting or limiting leisure participation” (Best, 2010: 55). For example, the pursuits of certain activities is socially conditioned (Page & Connell, 2010). This means that leisure “opportunities are determined by our circumstances, the society we live in and our position in that society” (Ibid.: 83). So, spare time does not necessarily mean a free choice to engage in the whatever form of leisure is preferred (Ibid.). Leisure engagement is a constant struggle between social conditions and what leisure engagement someone thinks he or she is free to do (Ibid.). According to Torkildsen (1999, in Page & Connell, 2010: 84), “there are a range of factors which influence our ability to participate in and enjoyment of leisure activities”. These factors are divided by Page and Connell (2010) in three interrelated groups, see figure 6.

![Figure 6. Influences on leisure choices and participation](image)

This first group consists of inherently personal factors and focuses on the individual. This group includes some of the psychological aspects of leisure. According to Best (2010), leisure studies have always been interested in the barriers to participation and the lack of equality of leisure opportunities. Best also mentions the emphasis in these studies on demographic characteristics such as class, race, age and gender. The second group deals with social and circumstantial factors which are focused on the individual and some of the social aspects of the individual, and are structured around a number of economic issues such as work, income and wealth. Finally, the third group consists of opportunity factors which means that we need opportunities to engage in leisure. These three groups overlap and coalesce in a common area where leisure choices are made.

### 4.5 Conclusion

The various stressors and difficulties international students experience during their study abroad require coping. Current literature focuses mainly on adaptation to the host culture, while not all stressors and difficulties might need this type of coping. Some problems possibly necessitate accepting difference in cultures or maintaining one’s identity (or any combination of these). This study therefore considers these areas of coping equally vital for international students dealing with stressful and difficult situations. Contemporary research have defined numerous features that
constitute coping. These features consists primarily of benefits international students acquire through social interaction, and the development of friendships is therefore believed to be a major coping strategy. Leisure is a social context and leisure activities are believed to generate numerous social outcomes. However, leisure has an added value for coping as leisure activities also generate psychological outcomes. The social and psychological outcomes of leisure can be connected to all three types of coping, and therefore leisure has the potential to be an important coping strategy for international students. Of course, this depends on the individual international student, the activities he or she pursuits, the difficulties and stressors this persons experiences and how he or she copes with these situations. These connections will be explored in order to explore whether leisure can function as coping strategy. Figure 7 is an theoretical overview of how the various relevant concepts are related. First, the stressors and difficulties derived from the literature are stated and these are connected to the three areas of coping. These connections are based on which area of coping is presumably needed for each difficulty/stressors. Second, the areas of coping are linked to leisure, and leisure is subdivided in social outcomes and psychological outcomes. Third, examples of both the social and psychological outcomes are specified. Finally, the specific outcomes of leisure are connected to the three coping areas in order indicate how these outcomes could possibly contribute to the coping process of international students. The numbers that have been stated at each specific outcome are used to visualise the connections between the outcomes of leisure and the expected coping area to which it could contribute. In this overview the numbers represent 1) adjustment, 2) maintenance, and 3) accepting. The theoretical overview is used in order to provide an initial impression of the course of this research.
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Figure 7. Theoretical model, leisure as a coping mechanism for international students facing stressors and difficulties.
5. Methodology

This study is explorative in nature as the link between coping and leisure of international students is a newly emerging field of interest (Boeije, 2010). Starting point was to discover what leisure means for international students who have to cope with several stressors and difficulties during their study abroad experience, and this means that the participant’s perspective was not (entirely) known prior to the data collection (Boeije, 2010). This required a flexible open-ended approach because data collection and data analysis continually had to be adjusted to the emerging findings, which is distinctive for qualitative research (Boeije, 2010). A qualitative approach was most appropriate because experiences are more complex to study than a series of constructs which can be measured and quantified (Carr, 2011 in Bos, McCabe and Johnson, 2013). In this chapter the data collection method is described, the participants illustrated, the research analysis defined and finally an overview is provided of possible limitations of the study.

5.1 Data collection method

Data has been collected through semi-structured interviews in order to give the participants the opportunity to further explain and share “their story, pass on their knowledge and provide their own perspective on a range of topics” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 in Boeije, 2010: 62). Interviews were valuable because they offered visual and sensory data as the participants used both verbal and non-verbal communication which was of interest for the research (Mason, 2002). The research questions were open ended because this allowed the interviewee to give comprehensive answers (Jennings, 2001). This was beneficial for the interviewer because multiple realities could be determined (Ibid.). Open ended questions are distinctive for semi-structured interviews which means that the interviews are prepared by creating a list of topics with corresponding questions, which will be asked at some point in the interview (Boeije, 2010). This list is called an ‘interview guide’ and was used to give some structure to the interview (Ibid.). However, the use of an interview guide left the interviewer free to formulate the questions and to determine the sequence (Ibid.). Moreover, the use of an interview guide allowed the interviewer to alter the questions during the interview, and this enabled the interviewer to ask for further information and clarification during the interviews (Jennings, 2001). Likewise, follow-up questions were easily framed to further extend responses (Ibid.). Refer to appendix I and II for the interview guides.

Topic interviews were used to interview the international students as these interviews encompass only the subjects of interest (Boeije, 2010). The aim of the topic interviews was to gather data for this research by making international students think and talk about their study abroad experience with a focus on the difficulties and stressors they encountered and how they coped with these. Thereafter, the participants were asked to share information about their leisure pursuits and they were asked if they perceived these activities as beneficial for coping with the difficulties and stressors they experienced during their study abroad. The topic interviews were carried out face to face or via Skype. The location used were the university, a public site or at the home of the interviewees. In addition, expert interviews were held with informants who had expertise on the research subjects (Ibid.). The aim of the expert interviews was to gather further general data on these subjects but also to verify and support the data that was provided through the topic interviews. The expert interviews were carried out face to face, and were held at the organisation/institution this person worked for.
Each interview took around 15 till 25 minutes including an intro with a short introduction of myself and the research, and a clarification about anonymity and the participants consent. The interviews were finished with a closure where the participants could share their feelings about the interview and where they had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. Although this study is explorative in character, the interviewees were provided with a general description of some of the relevant concepts because these might have different meanings for different people. Explaining these subjects prevented the impossibility to compare the collected data, and enabled the research to drawn valid conclusions. This applied especially for the concepts coping and leisure as these possess many definitions. The difficulties and stressors, on the other hand, were discussed without further explanations because the participants most likely have a good sense of what this means as the definition is quite straight forward. Moreover, this way the interviewees talked about the problems that are most demanding for them. In addition, the interviewees had the opportunity to share experiences about stressors and difficulties that have not been defined before.

The interviews were recorded on audiotape and this data has been transcribed in order to have the data on text (Ibid.). Recordings were important for the research because it benefits the quality of the data as the interviewer was able to focus on the interviewer and not worry about writing the answers down (Ibid.). Moreover, the interviewer did not had to worry already about what is important and what not, there is no distortion of the data (Ibid.). Furthermore, recordings provided literal quotes that have been used in the final report (Ibid.). In addition, recordings were beneficial for the quality of the data as the interviewer could replay the interview and think about areas for improvement for coming interviews (Ibid.). A possible downside was that during the transcription of recordings valuable non-verbal communication could have been lost (Ibid.). Therefore, elaborate memos were created during the interviews by the interviewer. These memos are called observational memos and were made to capture observations during the interview which cannot be recorded on tape such as facial expressions, posture, tone etcetera (Ibid.). In addition, memos were made about frequently occurring answers, reasoning of people why he/she did not think of certain things before or unexpected findings or concepts that arose during the interview (Jennings, 2001). These memos played a significant role in depiction and interpretation of the data gained from the interviews. Finally, methodological memos were made to document the experiences of the researcher during the interviews which were used to adjust the interview technique or questions for coming interviews (Boeije, 2010).

Ethical principles were of great importance during this research. The interviewees got full information about the nature of the data collection and the purpose for which the data was used (Ibid.). Furthermore, the privacy of the participants was respected. Information has not been shared with others and stored in an appropriate way. In addition, the names of participants are not used. Although leisure is generally not a sensitive topic, the difficulties and stressors the foreign students faced can be and this heightened the need for ethical consideration in this research (Ibid.). Therefore, the interviewees were explained that they did not had to answer all the questions and they were able to quit the interview at any time. Here too it was important to explain the topic and the content for the interview beforehand because if the international student did not want to talk about the problems he or she experienced, the interview would not have been relevant for this research.
5.2 Participants
In total this research has collected data from 16 interviews. The interviews were held with 14 international students and with two experts. All international students studied in the Netherlands, and 9 of the interviewed students attended TU Delft (Delft University of Technology) and 5 were Wageningen University students. Two of the participating students did their Bachelor and 12 followed a Master study. Two of the interviewees from Wageningen University just recently graduated. The international students consisted of 5 females and 9 males, and the ages ranged from 20 to 46 years old. Except from three interviewees from India, all the students had different nationalities. The countries of origin of the students are India, Surinam, Italy, Portugal, England, Germany, Poland, China, Greece, Peru, Kenya and Latvia. This study interviewed students from both Bachelor- and Master programs, students with different cultural backgrounds, both men and women and from various ages in order to make comparison possible. The international students were asked to participate through international student organisations, universities or via friends.

Furthermore, data was collected from interviews with two experts in the field of leisure and international students/study travel. The first expert interview was with a member of one of the international students associations in Wageningen, IxEsn (Erasmus Student Network). This organisation has a focus on current international students, but also include Dutch students in their activities. This international student organisation uses leisure as a tool to support and help international students in both their academic and daily life:

*The main focus of ESN is placed on current exchange students, who often face problems (and feel abandoned) in their environments. Therefore ESN offers help in academic, social and practical integration process. This is mainly done through activities in the local sections, which include cultural and social events such as trips to various places in the country, film nights, buddy group and language projects and international food fests and last, but not least, parties.*

The second expert interview was with an employee of Travel Active which is an organisation that specialises in cultural exchanges through various programs such as au pair, language travel, voluntary travel and more. The expert interviewed worked for the department called ‘High School Holland’ where they enable high school students from all over the world to come to study at a high school in the Netherlands. These students are younger (fifteen to eighteen years old) than the international students interviewed. However, this organisation used an orientation week with various activities to help these students to get acquainted with the Dutch way of life and culture, and furthermore they organised multiple excursions to teach these students more about the Netherlands. Therefore, this expert certainly had valuable knowledge and expertise for this research. Although there is little evidence in the literature on a link between leisure activities and the coping mechanisms of international students, the existence of and the method used by these organisations indicates a connection. These interviews were held in order to obtain the knowledge, expertise and the perspective of these professionals, and were therefore considered a valuable addition for this research.

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5.3 Qualitative analysis
Data that is gained from the interviews has been analysed and structured using thematic analysis (Boeije, 2010). This type of analysis used themes or categories and was a valuable method for this qualitative research because of the explorative nature (Boyatzis, 1998; Boeije, 2010). Beforehand, it was largely unpredictable what data would be of value, and therefore open coding of the transcripts was the first step during the analysis of the data. According to Boeije (2010: 96) “open coding encourages a thematic approach since it forces the analyst to break up the text into pieces, to compare them and to assign them to groups that address the same theme”. This process of open coding was started by highlighting relevant sections in the text which were thereafter compared in order to search for similarities and differences, and to determine whether different sections should be grouped or not (Ibid.). As a result the data was segmented into meaningful themes. After categorising, connections were made between these themes in order give coherence to the analysis (Ibid.). This process is named axial coding and was applied after open coding. When both these forms of coding were addressed, some interesting results appeared which needed further examination. The use of the research method has been adjusted partway in order to investigate and verify earlier found results, and expand, confirm or deepen the assertions found during open and axial coding (Ibid.). For example by altering the interview questions. Finally, the process of selective coding has taken place and hereby important themes were determined which served as theoretical concepts in the findings section (Ibid.). However, it is important to note that this has not been a linear process as (new) data was constantly reviewed, reinterpreted and compared (Ibid.).

