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## **Understanding the Motivations: a Qualitative Analysis of Israelis Holding a Bachelor's Degree who Pursue an MBA Abroad**

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# **Understanding the Motivations: a Qualitative Analysis of Israelis Holding a Bachelor's Degree who Pursue an MBA Abroad**

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## **Abstract**

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Motivations for study abroad have been studied mostly from a quantitative point of view. This study attempted to understand those motivations through qualitative methodology, by getting "into the heads" of international students using a multiple case study approach. Participants were 15 Israeli Hebrew-speaking graduates. Data sources included in-depth interviews with the students, a business professor, as well as official program documents. Findings show that while intrinsic motivations recur in the data, that are in essence the selling points of an MBA, stressing experience and gaining knowledge and skills, the dominant motivations are instrumental and at times even fantastic and extreme, although presented implicitly in the discourse. All these motivations reflect a mismatch between students' perceptions of MBA education and the actual reality of getting a graduate business degree abroad, which has serious ramifications for students' learning experience and the way in which efforts and resources are prioritized.

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**Keywords:** study abroad, international students, business education, motivations

# Comprensión de las Motivaciones: un Análisis Cualitativo de los Israelíes con una Licenciatura que Buscan un MBA en el Extranjero

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## Resumen

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Las motivaciones para estudiar en el extranjero han sido estudiadas principalmente desde un punto de vista cuantitativo. Este estudio trató de entender esas motivaciones a través de la metodología cualitativa, para conseguir "entrar en la cabeza" de los estudiantes internacionales utilizando un enfoque de estudio de casos múltiples. Los participantes eran 15 graduados israelíes de habla hebrea. Las fuentes de datos incluyeron entrevistas en profundidad con los estudiantes, con un profesor de negocios, así como documentos oficiales del programa. Los hallazgos muestran que mientras las motivaciones intrínsecas repiten los datos, que son en esencia los argumentos de venta de un MBA, subrayando la experiencia y adquiriendo conocimientos y habilidades, las motivaciones dominantes son instrumentales y a veces incluso fantásticas y extremas, aunque presentadas implícitamente en el discurso. Todas estas motivaciones reflejan un desajuste entre las percepciones de los estudiantes de MBA y la realidad de obtener un título de posgrado en el extranjero, que tiene consecuencias graves para la experiencia de aprendizaje de los estudiantes y la forma en que los esfuerzos y los recursos son priorizados.

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**Palabras clave:** estudiar en el extranjero, estudiantes internacionales, educación empresarial, motivaciones

The aim of the present paper is both to demystify and capture the motivations of Israeli graduates with a bachelor's degree to pursue an international MBA degree. To my knowledge, the only research to document study abroad regarding determinants of Israelis was conducted in 1969. In this study, Ritterband (1969) concluded that the low number of places in Israeli higher education institutions and the high rejection rate of qualified candidates that resulted from the shortage of places were significant predictors of education abroad. Since the number of higher educational institutions has increased, and because the MBA is the program most frequently studied abroad by Israelis, it is essential to explore the driving forces that led respondents to pursue an international graduate business degree. Understanding these motivations can shed light on the way students experience academia in an international