5.4 Limitations
Qualitative data reflects people’s experiences of their daily life, however, qualitative data are not exact representations of life experiences (Boeije, 2010) and this generated a possible limitation. Interviews included an interaction between the interviewee and the researcher and this means that the data was produced in a specific context with a specific aim, and therefore some information might be left out or the participants might have forgotten certain actions. Moreover, the social interaction between the interviewer and interviewee also made exact replication impossible because this interaction is always influenced by multiple circumstances (Jennings, 2001). In addition, “data depend on the participants’ ability to reflectively distinguish aspects of their own thoughts, ideas, observations and experiences and to effectively communicate what they perceive through language” (Polkinghorne, 2005 in Boeije, 2010: 58).
It is important to note that the students from Wageningen University all studied ‘Leisure, Tourism and Environment’. This is relevant because the data from these students could be influenced by what they have learned on leisure and therefore not solely be linked to their personal experiences. This is both a limitation and a strength of this research, as these students could also offer unique insights regarding leisure. It also indicates the importance of the interviews with the students from TU Delft as these function as a kind of counterpart to make comparison possible. Especially for the students from Wageningen University it was important to highlight the aim of the interview, which was to hear about their ideas, feelings and opinions, and the interview question were explicitly based on this aim.
In addition, planning has been very important for this study as (international) students have an educational program and the exam week and the week prior to the exams was especially busy for them. Moreover, it was important to consider when holidays were scheduled.
5.5 Conclusion

This study has been undertaken to explore how leisure can function as a coping mechanism for international students dealing with various problems during their study abroad experiences. Semi-structured interviews with foreign students and experts were used to collect the needed data which has been analysed using the thematic analysis. This produced theoretical concepts which are displayed in the findings. In addition, quotes which have been derived via the interviews are used in the findings. These quotes are reproduced verbatim and without changes in vocabulary and so may include spelling and grammatical errors. After the findings, multiple useful concepts are further explored in the discussion in order to provide an initial idea of the importance of leisure for the coping process of international students. Finally, in the conclusion of this research the research goal is discussed and an answer is provided to the main research question.
6. Findings

Data gathered from the interviews was analysed and the findings that emerged are described in this chapter. The various headings that are used represent the categories that are gained after a continuous process of open, axial and selective coding. The research questions, research goal and the theoretical framework were used as guidelines to construct these final categories. This chapter starts with a short illustration of how international students perceived the Netherlands, Dutch people, the city where they study, and the attended university. Subsequently, the difficulties that the students encountered are discussed, followed by an explanation on how they coped with these situations. This already includes some links with leisure, and therefore this is followed by a general description on the leisure lives of the participants. Finally, both the benefits and the obstacles of leisure are stated. The categories that are discussed in this chapter serve as a basis for the discussion and conclusion.

Both experts interviewed described international students as open people who are willing to experience new things. Most international students indicated they love to travel and that they have previous travel experience. Five of the interviewed students said that they had been to the Netherlands before for holidays or an exchange program during their high school period. All students that have been interviewed have a similar image of the Netherlands and its inhabitants. They mentioned that the level of English in the Netherlands is really good and one student even said that the Netherlands is the only country in Europe where most people speak flawless English. Four students have (partially) chosen the Netherlands as a study destination because of this high level of English and five indicated they have chosen the Netherlands (partially) due to cheap(er) tuitions fees. One student from Greece stated:

“So I have been in the Netherlands for holidays, I was always considering study abroad. So I went to the Netherlands for holidays, I really liked the country, I thought it would be a good country to study.”

Other foreign students decided to study in the Netherlands because of a specific university or program, and not specifically related to the country. The Netherlands is described by some students as an individualistic society. This is in line with the outcome of a study done by Hofstede (1980, in Ward et al., 2001) where the Netherlands ranks high in the Individualism index, to be exact the fifth place just behind the United States, Australia, Great Britain and Canada. According to Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001: 13-14), “in individualistic cultures people are much more loosely tied to other persons and groups” and “the self’s worth is evaluated in terms of its independence and uniqueness”. In addition, how people from either an individualistic or collectivistic society communicate differs (Ibid.). Dutch people are often described by the students as open and civilised. However, this openness of Dutch people can also make international students feel uncomfortable in certain situations, especially due to the direct communication style of Dutch people. Directness is also the most frequently used term to describe Dutch people. Although this directness and honesty is mentioned as difficult, all international students experienced it also as something positive because they claimed it made it easy to understand Dutch people, improved relationships with Dutch people, and because it is something they found unique.

Besides the Netherlands and the Dutch people, the interviewed students were also positive about the attended universities and the city in which these universities are located. Students from both
Wageningen and Delft described these cities as pleasantly small and green, but also interesting due to the open and friendly international environment. Moreover, both cities are described as gateways to other (big) cities in the Netherlands and even as gateways to other countries such as Belgium and Germany. There are some differences in the comments regarding the universities. TU Delft is chosen by all the interviewed students because it is believed to be one of the three best universities in its field, where Wageningen University is more often chosen because of the specific study program. The international students from Wageningen University claim that their program offers them an unique critical point of view regarding their program but also on world issues and developments.

In general the international students have a positive attitude towards the Netherlands, the Dutch people, the city where they are studying and the attended university. However, this does not mean that all their experiences during their study in the Netherlands went without a hitch. Which problems the international students faced during their study abroad is discussed in the next paragraph.

### 6.1 Difficulties

In the theoretical framework a general description is provided on the difficulties and stressors that, according to the current literature, can be experienced by international students. Some of these have also emerged in this study. However, at the beginning of this study it became apparent that most of the participants felt like they were not experiencing major stressors or difficulties during their study abroad. Despite all students mentioned some aspects they found difficult, both their the verbal (use of words) and non-verbal communication (the tone of voice, facial expression and body language) indicated these problems were not of great concern to them. As one student from Surinam stated:

“...I had a couple of bumpy first weeks, you know things don't go as easily [...], but you just get over it. It wasn't like the end of the word.”

The difficulties that have been mentioned by the participants are discussed below and the following difficulties and stressors from the theoretical framework are used: language difficulties, homesickness, academic stress and practical issues. An extra section is added because many international students mentioned making contact and interacting with Dutch people as being difficult, and this has not been defined as a possible difficulty before in the theoretical framework.

#### Language difficulties

Language difficulties were mainly experienced by the foreign students regarding practical matters such as doing groceries. A student from China mentioned it was difficult not being able to read the labels of packages in the supermarket. Related to this, a student from Kenya explained:

“The language was a bit of a problem. Especially if I got to the supermarket for example and I was shopping then everything is in Dutch. And also because the brands you have in the Netherlands are not familiar to me.”

During their study abroad, students often come across intercultural encounters where the involving parties speak different native languages. As mentioned before, according to Hofstede and his colleagues (2010), it is important to establish a more fundamental intercultural understanding by acquiring the host culture language, as they believe people will miss a lot of information when they do not speak the language of the host country. For this reason, it can be beneficial for international
students to understand and master the language of the host country. The student from Surinam explained:

“I think I have an advantage because I am from Surinam and I speak Dutch and English. And what happens a lot is that when we are out with these students (other internationals), they will ask me like what does this mean or can you translate, or they wanna learn Dutch so I tell them. [...] I can communicate with Dutch and the internationals so I think that this is way better, it is easier for me.”

The students did not only experience language difficulties regarding the host culture language. A student from Greece explained that the beginning of her time in the Netherlands was a bit hard because her level of English was not very good.

Homesickness
Four out of the fourteen students mentioned they had some troubles with missing home. This ranged from finding it hard to not being able to go to home due to the traveling costs, to actually being homesick. A Greek students described how she experienced being homesick:

“I mean even know now I am not used to the fact that I don’t live in Greece anymore. And I think that everything was fine, but feeling homesick all the time prevents you from appreciating all the things that are going on.”

Also the students from Surinam and England mentioned they missed home and their families, even though the Surinamese student also indicated she had family living in the Netherlands. The expert from Travel Active described that homesickness comes up easily, especially the first two weeks and after a few months when the students get used to everything and experiences are not new anymore.

Academic stress
Various academic stressors have been mentioned by the participants during the interviews. All students from TU Delft and two students from Wageningen University spoke of a difficult program. One TU Delft student from England described:

“I didn’t find it that difficult living here or adjusting to life here, but my course is bloody hard. I find it really difficult.”

Some of these students stated that the level of education in the Netherlands is higher than the level of education in their home country. Related to this, some students have mentioned it is sometimes hard to balance their academic and non-academic life because their program takes up so much time. For both foreign and domestic students it can be difficult to establish priorities and finding the right balance (Ward et al., 2001). Developing the appropriate study techniques is a problem that international and host students have in common (Ibid.). For example one student from India mentioned he only experienced difficulties when he did not meet a deadline, and this obviously also applies to students from the host country.

Yet, as mentioned before, international students experience unique difficulties in comparison to host students as they have to deal with an educational system with different cultural norms, habits, and values, but also with cultural differences in how people communicate, both verbal and non-verbal (Ward et al., 2001, Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). A student from China explained he found the Dutch educational system difficult because in China they have a completely different ideology and he
never had learned another way of thinking. For example, many international students mentioned a completely different student-lecturer interaction:

“For example education it is totally different. Here (in the Netherlands) it is more critical, encouraging you to think independently and be critical, have your own point of views. But in our culture education is more like you just listen to the teacher and you follow him or her and that is it.”

These difficulties are caused by different cultural values which manifest in differences in social interaction, etiquette, and in this case the student and lecturer roles (Ward et al., 2001). An international student from Latvia described her experience regarding the student and lecturer roles in the Netherlands:

“[…] behaviour of lecturers for example, that you are almost equal. […] it was normal to go to the bar for example and meet your lecturers there and share a beer. Which would be quite inappropriate in Latvia because lecturers don’t, yeah they still drink, but not in front of students. So that was a big difference.”

Though some international students found this relationship surprising, none of the participants were explicitly negative about it. One student from Italy even explained that she found it an improvement as in Italy, especially at universities, there was no chance to get into deep discussion about what they were studying due to the distance that existed between the student and the lecturer. Whereas in the Netherlands the lecturer relates to the students directly and practically which she believed opened up the opportunity for discussions and critical questions.

Besides the challenging interaction with lecturers, some students also indicated it was difficult to work together with other students (both Dutch and other internationals) as there are many cultural differences that have be taken into account. The student from Italy, for example, described a situation where she was working on a project with a good friend from India, and that their relationship suddenly changed which led to a conflict. They reached a cultural barrier as conflict solving is highly culturally bound (Ward et al., 2001), she wanted to talk it out, while he did not and just pretended it never happened. The expert interviewed from IxESN agreed and elaborated on this by stating that when you work with different nationalities, you have more different opinions. So, “the educational environment is a microcosm of the larger society and reflects its values, traditions and practices” (Ibid.: 156) which makes interaction with both lecturers and students from other cultures challenging.

Another difficulty that appeared in the educational environment was the high level of organisation and strict punctuality in the Netherlands. As one student from Peru clarified:

“Yeah for me something that is really weird is like, I arrive at a lecture that started 1.30 and I enter the room at like 1.32 and the guy is already at his third slide. For me that is like take it easy man. […] But I don’t get that still. I can’t understand the starting point. […] in my country, my university, […] the class starts at 11.00 and then they would say ‘at 11.15 I will close the door and nobody else comes in’. So they already giving you a quarter of an hour because they assume everybody is, and everybody is, late.”

A student from Portugal agreed with this as he stated that in terms of organisation the Netherlands is very different from his home country. One student from Greece considered this high level of organisation demanding but she stated that although it was hard, she learned more than during her bachelor back home.
Practical issues
The Dutch punctuality is also experienced by the students as a practical issue. A student from Surinam explained that she found it difficult to get used to the fact that she had to think more before she left the house because she had to catch a tram or train on time. She did not feel as free to do anything she wanted as she did at home in Surinam. A student from India explained he found it surprising that if he wanted to do something with a friend he had to schedule this:

“Like I think most of the Dutch persons and Dutch people here follow a strict schedule, and in India it is like we plan the next day. Here they mostly plan like a month ahead. Like even if you go for rowing [...].”

Some students also saw the benefits of this punctuality. For example, the student from Surinam also stated that she was able to schedule things and make appointments which provided her a better overview of what was coming.

Another practical issue that has been mentioned is the climate in the Netherlands. The student from Surinam even described it as the hardest part of studying in the Netherlands because she had to think more about what to wear and therefore missed the laid back feeling she had at home. She added that in winter times she was not as happy because when she looked outside it was just dark all the time. A student from India explained that as the sun shines longer in the Netherlands, this created issues with his eating habits, and another student mentioned this created sleeping issues. This climate issue also affected the academic life of some international students as is explained by the interviewee from Latvia:

“[...] weather has an influence on me. I was writing my thesis and good weather increased my productivity. Then I am happy, but at this moment if it’s all grey outside then I am not very satisfied.”

Furthermore, two students mentioned they had difficulties with Dutch food because it was very different from the food they ate at home. This difficulty is not only related to the type of food, but also to food habits as one student from Peru explained he could not get used to the habit of having dinner already at 6 pm.

Some other practical issues that have been mentioned by the students were finding specific information, finding a bike, doing the laundry, and driving. These issues were mentioned by the interviewees as troublesome because everything worked just a little bit differently from what they were used to. In addition, a student from India mentioned he was surprised about the amount of rules there are in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the student from Latvia said she had problems with the constant traffic noise in the Netherlands. She stated it was quite confusing for as in Latvia there is not as much traffic.

Difficulties interacting with Dutch people
Most participants also mentioned they found it hard to make contact with Dutch students. One student from India stated:

“Dutch are very helpful but it is difficult to get into the circle. [...] Dutch are sociable but it is difficult to become best friends with Dutch people.”

The students gave different explanations of why they found it difficult to integrate with Dutch students. For instance one student from Poland said it is difficult to have a small talk with Dutch,
which is easier with other internationals as they are in the same situation and eager to meet other people. He also explained:

“What I noticed is that I very often get along very well with people from similar cultures. Maybe not the same, but cultures that have like similar features. For example Polish people are generally, I would say, very family oriented. [...] And you meet people from cultures where these values are also important and somehow you just get along with them a lot.”

Another explanation is provided by the Surinamese student. She declared, contact with Dutch people is difficult because in the weekends most Dutch students go back to their families, while weekends are the best time for internationals to go out and meet people. Furthermore, according to the student from Germany, fraternities, societies and clubs are the best places for internationals to meet Dutch students. However, these are hard to join because the spoken language is often not English. The participant from Kenya described a situation where different cultural values caused problems as she was invited for a dinner by a Dutch student who afterwards asked for money, which she found really shocking. She explained that in Kenya people would never have to pay for hospitality as they have a culture of guest and hospitality partly due to the big tourism industry. While, according to this student, in the Netherlands people keep more to themselves unless you are a really close friend. Also the participant from Latvia noticed this difference in cultural values. She found it very difficult to get used to the fact that after a fun night out she had to be prepared that some Dutch people she had met, did not recognise or remember her the next day. She explained that in Latvia when people are welcoming you, they will also be welcoming you the next day. In the Netherlands people can have a nice time and then see each other never again. This student also mentioned she sometimes felt discriminated as her interaction with Dutch people became harder after she graduated. As a student she got respect from Dutch people, while the opposite is through now she, as an Eastern European citizen, is working in the Netherlands:

“If I am saying for example ‘I am Latvian and working in the Netherlands’, it doesn’t matter which occasion, people rather don’t speak with me. If I say ‘I came here for my studies’ and then say ‘I am eastern European’ it is totally different. [...] If you are a student you come to learn an maybe you can also give back something the society. If you come just to work, then you are trouble.”

The expert of IxESN mentioned it is difficult for some international students in general to meet new people. This is in line with the statement by Furnham and Bochner (1982, in Ward et al., 2001) that international students generally experience more social difficulties than host students. Yet, none of the participants agreed with this as they all stated that although they don’t have much contact with Dutch students, they do have a sufficient social life with co-nationals and multi-nationals.

Although some difficulties are declared as really hard and demanding by some students, for example homesickness, most problems are just situations that are different for international students. These situations are therefore most often experienced as surprising and not as particularly hard. This applies to both the academic difficulties, as well as to the difficulties they encounter in their daily life. However, no matter to what degree the difficulties are experienced, international students need to cope with these situations in order to both learn and live abroad. How the participants indicated they coped with the previously described difficulties will be discussed in the following paragraph.
6.2 Coping

The international students experienced a lot of things that were different from what is familiar to them. These differences are mentioned in the previous part as they are often experienced as difficult. The previous sections are used in order to discuss how the international students coped with these difficulties.

Coping with language difficulties

The student from Kenya described that for her doing groceries was quite hard as she did not know any brands and could not read the Dutch labels. She handled this situation by trying and testing different products until she found the one she liked. Although it took time, for her it was important to just experience the differences instead of holding on to things that were familiar to her. In addition she mentioned the benefits of having friends:

“And I think also just friends. Just having loads of Dutch friends or also other international friends willing to experiment with different products and recommend. That helps.”

The student from Greece whose English was not very good at the beginning of her study, improved her level by practicing with speaking English during her time in the Netherlands. She did not further elaborate on how she coped with this difficulty.

Coping with homesickness

The student from Greece explained how she handled her homesickness by holding on to some of her cultural habits such as mealtimes. She stated she could not really deal with her homesickness but it helped her to call her friends back home and talk to them for a while. The student from England used similar methods to cope with his homesickness. He had a flag of the UK up in his room as a reminder of his culture, and he spoke about his country to a lot to other people because he liked to share those things. Besides holding on to his identity, he wanted to learn Dutch as he believed this would help him integrate and cope with his homesickness:

“If I start learning some Dutch then I can obviously integrate myself a little bit better.” […] I do miss home a lot, so while integrating myself as much as possible, I am still am going to stay who I am, stay English.”

The Surinam student also explained that holding on to old habits was important for her in order to keep the feeling of home:

“I try to eat at the same time that I did back home. That is just specifically for my family because we always used to eat together like after my parents came home from work, and we would just sit together and talk about our whole day. And then I just feel like I am doing that since I was a little girl so I just wanna have that forever in my life. […] I do a lot of things like at home, I try to create the same life like at my parents’ house.”

Furthermore, she explained that she would be more depressed about being in the Netherlands and away from her family if she would not do things besides school.

The expert from Travel Active stated they try to prepare their students for homesickness by dedicating a chapter in their student handbook to this experience. They advise the students to stay busy, and to avoid contacting home too often. This is line what is mentioned by the student from Poland who described how he prevented being homesick by playing music with other people.
Coping with academic stress
Some students stated that contact with other students helped them through their difficult course as they could share experiences and it helped them to get their mind of problems. The student from Surinam explained how contact enhanced her mood:

“Just look at what other people are doing. Like in the weekends try to have as much fun as you can the moment you have like free time, and just go out and stuff.”

Also the expert from Travel Active acknowledged the importance of contact for international students, as she explained, it is important for getting recognition from each other, but also to talk about the things they go through. Yet, they stated that when a student has too much contact with someone from the same culture, this prevents integration as this student gets too much memories of the home country. The expert from IxESN elaborated on the importance of networks for international students:

“We have like a kind of introduction week and that really helps them because you see that they find people and everybody does not know anybody, so they are all in the same situation and they start to make friends. [...] The group is really important. That you, once they arrive you immediately you have a net, you can catch them and you are the first, like that they have a first network where they can build on.”

Furthermore, a student from China explained he learned to deal with the Dutch educational system from others:

“It (school) is kind of difficult but I guess you have to learn from others, to discuss with others, with professors and teachers.”

The student from Surinam explained she was able to cope with her difficult program thanks to her leisure life which offered a possibility to let things go and concentrate on fun things:

“Okay Wednesday I need to have the project done but then Wednesday night you know, you go dancing. So it just gives you something else to look forward to. So it makes you feel at ease and happy and just more in balance. Like I think that you are not in balance if you just always are busy with your schoolwork.”

This is also mentioned by an Indian student who states that his activities get his mind of studying. He stated it is also good to do something else. Another student from India explained why his leisure activities are important for getting his mind of studying:

“Yeah I love music, I love dancing. And most importantly because when you are busy, because Delft life is like too much of education here, so you have to study a lot. And I think it is just something we feel like, let’s just stop [...] not talk about studies. [...] you just love to do it because there is too much pressure sometimes because of assignments and stuff so yeah.”

Furthermore, the Latvian student explained that difficulties get less important when you do not concentrate on them. The student from England stated:

“Everyone doing my study, by Friday we are down and tired. So yeah, really when I have a nice weekend socialising or I have a nice week night socialising, it resets me up for the next week. It keeps me going.”
Besides social contact and leisure, the student from Peru talked about an example where he needed to adjust in order to have a sufficient academic life. He stated he had to improve his punctuality in order to cope with the different academic life in the Netherlands. He also explained this would cause problems when he would go back to his home country as being punctual is not common in Peru.

**Coping with practical issues**

Students coped with the different time management in the Netherlands by getting used to for example the different closing times of the stores in the Netherlands, as is explained by a student from India. He explained he had to adapt to these shopping times as in India the stores are open for a longer period of time. The student from Surinam explained how she had to adjust to the difference in time and seasonality in the Netherlands:

> “Just the time is a big thing to adjust to and just the fact that you have to order your day differently in winter because it gets dark. And then also in the summer it is like you feel tired but then it is still light outside and it kind of messes with your head as well.”

She also explained how she coped with the climate of the Netherlands by accepting this difference and not complain about it. She gave as an example that she thought it is cold in the Netherlands but that she tried not to keep saying that because she believed you should not focus on those things. She stated that people should rather focus on what they are here for, their study. She also tried to see the positive side of the Dutch weather as she explained she really enjoyed the first time it snowed. A student from India mentioned he had to get used to the sunshine as here the sun shines longer. Another student from India explained that for him Indian food and festivals were still very important in the Netherlands. He believed he just could not forget about those things. The importance of food is also acknowledged by the expert of IxESN who stated food is an important factor to establish networks as people need to eat anyway, but also because people bond over it. Moreover, the student from China explained that food creates an opportunity to learn about each other as food is highly culturally bound. He also explained how he dealt with Dutch food by learning to cook for himself:

> “Most different is food, I am not used to Dutch food at all. I think I am kind of open, I accept all kind of food, but I cannot accept food here {in the Netherlands}. [...] To be honest I didn’t cook before I came here but now I am a really good chef of Chinese food.”

Practical issues such as finding information are dealt with by the students through contact with friends. Some students mentioned for example the importance of sharing experiences, which is also mentioned by the expert of Travel Active. A student from India stated that for him it is important to have people around to share and talk about these problems in order to overcome them.

**Coping with interaction difficulties**

Many students dealt with the difficult contact with Dutch people, and especially Dutch students, by trying to learn from the experiences and situations they encountered. A student from India elaborated on this by explaining how he handled the differences between his culture and the Dutch culture:
“[...] I learned these kind of things like the Dutch people are very direct [...]. So it wasn’t naturally, but now I get used to it.”

Another student from India described how his leisure activity offered him the opportunity to learn about the cultural differences beforehand as he was walking with Dutch people. He believed that he therefore also knew how to deal with difficult interaction with other Dutch people in different situations. This connects to the experience of the Kenyan student who attended a Dutch church in her leisure time at the beginning of her study abroad where she got all kind of information through booklets, and found people, both Dutch and other internationals, who gave her recommendations and advise. Other students just accepted the situation. A student from Latvia explained she did not analyse her experiences at the time, she mentioned everything was just new. Some other students felt like they had to adjust to the Netherlands in order function effectively in their everyday life. An example is provided by a student from India:

“You have to adapt to the rules over here (in the Netherlands), there are a lot of rules. You even have biking rules, which I had no idea, because we (Indians) bike randomly. [...] You have to adapt to the rules of the country.”

**Conclusion**

The data on coping is not as comprehensive as could have been expected after reading the literature. This might be due to the fact that many international students believed they did not experience major difficulties, and therefore felt they did not need to cope with these situations. However, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the coping processes of these students because when looking at the data there are some links visible between the various ways of coping by the international students.

Firstly, it is noticeable that students tried to get used to various new features of their study and everyday lives in the Netherlands. It became apparent from the data that international students partly cope with the previously mentioned difficulties by just experiencing difficult situations and observing how things work, and then just get used to it. The students explained how they achieved this using strategies related to coping by adjustment to the host culture, by accepting cultural differences, and by maintaining their identity. These are explained before in the theoretical framework, but it is not a linear process as some students mentioned using just one strategy while others use them simultaneously or not at all. This differs per individual student and per difficulty. The experts from IxESN and Travel Active have specifically indicated they mainly use adjustment to the Netherlands as a focus point for the coping process of international students, but most students did not explicitly state if and how they used the coping areas.

Secondly, the data showed that students used contact with others to cope with their difficulties. International students used contact with students, friends, lecturers (all can be host-nationals, co-nationals and multi-nationals), and contact with friends and family back home, in order to cope with various problems. All students from Delft indicated their friendships were mainly with fellow housemates which are co- and multi-nationals. This might be due to the fact they live in an international student housing where it is easy to meet other internationals in the shared areas. The same goes for two students from Wageningen who also lived in a student housing. Two other students from Wageningen University indicated they have contact with co-, multi-nationals, and some host-nationals. This might be because these students are graduated and are living in the...
Netherlands for already a longer period of time. Further, one student from Wageningen mentioned she only had contact with co-nationals. Finally, some students have indicated how they use leisure activities to cope with difficulties they encounter both in their academic and their everyday life. In addition, when looking at the moment when students cope with their difficulties, it becomes clear that the participants in this study cope in their leisure time, this includes coping with academic stressors. Before this will be further discussed, it is important to elaborate on the leisure lives of the international students in general. Therefore, in the next paragraph the leisure activities of the students are presented. With an emphasis on the division between serious or casual leisure, and on the distinction between new or familiar activities.

6.3 Leisure
The importance of leisure is widely recognised as it provides jobs, incomes, and economic development (Cushman, Veal & Zuzanek, 2005). Moreover, according to the following articles by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, leisure is considered one of the basic human rights (Ibid.: 1):

*Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.* (Article 24)

*Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.* (Article 27)

According to the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP [Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau], 2000 in Cushman et al., 2005), Dutch people in comparison to other European nations, attach a relatively high value to leisure, and they have relatively few complains about the availability of leisure and/or opportunities to enjoy their spare time. The SCP believes that this level of satisfaction with leisure in the Netherlands may be the result of high levels of holiday and sport participation, and possibly the high level of provision of facilities (Ibid.). It appears from this study that the foreign students agree with this latter. Except for one student from Wageningen, all the interviewees were very positive about the leisure opportunities in order for them to do what they like in their free time. For example, in both Delft and Wageningen there is a cultural centre and a sport centre where students get discounts. The student from Surinam highlights the benefits of the sport centre in Delft. She stated that although you need to subscribe it is open to everyone, furthermore she mentioned there is a lot to do and it is cheap. According to the Polish student there are more activities available in Delft then at his previous university in Poland. The student from Latvia even emphasises the risk of the numerous leisure possibilities in the Netherlands:

“In the Netherlands you have so much opportunities for it (leisure) that I think that those students (international students) also have to learn to balance their study life and social life.”

The one student from Wageningen who was not satisfied with the leisure opportunities said she liked to go out at clubs and suchlike, and she stated this is not possible in Wageningen. Other students from Wageningen agreed with this statement, but for them going out was not as important. In general, the leisure activities of all students resemble each other. Below, the leisure pursuits of the international students will be discussed with an emphasis on the division between serious and casual leisure, and thereafter on the distinction between familiar and new leisure activities.
6.3.1 Leisure pursuits

The international students mentioned many different activities which they performed in their spare time. Important to note is that although all participants were provided a definition of leisure prior to the interview, there were still some different perceptions of the term. For example, sleeping is mentioned as a leisure activity while the provided definition of leisure was: the time left over after work, sleeping, feeding, bathing, household chores, homework, and other self-maintenance activities. Yet, because the interviews are held in order to give international students the opportunity to share and explain their perspective on leisure, this study defined sleeping as leisure activity. The table below provides a brief and clear overview of the activities that have been mentioned by the participants.

Table 1. Overview of the mentioned leisure activities by the participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leisure activity:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanging with friends at home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parties/go out with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking and having dinner with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching series/television/movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveling/hiking/camping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing an instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visiting festivals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skating/rollerblade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playing quash</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playing football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jogging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playing knotsball <em>popular ball game in Wageningen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing rugby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longboard riding <em>similar to a skateboard</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock climbing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayaking/canoeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxing at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the Board of the study program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picnicking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time with boyfriend/girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting family (in the Netherlands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking weed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walking around the city</td>
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</table>
6.3.2 Casual and serious leisure

Some of the activities the participants preferred to do individually, but they stated that most activities are undertaken with friends. However, both of these activities consist of mainly casual leisure activities. A few examples of the casual leisure activities that were mentioned are sports, watching television, sleeping, reading, playing music, hanging and going out with friends, cooking and traveling. Some of these activities can also be considered serious leisure activities, as already stated by the expert of IxESN people for example can also learn a lot from food because it is culturally bound. However, these activities are chosen by the participants for the main reason of relaxation and are therefore regarded as casual leisure activities. Yet, some students have plans for serious leisure activities in the future. As is noted by the English students who intended to learn Dutch but was not able to do so because of his difficult and demanding program, he said he would like to do this next year. To be exact, only one student from Peru mentioned performing a serious leisure activity as he was member of the Board of his program.

6.3.3 New and familiar activities

The amount of leisure activities show that the international students carried out a wide range of activities. According to Kim and Gudykunst (1988, in Reisinger & Turner, 2003) cultural differences are noticeable in these activities. This also manifest in this study as for example the student from China explained he did not like to party as much, because he believes Chinese people are not really into parties and they feel more pressure to perform well in their academic life. According to Sivan and Stebbins (2011: 32), “leisure culture develops people’s sense of belonging to their society”. This is line with the notion by Allen and his colleagues (2010: 422) that “sport can be utilised as a way of maintaining one’s cultural identity”. So, the leisure activities that the international students choose could be a way for them to maintain a sense of belonging to their home country. However, out of the fourteen participating students, only four students indicated their leisure life was similar to the leisure life they had in their country of origin. As the student from Greece explained she performs the same activities she did in Greece. She watches movies during the working days, and likes to go out with her friends from Greece in the weekends. The student from Italy mentioned her main leisure activity is still gymnastics as this takes a lot of time. Also the student from Surinam explained that although she tried new things she ended up doing the same activities as she did back home. The student from Poland stated that he even looked up the possibilities for playing music before he decided to come the Netherlands.

The other students experienced partially a different leisure life. This is foremost because their circumstances changed as a result of studying the Netherlands, but some students also deliberately carried out some additional new activities as is explained by the student from Kenya:

“I just came to experience new things, meet new people. [...] I wanted to have new experiences too, things I have never done before, that I wouldn’t do in Kenya. So it was not that I was holding on to things from Kenya because I actually was coming very consciously to experience things that were not Kenyan [...] So I really like the rock climbing what I did, I joined a club for rock climbing events and they taught me from scratch, I mean I never climbed before. So that was really nice.”

The student from Germany explained why he deliberately chose new leisure activities. He started to ride a longboard because he wanted to have a nice way to go to school, and in addition he decided to learn how to play the guitar in the Netherlands as it was something he wanted to do for a while but was not able to do so before. The same goes for the student from Peru who was familiar with squash.
but only started playing it in the Netherlands, he also discovered “knotsball” during his study in the Netherlands as it is a popular ball game in Wageningen. These students also performed activities similar to the ones they did back home as is explained by the student from Kenya. She performed some outdoors activities which she also did in Kenya because she believes being outdoors is part of her culture. Some other students explained why their leisure life changed due to circumstances on which they had no control. A student from India explained that his leisure activities changed because there are a lot of atheists in the Netherlands, and therefore there were not as much religious activities to do for him. One more example is provided by a student who traded his jogging for cycling as this is more common in the Netherlands. Other students mentioned their leisure life changed positively due to different circumstances in the Netherlands. As a student from India explained how his night life changed because he no longer had his family around:

“In India the thing is that eh for example, especially the, you have family issues. You just can’t go at night. And I mean come on, even if you go at ten o’clock you get like ten calls from your parents, ‘where the hell are you, when are you coming?’. It is just a sense of responsibility you have to come back. Here you are doing your studying, you are responsible for you partying. You are responsible for your time.”

The students from Latvia and China also explained why their leisure changed due to cultural differences as they mentioned that in their home country it is not common or even allowed to go out as much and attend too many parties. While according to the student from Latvia, this is almost expected from students in the Netherlands as otherwise they do not fit in:

“In Netherlands beer is very important in my opinion and yeah as a good student you should go out at least two or three days a week during your studying time. [...] Otherwise you just don’t fit in.”

Furthermore, the leisure time of most international students also changed because of the amount of available free time they had. Some student indicated they have more free time in the Netherlands compared to the time they had available in their home country, while others state they currently enjoy less spare time. A student from India explained this difference as he before he started his study in the Netherlands, had a job with regular working hours and did not have to deal with deadlines and things like that in his leisure time.

In addition, the student from China explained how he developed cooking as a hobby because he could not get used to Dutch food and therefore decided to learn to cook for himself. While in China he used to go out for dinner very often. The student from Latvia adds that the opportunity to learn changed her leisure time, as she considered the leisure scene in the Netherlands far more multicultural than in Latvia which enhanced her to learn from other cultures. Something she really appreciated.

Though the leisure life of many international students has changed, a lot of students also maintained the activities they did at home, they just had to change the conditions of these activities somewhat. This is possible in the Netherlands because as is said before the provision of leisure facilities is quite broad. According to Cushman and his colleagues (2005: 186), this is due to the history of the Netherlands as it “has been a relatively ‘open’ country, and highly involved in the global economy right from its inception. Scrutinising Dutch leisure practices, reveals a highly eclectic and diverse ‘melting pot’ of activities, goods and services from all over the world.” Furthermore they state that
“Dutch’ leisure is no more, and no less, than an historically grown local amalgam of globally available activities, goods and services.”

6.4 The benefits of leisure

The participants were asked why leisure was important for them during their study abroad, and the answers have be divided in social and psychological benefits of leisure. Here the benefits are described and the next chapter will elaborate on why these benefits are important for the coping process of international students. Where applicable, the distinction between serious and casual leisure, and between familiar and new activities, is used.

6.4.1 Social benefits of leisure

As mentioned before, social contact is vital for people as it provides emotional support, companionship, tangible assistance, and informational support (Ong & Ward, 2005). Furthermore, in 1943 Abraham Maslow created a five level hierarchy of human needs, see figure 8 (Freitas & Leonard, 2011). These five levels of needs are termed by Maslow as physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. Part of the third level, love and belonging, is friendships as human being need to feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and affiliation from their social groups (Williams & Page, 1989). The participants from this study agreed with this statement as all mentioned that social contact, and friendships in particular, is of major importance during a study abroad.

![Maslow's hierarchy of needs](image)

Figure 8. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

According to the participants, most social interaction takes place in their leisure time as they do not have much friends in their class. Although some mention to be friends with fellow students, especially friendships with Dutch students are not common. The students indicated they foremost have contact with co-nationals (a mono-cultural network) and multi-nationals (a multi-cultural network). Nevertheless, most indicated they would like to have more contact with Dutch people, and they believe also Dutch people would like to have more contact with internationals. The international students in this study indicated they prefer to interact more with Dutch students as they acknowledge that they could learn a lot from Dutch students both regarding their academic and personal development. Moreover, the international students have indicated they would like to learn more about the Dutch culture. The student from England believed that leisure could play an important role in order to establish this:

“I suppose yeah if I am socialising and all, doing all my hobbies and stuff it just allows you to, as a said before, get into the community and get into contact with Dutch people.”

Studying Abroad: Both Learning and Living. Leisure as a coping strategy for international students.
A student from Poland agreed with this as he explained he likes the musical jam-sessions he attends because he gets the chance to have a beer and meet people, including some Dutch people. However, the participants did not only want to learn more about the Dutch culture, as eight students explicitly mentioned contact with other internationals is important in order to learn from other cultures. As the student from England stated:

“I think one of the great things of being an international student is that I have developed a lot of good friendships and social awareness about other cultures. Like where I come from in England, there is just really English people. [...] I am learning a lot and not just my studies. [...] I know a lot of people that haven’t been in an international community and are very narrow minded. So it opened me up, changed my perspective on things.”

In addition, the student from Poland described that as an international student you are forced to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, which he believed broadens your horizon. Moreover, he described how people get more tolerant towards each other:

“[…] you can like realise that you, that we are all like similar no matter which culture or which kind of person you are, but on the other hand there are some differences so you are getting like more tolerant towards other cultures just because you see this part of us is similar but also that you have differences which you have to tolerate.”

As the expert from Travel Active explained, the contacts students acquire through leisure activities, opens up the minds of these students. This importance of learning about other cultures during leisure time is also mentioned by the expert from IxESN. A student from Surinam explained:

“The whole experience like living here with the international students, it is so much fun. Like at every party you just meet someone from a country, like you know it exists but now that you met someone from that country, that country has a face. And it’s good to just meet as many people as you can and learn as much as you can about the world.”

Besides learning from other cultures, leisure provides many more social benefits for international students. As a student from Poland described, leisure provides a setting where people have something is common which he believed is advantageous for establishing sufficient relations. This in turn is gainful for the opportunity of international students to talk to people who are in the same situation, which is a benefit of leisure according to a student from India and the expert of IxESN. This same student from India also highlighted that when people are in the same situation, it is easier to share and talk about problems. Which is also mentioned by the expert from Travel Active:

“it [contact with other students] is a recognition from each other, you can talk about things you are going through.”

Additionally, the expert from IxESN stated that leisure activities enable international students to create bigger networks, which means they get more people on whom they can count, and more people from whom they can receive, and with whom they can share, important information. The student from Germany agreed with by this by stating that in his leisure time he has people who he can ask for help and advice. Yet, not all students defined meeting people as vital during their study in the Netherlands, as one student from India explained:
“I won’t say it’s important to meet people but very comfortable. It is very refreshing to meet new people and they have their own stories to tell. [...] I won’t say it is important to meet people, but when you get a chance I think it is a really good thing to meet people.”

This student also mentioned he thinks it is nice to know people so he has someone to talk to during breaks. Also the student from Latvia explained why sometimes it is not solely positive to meet people in leisure time:

“And sometimes it [contact with people] can be disturbing. [...] And I still can notice it if I go for swimming, that is the worst place to be if you want to be alone.”

However, most international students are positive about meeting others as a student from Kenya indicated social interaction is not just beneficial, but vital for human beings as they are social creatures. The expert from IxESN agreed with this by stating that people just feel better when they have the opportunity to meet others. This latter is already slightly related to the psychological benefits of leisure, which will be discussed below.

6.4.2 Psychological benefits of leisure
In 1987 the then Secretary-General of the United Nations declared (Cushman et al., 2005: 1):

One of the primary needs of the human person is leisure and such use of it as will provide psychological strength and refreshment. (Perez de Cuellar, 1987)

This psychological benefit of leisure is also mentioned by both the international students and the experts in this study. However, in contrast to the social benefits of leisure, many of the psychological benefits are defined as important for their academic life as well, while the mentioned social benefits are more often linked to personal development. For example, the student from Kenya mentioned the psychological benefit of leisure to clear her mind. She explained how travelling helped her during her thesis because after reading, writing and thinking so much she felt like her mind clotted:

“[...] what I do is in between I travel a lot during my thesis because it is just being out there. It frees my mind it moves all the blocking and blockages and when I come back and I feel like I can think fresh again.”

A student from India agreed with this as he stated leisure time makes his mind fresh and clean. This is also mentioned by the student from Latvia as she explained that during a hard cycle ride she can solve big problems and form conclusions about what to do, because in that moment she is able to think things through and put her thoughts together. Also the Surinam student explained that in leisure she can let things go and see the fun side of things. A student from Germany described how leisure clears his mind, but also how it works distracting for him:

“[...] I really try to shut down the thought of studies and like running is a really, a really good way to like get your mind free or get like nights out. And like playing guitar is like really nice in between because you can get it out and play for 10 minutes, and then do something else. It’s a really, it’s really a nice short break you get from the usual.”

Distraction is mentioned by three other students as a benefit of leisure. The distraction leisure activities provide are most often linked to the academic lives as the students feel a need to think about something else every now and then. The international students use leisure to accomplish this
as is explained by an Indian student who stated that his activities get his mind of studying and it is also good to do something else. The student from Germany also explained that taking time for himself is beneficial for his schoolwork.

Besides the possibility of clearing their minds and being distracting, some students also mentioned that leisure provides a balance in their busy lives. They explained leisure functions as a kind of counterpart of their academic life. This is also explained by a student from Surinam who stated that her life is not in balance when she would always be busy with her schoolwork. Many students linked this to the strength of leisure of providing (often much needed) relaxation as is explained by a student from India:

“Yes it (cycling) is very relaxing, refreshing because it is mostly, because of the greenery here. [...] It is definitely important, it gives me an edge back to get back into life. So it is like a balance thing.”

The student from Portugal also acknowledged the importance of leisure for his study as he explained that in his spare time he can relax and then he is more motivated to study afterwards. Also two other students from Poland and India explained that relaxing in free time helps to release stress. It is important to note that relaxation is not solely defined as important for the academic lives of the participants, but for their everyday lives as well. Related to relaxation is the potential of leisure to provide a feeling of being calm. The student from Surinam described that leisure works calming for her as she has so much to think about all the time, while in her leisure time she can do things which do not require thinking. This might also be a reason why many students choose familiar activities as is explained by the Surinam student, who stated that when she is stressed because of stuff and she needs to think all the time, she just wants to do something familiar. The expert from Travel Active also suggests that familiarity is important for students:

“What I think is it gives them a feeling, it is something they know. So it is something they are already good at. So in a world where language is different, the school system is different, family life is different when you like horse-riding that is still the same. So that gives a kind of familiarity for them.”

Furthermore, leisure is also said to have benefits which are related to providing excitement as is mentioned by a student from India. Two students also mentioned how leisure provides them new energy. The student from Italy for example compared leisure to Oxygen as it helps her to regain energy for studying and the student from England explained:

“I for me it (leisure) is very important, very important because yeah I need, I don’t get enough of it actually, but I need free time to recharge and I don’t think I would do well in my studies at all without sufficient free time.”

Furthermore, an important psychological benefit, according to five students and both experts, is the power of leisure to provide fun. The student from Kenya explained that if she would be working the whole day, she would become dull. Also the student from Surinam thinks leisure is important to prevent being bored as she explained it is fun to have something to look forward to, and it helps you to get out of your room which, in addition, prevents depression. She also stated fun is generally important:

“Though it is really important you do well in school but at the same time it is so important that you have fun in life because I know if you don’t do that know you will regret it later.”
The student from Kenya agreed with this as she stated leisure makes her feel more fulfilled. Additionally, she mentioned that leisure made her study abroad experience a more holistic experience, as she was able to experience people and situations during less serious moments. This latter might be an explanation why many international students do not choose serious leisure activities. They maybe liked to experience the ‘fun’ side of life, as their academic life is already quite demanding. The student from Poland even explained that he cannot imagine a life without leisure as it makes him happy and more satisfied with his life in the Netherlands, and the student from Germany explained leisure gives him a break from his everyday life. Finally, the student from Latvia states:

“My life is about enjoyment. [...] It’s like whole my life, as soon as I have some savings, I go to travel for example. I come back with zero on my account, with no idea what should I do now. Somehow I survive and then I get it again and I never learn, I spend the whole again. But it is another experience, it is like for me I don’t have to have a lot of money, but I have to have a lot of moments.”

6.5 Leisure obstacles

The previous sections indicate that leisure is vital in the lives of international students. However, leisure also has its problems and this study focused on two aspects of these obstacles. On the one hand the study looked at how the international students feel they are constrained to participate in certain leisure activities, and on the other hand this study also reveals some aspects of leisure which constrain international students in other areas of their lives (e.g. their academic life).

6.5.1 Factors which constrain leisure participation

Most students are content with the leisure opportunities that are offered in Delft and Wageningen. Therefore, they do not feel constrained by opportunity factors, but the students indicated they more often feel constrained due to social/circumstantial factors and personal factors. These factors which prevents them from doing what they would like to do in their leisure time, will be discussed below.

Financial problems are mentioned as a constraint for leisure participation, and this constraint is according to Page and Connell (2010) part of circumstantial factors which influence the ability to participate in, and enjoyment of leisure activities. Some students talked about how they had to consider which leisure activities to pick as they did not had enough money to do all the things they liked. For example the student from China who would have liked to travel more but this was not possible as it was too expensive. The student from Peru explained he could not do all the things he liked anymore because he lived in Amsterdam but studied in Wageningen. He used to get student grants and a travel card but not any more and he therefore did not had the money to travel between the two cities as often as he used to. The student from Poland explained he has a bit less money to spend as he did in his home country.

Besides money, a lot of students lacked time which is also considered by Page and Connell (2010) a circumstantial factor. A student from India explained how the lack of time constrained him:

“I don’t get too much time to do culture activities because this year was really hectic. I was trying to go to courses in the culture centre but will try to do it next year. There are a lot of activities over there. I like to get into some of the painting sessions there.”

Time wise, another student from India explained that he could not participate in certain activities because he has no free time periodically. This means he cannot perform leisure activities which
demand a weekly presence for a longer period of time. There are also some students who feel they are restrained in their leisure life because of their academic life as a student from Germany explained:

“I used to do that (meet new people) and that was quite good. But then this, like the studies have overtaken. So I stay home a lot more than I actually used to in the beginning.”

The student from England explained he found his course so difficult, he had to drop some hobbies, including his ambition to learn Dutch. This is related to the amount of time students have available for leisure.

A further circumstantial factor is mentioned by three students from India, Latvia and Kenya who stated seasonality influenced the leisure choices they made. According to the student from India there is not much to do in winter time. While the students from Latvia and Kenya indicated they changed the conditions of their activities. For example, some students liked to jog, and in summer times they would jog outside, while in the winter times they would go to the sport centre.

Two students and one expert also mentioned the constraint due to culture in leisure participation which is a personal factor (Page & Connell, 2010). For example, as said before, Chinese students pressure themselves more to perform well in school and this constrains their leisure participation. The expert from IxESN mentioned for example that in general African and Asian students miss out on the activities they offer because they stick more together. The student from Surinam explained that she misses out on some of the activities organised by fellow internationals in her flat because she is often away to visit family members who also live in the Netherlands. Yet, her culture also gives her advantage regarding leisure participation as she can speak both English and Dutch.

Two other things that were mentioned by only one participant are personal traits and gender, both personal factors. (Page & Connell, 2010) The first has been mentioned by the student from China who explained that he is not a very efficient person and therefore gets into trouble regarding his planning. Which means he has to do schoolwork in the evenings and weekends. The student from Latvia stated that women do not get as much respect in the Netherlands as women in Latvia. She mentioned as an example swimming:

“I go swimming and a lot of times I stop going to swim on Sundays [...] because I got a lot of attention. It is like for male it’s, I haven’t seen you for long would you like to go for a coffee? And I see it as disturbing.”

Another constraint is mentioned by the student from Kenya who recently graduated. She explained her leisure life changed because she is no longer active in activities which are organised by student organisations. For her graduation became a circumstantial factor which constrained her to participate in her former leisure activities.

Finally, most students have mentioned they feel constrained in their leisure time due to social factors. An example is provided by a student from India as he explained he sometimes has to go home earlier from parties and suchlike because he has to Skype with the family back home. Furthermore, the expert from Travel Active indicated she believes social media can prevent students from getting into contact with Dutch students. Another example is when leisure activities are undertaken with other people. However, most participants do not consider this a constraint, but more as something they have to take into account when planning their leisure activities. This is explained by the student from Kenya who really likes to travel but does not like to do this alone. The same goes for the students from England and Germany who indicated they prefer to do their
activities with friends. Another student from India stated that if you have a social life, you have to take your friends into account.

6.5.2 Leisure as a constraint
There are quite a few factors which influence the choices that international students make regarding their leisure time and which sometimes constrain them in pursuing their desired activities. However, leisure itself also has an influence on the choices international students make, which sometimes lead to leisure as a constraint. Especially school is mentioned as something that can be neglected due to leisure. The student from Latvia for example mentioned how leisure can create difficulties:

“I think for a lot of students because of leisure time they got difficulties. I think that its most of the case because students are excellent example to postpone the deadlines which cannot be postponed. And that, I think that also an important part because the price is too cheap. Like everybody has been student and every, [...] but when you are a student we know there is a deadline and there is an important party, what would go first?”

Also the student from Greece explained how she thinks people can get into troubles with their school due to leisure:

“I mean it (leisure) would also be, have drawbacks in the sense that you have, you want to do things and you leave your stuff behind to make your friends for example. But I think that besides the feeling of being appreciated or belonging there is no other way. [...] I have seen, I mean I didn’t do it, first year for me it was not that socially, but I have seen people overdoing it with social life. So there academic life was left behind.”

Finally, the student from Surinam highlighted both sides:

“I mean it can happen that you forget to ehm do stuff for school and stuff because you have to go to I don’t know like some class and stuff. And then also it can happen that you skip classes because you are putting school first. So it is a challenge to find the balance between them. And that is what’s good I think because that is part of growing up right. Just to make your own schedule and find your yeah.”

Interesting is that this student from Surinam also explained how this effect of leisure is important for the personal development of international students, as this responsibility over their academic life is part of growing up.

6.6 Conclusion
In summary, the international students are generally quite positive about the Netherlands and the Dutch people. Although all students mentioned that some aspects of their study in the Netherlands where problematic, many students did not consider these situations as major difficulties. Some students indicated they expected the differences between the Netherlands and their home country to be greater, and several other students found it difficult to compare their culture to the Dutch culture as they did not know the Dutch culture too well. The data revealed that the coping mechanisms of the students relate to three areas, namely by getting used to circumstances, having contact with others and the use of leisure. Thereafter, the leisure pursuits of the international were displayed with a special focus on the distinctions between casual and serious leisure, and new and familiar activities. Which type of leisure and activities are preferred by the international students became clear thereafter when describing the social and psychological benefits of leisure. These benefits will, in the next chapter, be linked to the coping process of the international students.
7. Discussion

This chapter consist of a discussion on the findings from the previous chapter in order to provide an preliminary impression of the importance of leisure for international students. In the previous chapter the following items were addressed: the difficulties of international students, how they coped with these difficulties, general information on the leisure lives of the participants, and the experienced benefits and obstacles of leisure. These items are used in order to provide an initial overview of how leisure could function as a coping strategy for international students in the Netherlands.

The difficulties that are experienced by the international students can be divided in academic issues, and problems that the students encountered in their everyday life. This latter includes language difficulties, homesickness, practical issues and interaction difficulties with Dutch people. Below, a table is provided with an overview of the mentioned difficulties by the participants.

Table 2. Overview of the mentioned difficulties by the participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language difficulties</th>
<th>Homesickness</th>
<th>Academic stress</th>
<th>Practical issues</th>
<th>Interaction difficulties with Dutch people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Reading Dutch while doing groceries.</td>
<td>- Not being able to go home.</td>
<td>- Handling a hard and demanding program.</td>
<td>- Getting used to different time management.</td>
<td>- Making contact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Speaking adequate English.</td>
<td>- Missing friends and family back home.</td>
<td>- Developing a new way of thinking.</td>
<td>- Getting used to a different climate.</td>
<td>- Becoming friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Not being able to get used to living in another country.</td>
<td>- Getting used to new student/teacher roles.</td>
<td>- Getting used to different food and eating rituals.</td>
<td>- Feeling discriminated after graduation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Working together with fellow students. |
- Getting used to punctuality. |
- Getting used to small things such as finding information, doing laundry, driving, new rules and noise. |

It is important to note that this distinction is not absolute because the difficulties can overlap. For example, problems with speaking English can also be encountered in the academic life of the students. The same goes for the consequences of these difficulties as the effects are felt by the students in both their academic life and their daily life. For instance, a hard and demanding program causes stress, and academic stress is found to be a significant predictor of life stress which is obviously also experienced in their daily lives (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Similar, negative feelings due to homesickness, such as loneliness and sadness, results in poor decision making and studying skills.
This means that also the positive consequences of these difficulties are felt in both areas of their lives because when difficulties are handled effectively they can eventually result in both academic and personal development. For example, one student mentioned she had a hard time finding a balance between school obligations and leisure activities, but she stated that figuring this out is an important part of growing up and resulted in both academic and personal development.

As previously mentioned, study travel is considered beneficial for international students as these experiences have an impact on their intellectual and international perspective, and their personal development (Lumkes Jr. et al., 2012). For this reason, it is important for foreign students to cope with stressors and difficulties in order to have an effective and productive study abroad experience. In the following paragraphs it is discussed how leisure could contribute to the establishment of this profitable experience for foreign students.

7.1 The ability of leisure to support coping mechanisms

The data showed that the international students coped using various strategies. They for example indicated they got used to their new circumstances by accepting cultural differences, maintaining their identity, and adjusting to the host culture. Furthermore, they mentioned that contact with others helped them to cope with their difficulties. From the study it became apparent that leisure could support these coping mechanisms. For example, leisure can be used as a way of maintaining one’s cultural identity when the students perform familiar activities (Allen et al., 2010). Another example is that students can adjust themselves to the host culture by performing, for them new, Dutch activities. Concerning the acceptance of cultural differences, the international students mentioned that it is important to have fun and not complain about new circumstances. They achieved this through their casual leisure activities which they stated provided fun and enjoyment. Moreover, the students have indicated that the majority of their friendships are developed in their free time when they are having fun, which indicates the importance of especially casual leisure for coping through having contact with others. Although leisure has a valuable ability to support other coping mechanisms, no further attention is given to this subject as the goal of the study is to explore whether leisure could function as a separate coping strategy.

In the next paragraph, the social and psychological benefits of leisure are used in order to explore how leisure could function as a separate coping strategy. However, it is important to note that in particular the social benefits overlap with the coping strategy ‘contact with others’. The difference is that the latter has as a main focus contact, while the social benefits are viewed from a leisure perspective. In other words, this latter only includes interaction which the international students encountered in their leisure time. The same applies to the psychological benefits of leisure which in some ways matches the coping strategy ‘getting used to new circumstances’. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the coping strategies and the benefits of leisure are viewed as two separate matters, and as mentioned above, in the next section the benefits of leisure are discussed.

7.2 Using the benefits of leisure to cope with difficulties

The international students in this study have mentioned various benefits of leisure during the interviews. In the this paragraph each set of difficulties (see table 2) is used in order to indicate how these benefits of leisure have been used by the students in order to cope with their difficulties. This
way, an initial idea is provided on the importance of leisure for coping. Where applicable, the literature from the theoretical framework is used to support the statements of the participants.

**Language difficulties**
Leisure is important for coping with language difficulties as students can meet other people in their leisure time with whom they can share experiences and information. This is important for e.g. doing groceries which is mentioned by one student who used her Dutch friendships for translations and advise on which products to use, and used her friendships with other internationals (co- and multi-nationals) in order to experiment with different products together. Moreover this student used common meeting places of international students (e.g. church or student housing) in order to gain more information. This is in line with the statement of Hendrickson and his colleagues (2011) that leisure is important for the coping process of international students as it offer them the chance to have discussions and share experiences with others. In addition, leisure is not only important for language difficulties regarding the Dutch language, but also for difficulties with English. Although nothing is mentioned about coping regarding this difficulty, students can learn and practice their English in leisure because international students speak English amongst each other as it is a world language.

**Homesickness**
Many students used leisure activities to deal with their homesickness. First of all as it helps them to think about something else, so it offers distraction. Caldwell (2005 in Best 2010) also mentions the psychological strength of leisure to work distracting. Moreover, activities besides school give them something to do which, according to one of the students, prevents feeling depressed about being in the Netherlands and far away from home. As life satisfaction is defined as vital for coping (Dunbar, 1992 in Ward *et al.*, 2001), leisure activities are important for students studying abroad because they can make people feel more satisfied with their lives (Roberts, 2006). In addition, contact with co-nationals in leisure time is said to be important because it enables the students to talk (in their native language) about their home culture with others and share experiences. As said before these networks are important for the psychological well-being of international students because they provide a sense of security, commonality and facilitate the transition (Ying & Liese, 1994 in Gu & Marley, 2008). Co-national networks give these students an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the new culture by discussions, social interaction, and intellectual exchange with other students who are experiencing the same emotions (Woolf, 2007 in Hendrickson *et al.*, 2011). These networks are believed to help maintaining the cultural identity of international students which is important for coping with homesickness (Maundeni, 2001 in Hendrickson *et al.*, 2011). In addition, one of the experts mentioned contact with other internationals can offer them a network of people on who they can count for support and consolation.

**Academic difficulties**
Problems that are academic related most often occur during situations at the university. However, some problems are also experienced by their students in their daily life, for example the stress that spills over from their hard and demanding program. In addition, students can deal with problems that occur during their academic time later in their leisure time. For example, many students stated that their leisure life offered them a possibility to let things go and concentrate on fun things, so it offers distraction. Getting their mind of studying is important for the coping process of these
international students as these students constantly experience pressure and stress due to assignments, exams, deadlines and suchlike. For these students it is important to do something else every now and then, and not think and talk about their academic life. Mannell (2000 in Best, 2010) agrees with this as he mentions that leisure works relaxing which provides these students temporary respite from issues that are of concern to them. Also a student mentioned leisure is needed to recharge and regain energy in order to perform well in their academic life. Some other students have stated that difficulties become less important when you do not concentrate on them. This means leisure is important for coping with academic stress, because it offers international students an important balance in their life. In spare time students can relax, enjoy and having fun in order to become happier. As one of the students mentioned, this is important because then he is more motivated to study again the next day. Also Roberts (2006) states that leisure enables people to relax and refresh, and literally recreate themselves in order to return suitably restored to (in the case of international students) their academic work. Moreover, when students learn how to cope with difficulties in their daily life, they often indirectly also cope with some of the academic difficulties. For example, by learning more about the Dutch culture in leisure time, the students acquire some valuable information which is also relevant for dealing with the Dutch educational system and fellow Dutch students.

Practical issues
How leisure is used to cope with practical issues depends on the problem. For example the friendships they develop in their leisure time can help them dealing with the strict time management in the Netherlands and other smaller problems such as finding a bike, doing laundry and suchlike because they can share information and experiences amongst each other. Moreover, leisure enables students to acquire culturally appropriate behaviour, skills and knowledge (e.g. Bochner et al., 1980) which can help them learn more about the Netherlands. In addition, leisure can help coping with the different climate in the Netherlands because, as one student mentioned, it is important not to concentrate on such issues. Therefore, leisure provides a situation where the students have something else to look forward to which works distracting (Caldwell, 2005 in Best, 2010). In addition, leisure enables students to see the fun and exciting part of this unfamiliar climate as for example snow can be fun too, especially for students who have never experienced this before. As leisure is intrinsically rewarding if offers fun and pleasure (Best, 2010) which is important for students in their coping process. Regarding the difficulties that international students experience with Dutch food, leisure can help because students can experiment with types of food together with their friends. Moreover, as food is culturally bound the students can learn more about the Dutch culture, which is part of culture learning and that is defined as an important aspect of coping by Ward and her colleagues (2001). Besides, when students are not able to get used to the Dutch food they, together in their leisure time, can learn how to cook other types of food and enjoy a meal together. So leisure is important for coping with practical issues because it, amongst other things, broadens their horizon as they try and learn new things.

Making contact with Dutch people
Leisure is also used as a coping strategy by the international students when dealing with the difficult contact with Dutch people. The students have indicated they use leisure to learn more about the Dutch culture because during their leisure activities they received information, and that is part of culture learning (Ward et al., 2001). When the students learn more they might develop awareness

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and tolerance towards the Dutch culture which can help them in their interaction with Dutch people. Furthermore, the international students mentioned that in their leisure activities, they come across others who help them and provide valuable advice on how to interact with Dutch people. As Woolf (2007 in Hendrickson et al., 2011) has mentioned, contact with others provides international students the opportunity to enhance their understanding of the new culture through discussions, social interaction and intellectual exchange. Some students even stated they met some Dutch people in their leisure time which prepared them for understanding cultural differences. In leisure time internationals students always come across Dutch people such as the cashiers, waitresses, employees and other visitors in movie theatres, etcetera. Students can learn from these random encounters with Dutch people in their leisure time, and apply what they have learned in their interaction with fellow Dutch students.

Especially, the strength of leisure to provide distraction and the ability to share information and experiences are viewed as valuable assets of leisure activities by the participants. These benefits of leisure are also quite clearly linked to the three leisure-based coping strategies that are identified by Iwasaki and Mannell (2000 in Best, 2010). First, distraction is related to palliative coping which refers to leisure activities that give individuals temporary respite from issues that are of concern to them. Second, the ability to share information and experiences is linked to the leisure-based coping strategy companionship. Together, these benefits can generate the third leisure-based coping strategy as they are able to establish mood enhancement.

In the table below an overview is provided of the social and psychological benefits which have been mentioned by the participants. All foreign students needed these features of leisure to cope with stressors and difficulties that occurred in both their everyday life and in their academic life. This indicates the importance of leisure, but this study suggests that leisure is even more important for students with a cultural background that differs significantly from the Dutch culture, this is discussed in the next section.

Table 3. Overview of the mentioned social and psychological benefits of leisure by the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological benefits of leisure:</th>
<th>Social benefits of leisure:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishes fun, happiness, satisfaction, enjoyment</td>
<td>Learn about other cultures which creates awareness, broadens horizons, develops tolerance, and opens up the mind of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>Feeling of commonality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides a balance in life</td>
<td>Share information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
<td>Talk about experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>People to count on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recharging, refreshing and regaining energy</td>
<td>Receive help and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clears the mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling more satisfied and fulfilled in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.3 The importance of leisure for students with a significantly different culture
As mentioned before, due to new travel possibilities in this globalising world the number of students studying outside their home county is growing rapidly. In addition, these travel opportunities have enabled students to travel to less traditional destinations, and facilitated growing numbers of international students from less developed countries (Institute of International Education, 2010;
Rienties et al., 2012). This created a large cultural gap at universities as the cultural core values of these students differ greatly. Every person goes through a process of primary socialisation and during this process a “person acquires a set of core values early in their lives, which they then come to regard as reflecting reality and, therefore, as absolutely true, and which, for a variety of reasons, are highly resistant to change” (Ward et al., 2001: 10). These core values are partly influenced by the society people grow up in, so whether this is an individualistic or a collectivistic society has an effect on these values.

As mentioned before, the Netherlands is considered an individualistic country. In order to create an initial idea of which cultures differ the most from the Netherlands, an overview is provided on which countries are considered individualistic and which are defined collectivistic. The participants in this study are from India, Surinam, Italy, Portugal, England, Germany, Poland, China, Greece, Peru, Kenya and Latvia, and Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism (I-C) index includes all these countries with the exception of Latvia. According to the I-C index, aside from England, all the countries score lower on the index than the Netherlands. Italy, Germany, and Poland have, similar to the Netherlands, relatively high scores. This means that these countries are considered individualistic. Thereafter, the scores drop rapidly and the following countries are considered collectivistic: India, Surinam, Greece, Portugal, Kenya, China, and Peru is on the bottom of the list.

This ranking is not absolute as there are many other factors which influence differences in core values, for example power distance (PD) which refers to “the extent to which there is general acceptance of status inequality” (Ibid: 55). In other words, to what extent less powerful members of a society within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (The Hofstede Centre). The Netherlands scores low on the PD index, which means that Dutch people strive to equal distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power (Ibid.). The collectivistic countries in this study all score high on the PD index, meaning that people accept a hierarchical order which does not need further justification (Ibid.). Not all individualistic countries have a low score on the PD index, Poland for example has a high scores high and Italy a medium score.

Table 4. Overview of I-C and high or low PD countries according to Hofstede’s index.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country:</th>
<th>Individualism or collectivism:</th>
<th>Low or high power distance:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>Individualistic - 89 points</td>
<td>Low score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Individualistic - 80 points</td>
<td>Low score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Individualistic - 76 points</td>
<td>Medium score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Individualistic - 67 points</td>
<td>Low score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Individualistic - 60 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 48 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surinam</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 47 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 35 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 30 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 27 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 20 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>Collectivistic - 16 points</td>
<td>High score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this study, most countries are considered collectivistic and have a high score on the power distance index (see table 4), which means that the cultural core values of most participants differ significantly from the Dutch values. According to the culture-distance hypothesis, this large cultural gap at universities creates added difficulties for these students (Ward et al., 2001). The students in this study have stated various difficulties that are caused by cultural differences. For example, students have mentioned difficulties with the student-lecturer roles and punctuality. These problems are related to the Dutch educational system and that this system is based on Dutch core values becomes clear when looking at the data. One of the students stated he had to learn to debate with the lecturers as they found it important for him to think critically. This is linked to a Dutch value which is mentioned by one of the experts who stated it is expected from Dutch people to speak up their mind. Therefore, it is to be expected that difficulties due to different cultural values are especially hard for students from countries that are considered collectivistic and which score high on the PD index.

As mentioned before, coping is perceived by international students as demanding a lot of effort or even exceeding resources available (Sapranaviciute et al., 2012). Students therefore, need adequate time and a good environment to make behavioural and cognitive efforts in order to respond to the new cultural values of the Netherlands (Ibid.). Especially students with a cultural background that differs considerably from the Dutch culture, need to be able to take time for coping with these difficulties. For this reason, leisure is particularly valuable for these students as it offers the much needed extra time. In addition, leisure is said to provide a safe environment where failure has no devastating consequences (Roberts, 2006) and this enables students to relax and learn. The importance of time and a good environment for these students becomes clear when looking at academic difficulties which are caused by different cultural values. The international students in this study indicated they are not able to cope with academic difficulties while they are at the university. This resulted in the finding that specifically students with a culture that differs considerably from the Dutch culture (e.g. China and Peru) have mentioned academic difficulties that are caused by cultural differences. This is problematical for these students as in particular academic difficulties require almost immediate coping because the consequences of not managing these difficulties are great. This is described by a student who explained he was a few minutes late for his class and already missed valuable information as the lecturer already showed the third slide. Difficulties in their everyday life do not require instant coping as the consequences of not handling these difficulties are often not as tremendous, and these problems can even (temporarily) be ignored. On the other hand, academic difficulties cannot be disregarded because the international students need to work effectively in this important aspect of their time in the Netherlands. In particular for students having a significant different cultural background, leisure is important because they need to cope with academic difficulties which are caused by different cultural values during their leisure time. Through leisure activities foreign students can develop skills and gain knowledge which may be transported in other areas of their lives (Roberts, 2006), which means they can apply what they have learned in their leisure time for academic difficulties.

In the three previous sections it is discussed how leisure is important for international students in coping with difficulties and stressors. In the next paragraph, the overall importance of leisure for international students is discussed using its potential to prevent difficulties and stressors.
7.4 Leisure as a tool to prevent difficulties

As mentioned above, according to the literature, international students experience added difficulties compared to host students (Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002) because they often have limited resources for modifying the troublesome features of their new (cultural) environment (Ward et al., 2001). Today, an increasing movement of people across national and ethnic boundaries exists, which means there are more cases of culture contact (Ibid.). Culture contact refers to “the meeting of individuals and groups who differ in their cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds” (Ibid.: 4), and is defined as one of the greatest perpetrators of problems for international students because difficulties are normal aspects of these encounters. The participants in this study have mentioned various difficulties, but most students stated they did not experience tremendous problems. This can be explained in a variety of ways.

Culture contact, which is said to generate severe problems for international students while being abroad, can also be used as an explanation in order to clarify why the students in this study did not experience the anticipated problems. As cultures are not tied to the borders of a country anymore, there are tighter connections between different cultures in one country (Ward et al., 2001; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). Although some students have mentioned that their home country is not as multi-cultural as the Netherlands, in general, intercultural contact is more common in this globalising world due to for example immigration, tourism and the fast growing numbers of international students (Ward et al., 2001). As a result, most international students experience intercultural contact already in their home country. As intercultural contact is said to generate self- and cultural awareness (Uehara, 1986; Bennet, 2004), this can be helpful for the foreign students before arrival in the host country because they are already used to, and have learned from these encounters.

An additional possible explanation why the students in this study did not experience major problems is that the participants are all experienced travellers. Some of them have even been to the Netherlands before. This is in line with the statement by Klineberg and his colleagues (1981 in Furnham & Bochner, 1986) that previous travel experience is associated with better coping skills and fewer difficulties. As mentioned above, travel generates self- and cultural awareness which contributes to the cultural competence of people (Otten, 2003). Through travel, people obtain knowledge, attitudes and skills that enables them to have a positive and effective interaction with members of other cultures (Ibid.).

Furthermore, as mentioned before, nowadays international students have a better understanding of what to expect from their study abroad experience due to, for example, the Internet where they can find information about the Netherlands beforehand (Ward et al., 2001). Some students prepare for their study abroad experience by attending trainings and courses about crossing cultures before arrival in the host country, which is said to be beneficial for preventing stress caused by culture contact (Ibid.). When students have a better understanding of what to expect due to preparations, they are able to predict certain situations which offers them the possibility to prevent problems (Lafrenie & Cramer, 2005 in Xia, 2009).

Another possible explanation is linked to the fact that the Netherlands is increasingly attracting international students (Dutch Ministry of Education, 2010; OECD, 2009 in Rienties et al., 2012). In 2012, 13,3% of the student population at TU Delft was international (TU Delft), and at Wageningen University 25,4% of the student population consisted of foreign students (Wageningen UR). Thanks to the numerous nationalities especially Wageningen is considered a multicultural city, but as TU Delft is one of the most recognised universities of the Netherlands and considered one of the best
universities in its field worldwide, Delft also attracts a relatively high number of international students. This means that these cities, and the Dutch inhabitants, are quite attuned to the presence of international residents. It is to be expected that these cities are well-prepared and accustomed to the continuous arrival of new international students, and are therefore able to provide clear information for international students about for example housing, resident permits and suchlike which can prevent several problems. Besides, the majority of Dutch people speak English which enables international students to communicate with them without having to learn the host language. This is important as communication with host nationals is believed to result in fewer academic problems (Pruitt, 1978) and social difficulties (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

Last but not least, leisure might explain why the students in this study did not experience the anticipated problems because leisure is considered a tool to prevent negative life-events (Caldwell, 2005 in Best, 2010). Kleiber (2004 in Best, 2010) suggests that especially the strength of leisure to work distracting can act as a buffer to prevent negative life-events, which is mentioned by various participants as an important psychological outcome of their leisure activities. According to Selye (1956 in Leitner & Leitner, 2004), the most effective way to prevent stressors and difficulties is through leisure experiences because these experiences generate life’s pleasures, facilitates planning for future gratification, offer satisfaction through social interaction and enables the pursuit of optimal self-expression. Some students in this study indicated they would prefer more leisure time, and in addition some students mentioned financial, seasonal, personal (culture/gender related), and social factors which constrained them in pursuing certain leisure activities. However, in general, all participants expressed to be satisfied with their leisure activities and their leisure experiences. Some students even mentioned that they enjoyed their leisure activities a bit too much which led to leisure as a constraint itself because they neglected schoolwork. All students stated to have a sufficient leisure life, and also mentioned this is of immense importance during a study abroad. This could possibly indicate that leisure prevented major difficulties during their study in the Netherlands.

In this chapter various links are discussed between leisure and coping and each, in its own way, reveals the importance of leisure for the coping process of international students in the Netherlands. In the next chapter, these four links are used to provide an answer to the main question of this research.
8. Conclusion

This chapter starts with a description of the research goal. Thereafter, the conclusion of this study is provided by answering the main research question. In addition, recommendations for further research on the link between study travel and leisure are given.

The purpose of this exploratory research was to gain a better understanding of the leisure experiences and the perceived difficulties of international students, with a focus on exploring if and how leisure could function as a coping mechanism for international students. In other words, the aim of this research was to gain insight into the experiences of international students, and how leisure could minimise the difficulties- and maximise the benefits of study travel.

This study started by exploring how international students experienced their study abroad, and which difficulties and stressors they encountered. After analysing the data, the results showed that most international students enjoyed their time in the Netherlands. Except from one student who mentioned she could not get used to not living in her home country anymore, all students indicated they are pleased with the course of their study abroad experience in the Netherlands. Some of the difficulties that have been mentioned by the participants were declared as demanding and some even as challenging, but most of the problems are experienced as surprising and not as particularly hard. Although the amount and the severity of the mentioned problems are lower than expected after reading the literature, the students did talk about various problems. The students encountered problems in their daily life and these include language difficulties, homesickness, practical issues and interaction difficulties with Dutch people. In addition, the students mentioned problems they experienced in their academic life.

In the literature also culture shock, acculturation difficulties, feelings of loneliness, discrimination, and a decreased self-efficacy have been stated as frequently experienced difficulties and stressors by international students. Yet, these difficulties have not emerged in this study. After the analysis of the data, interaction difficulties with Dutch people is added as a problem in this study because most of the international students mentioned difficulties regarding this subject. Discrimination has not been stated as a separate difficulty because it has only been mentioned by one participant, but it connects to interacting difficulties with Dutch people and is therefore stated as part of this difficulty.

The participants have described how they handled most difficulties, and it is noticeable that these coping strategies do not evidently correspond the three coping areas that are described in the theoretical framework. According to the literature on coping strategies, the coping mechanisms that are used by international students can be divided in three areas 1) coping that focuses on adjustment to the host culture, 2) coping that focuses on acceptance of cultural differences, and 3) coping that focuses on maintenance of identity. However, these areas did not become clearly visible in this study, especially not with the focus on the importance of leisure. Therefore, these areas of coping are not extensively discussed in this chapter.

Something that also turned out to play a less significant role than initially anticipated, is the distinction between serious and casual leisure because almost all leisure activities mentioned by the participants are considered casual leisure activities. On the other hand, during the interviews it appeared that the division between new and familiar had a greater impact on the coping process of
international students than originally expected. Activities which were also carried out in the home country turned out to provide much needed comfort and familiarity, whereas new activities provided the participants more opportunities to develop skills and gain new knowledge, particularly about the Dutch culture. These beneficial outcomes of both new and familiar activities are linked to features that are considered important for coping, and therefore valuable for this research. In addition, these outcomes match the psychological and social benefits of leisure, which were derived from the interviews by asking the participants how their leisure activities made them feel, and which relations they developed in their leisure time.

These social and psychological benefits turned out to be crucial for the research as, according to the participants, they were important for coping with difficulties during their study in the Netherlands. As these benefits are most directly linked to the coping process of international students, they are used to provide an answer to the main question of this research:

*Can leisure function as a coping mechanism for international students facing stressors and difficulties during their study abroad, and if so how?*

The study has shown that that leisure can be considered a coping mechanism for international students, because coping features that are defined as vital for foreign students are similar to the psychological and social benefits with have been mentioned by the participants of this study. The most frequently cited psychological benefit of leisure has been the ability of leisure to work distracting, and the most regularly mentioned social benefit is the ability to share information and experiences with others. Some of the students have clearly stated how they used leisure as a coping strategy. For example, one student explained how difficulties became less important due to her leisure activities as she did not constantly concentrated on them. This student elaborated on this by stating during cycling she was able to solve big problems and come up proper solutions because it cleared her mind.

In addition, the participants in this study have indicated that leisure is the moment when most students cope with their problems as leisure provides valuable time and a safe environment to learn and relax. This study suggest leisure is especially beneficial for students with a cultural background that differs substantially from the Dutch culture, in dealing with difficulties due to differences in cultural values. As these difficulties are foremost challenging for these students, they therefore in particular need this valuable time and a relax environment for coping. Furthermore, this research was able to demonstrate the ability of leisure to provide valuable support for existing coping strategies. Although this is not further discussed in this research, it is important knowledge for the current literature on the coping process of international students. Finally, this study suggests that leisure can possibly prevent difficulties which indicates the general importance of leisure for international students.

This latter needs further exploration as prevention is often better than cure. However, it is important to keep in mind that people learn from difficult situations which enables them to develop both personally and academically. It could be suggested that preventing problems can lead to reduced opportunities to achieve the pre-mentioned positive outcomes of studying abroad. Therefore, it is important consider that maybe not all stressors and difficulties should avoided and prevented. Further research is needed on this topic in order to explore what the benefits and disadvantages are of preventing problems for international students.

*Studying Abroad: Both Learning and Living. Leisure as a coping strategy for international students.*
More comprehensive research is also needed to explore the benefits and downsides of new and familiar activities as this could deepen the understanding of leisure as a coping mechanism. This division is possibly also more clearly linked to three earlier mentioned areas of coping because for example familiar activities are said to reinforce the cultural identity.

Furthermore, this study is based on the experiences of a relatively small number of participants but the variety in age, gender and countries of origin made comparison possible. However, it would be interesting to further explore the link between studying abroad and leisure using a greater diversity in participants concerning e.g. educational level and length of stay. In this study there are some differences visible between the international students who are still studying, and the two students who recently graduated and are living in the Netherlands for already a longer period of time, and therefore it would be possible there are different outcomes for students who travel abroad for an internship (shorter duration) or a PhD (longer duration).

Related to the graduated students, both indicated their leisure life changed after graduation and this is an important topic related to the on-going political debate on how the Netherlands can bind current international students in order for them to stay in the Netherlands. As the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science acknowledges the benefits of leisure for this purpose, this study advises further exploration how the (leisure) lives of these students change after graduation. For example, the importance of integrating international students into the city where they live though social and academic activities is mentioned, but these students are not able to attend the same activities as they are no longer viewed as students, something that is mentioned by one the graduated students. Moreover, it is hard to integrate these students into a society that is not always welcoming to foreign people who want to stay in order to start working in the Netherlands, as is explained by the other graduated student. This is less directly linked to research on the importance of leisure for international students, but even more important for the enhancement of the knowledge production in the Netherlands.

This study concentrated on international students the Netherlands. However, the results possibly also apply to international students who are studying in other countries. In addition, this study focused on leisure as coping strategy but the results indicate the general importance of leisure for international students. Further research is needed in the field of leisure and tourism to help guide and further evaluate the importance of leisure for students who have travelled abroad for study purposes.

From this research it can be concluded that leisure is not just valuable for coping, but in some cases even essential for the overall study abroad experience of international students. This study argues that studying abroad is not just about learning, but it is also about living. For international students it is important to cope with difficulties both in their academic and everyday life, because these students are in the Netherlands to graduate their academic degree. However, it is the experience they gain in their daily life what they will look back on afterwards, and which will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Therefore, this latter determines for a large part the successfulness of the study abroad experience. International students gain important benefits during their leisure time which they use in order to cope with difficult situations they encounter. Therefore, leisure helps international students to deal with difficulties that emerged due to the new (cultural) environment and which affects both their academic and everyday life. Leisure contributes to minimising the difficulties of study travel, which allows students to optimally benefit from this experience in order to both learn and life abroad.
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Appendix I: Interview guide International students

Preparations:
- Interview guide
- List of participants
- Audio recorder (and extra batteries)
- Pen and paper

Introduction

Introduction of the interviewer and the interview objective
My name is Lilian Bos and I study at Wageningen University. At this moment, I am working on my thesis. I explore how leisure could help international students coping with difficulties and stressors during their study abroad experience. I would really appreciate it if you wanted to share your experiences and visions on this topic. Would you help me, and participate in this interview? Participation is completely voluntary and anonymous.

Course of the interview
I will ask some general question on difficulties you might have experienced and how you handled those. Thereafter, I will ask some questions about your leisure life. The interview will take approximately 15-30 minutes.

Clarification
There are no right or wrong answers. The aim of this interview is to hear about your ideas, feelings and opinions. You can end the interview at any time. Everything you say in this interview will be treated confidentially. Is it okay for me to record this interview as this makes it possible for me to write down your answers as accurately as possible after the interview?

Then I will now turn on the recorder and start the interview.

Interview

General questions:
- Could you please start with telling me something about what course or study you are doing at this university?
- Why did you decide to study abroad in the Netherlands and at this university in specific?

Questions about coping:
- Could you tell me about some of the difficulties your experienced abroad.
- Could you tell me what you did to cope with these difficulties?
- To what extend did you adjust to the Dutch culture? How and why did you adjust to the Dutch culture?
- How important is it for you to hold on to your own culture during your study abroad?
- During your study abroad, did you noticed big differences between your culture and the Dutch culture?
- How did you handle these differences? Did you find it difficult to accept these differences?
- What do you think is the hardest part of studying abroad?

**Questions about leisure:**
- Could you tell me something about what you like to do in your leisure time, so your leisure activities?
- Could you tell me why you have chosen for these activities?
- How important do you consider your leisure time during your study abroad and why?
- Do you believe that your social life has changed as a result of your leisure activities? If so, could you tell me in what way? If not, why do you think your social life has remained the same?
- Why do you think it is important to have social relations in your free time?
- Could you tell me something about how your leisure activities make you feel?
- Do you believe your state of mind, so how you feel changed due to your leisure activities? If so, could you tell me in what way? If not, why do you think your it remains the same?
- Why do you think leisure activities are important for becoming happier and more satisfied with your life?

**Questions about linking coping and leisure:**
- Do you think that social support is also important in other areas of your life besides your leisure time?
- Do you believe that when you are more satisfied with your life this also helps you in other areas of your life besides your free time?
- Do you think that your leisure activities offered you some sort of help with the problems you experienced during your study abroad? If so, could you tell me in what way?

**Questions about leisure constraints:**
- Do you think there are enough leisure possibilities in .... in order for you to do what you would like to do in your free time?
- Do you think international student organisations and the university in .... help you to become aware of the leisure possibilities that are available to you?
- Did you during your study abroad ever feel restrained to do a certain activity due to personal traits such as your gender, social class or age?
- Did you during your study abroad ever feel restrained to do a certain activity because of your cultural background?
- Did you during your study abroad ever feel you could not participate in a leisure activity because you felt you lacked certain skills or abilities?
- Have you felt you could not participate in a certain leisure activities because of circumstantial factors such as your financial status, available free time or your transport possibilities?
- To what extend are your leisure choices influenced by friends and other social relations?

Finally, what role does leisure plays in your overall study abroad experience?
Conclusion
That was the last question, I will now switch off the recorder. Is there anything you would like to add, or do you have any questions for me? I would like to thank you very much for your help and cooperation. If you are interested, please give me your email address and I will send you the research report.

After the interview
- Make a small summary
- Work out notes made during the interview
- Note important details which are not recorded on audio recorder
Appendix II: Interview guide Experts

Preparations:
- Interview guide
- List of participants
- Audio recorder (and extra batteries)
- Pen and paper

Introduction

Introduction of the interviewer and the interview objective
My name is Lilian Bos and I study at Wageningen University. At this moment, I am working on my thesis. I explore how leisure could help international students coping with difficulties and stressors during their study abroad experience. I would really appreciate it if you wanted to share your experiences and visions on this topic. Would you help me, and participate in this interview? Participation is completely voluntary and anonymous.

Course of the interview
I will start by asking some general question about the organisation and your work, and thereafter I will ask additional questions about your perspective on the link between leisure and the coping process of international students. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

Clarification
There are no right or wrong answers. The aim of this interview is to hear about your ideas, feelings and opinions. You can end the interview at any time. Everything you say in this interview will be treated confidentially. Is it okay for me to record this interview as this makes it possible for me to write down your answers as accurately as possible after the interview?

Then I will now turn on the recorder and start the interview.

Interview

General questions:
- Could you please start with telling me something about the organisation you work for and the work you do within this organisation?
- Why did you decide to become active within this organisation?

Questions about coping:
- In your work, do you notice that international students experience certain difficulties during their time here in the Netherlands?
- What do you think is the hardest part of studying abroad for international students?
- ... are examples of frequently mentioned problems by international students. What do you think international students can do to overcome these and other difficulties?
Questions about leisure:
- Could you tell me something about the activities that are offered by your organisation? (serious or casual leisure)
- Why are these leisure pursuits chosen?
- How important do you consider leisure for international students during their study abroad?
- Could you tell me something about the purpose of your organisation and how and why you use activities to achieve this goal?
- How do you think international students evaluated the importance of leisure during their study abroad?
- Do you believe that leisure activities impacts the social life of international students? If so, could you tell me in what way? If not, why do you think their social life remains the same?
- Why do you think it is important for international students to have social relations in their free time?
- Do you believe that leisure activities can influence the state of mind of international students, so how they feel? If so, could you tell me in what way? If not, why do you think their it remains the same?
- Do you think leisure activities are important for becoming happier and more satisfied with your life?
- What benefits do international students get from their free time? So why are leisure activities important for international students?

Questions about linking coping and leisure:
- Do you think that social support is also important in other areas of the lives of international students besides their leisure time?
- Do you believe that when you are more satisfied with your life this also helps you in other areas of the lives of international students besides their free time?
- Do you think that your leisure activities offered international students some sort of help with the problems they experienced during their study abroad? If so, could you tell me in what way?
- So, in general how important do you consider leisure activities for coping with the difficulties international students experience during their study abroad?

Questions about leisure constraints:
- Do you think the international students in .... have enough opportunities to do the leisure activities they want to?
- How do you think international students are affected by friends when it comes down to the activities they pursue during their study abroad?
- Do you believe international students can also be constraint from certain leisure activities due to their gender or social class? If so, how?
- Do you think the personal circumstances such as the financial status and the available free time of international students play an important role in their leisure choices? If so, how?
- Do you notice in your work that the pursuit of certain leisure activities are culturally bound?
Do you think international students often choose familiar activities or do they try something new?

How does your organisation deal with culture differences amongst the international students?

Finally, do you think that leisure is valued enough by international student organisations? Or do you believe there are certain things that should change in the future?

**Conclusion**

That was the last question, I will now switch off the recorder. Is there anything you would like to add, or do you have any questions for me? I would like to thank you very much for your help and cooperation. If you are interested, please give me your email address and I will send you the research report.

**After the interview**

- Make a small summary
- Work out notes made during the interview
- Note important details which are not recorded on audio recorder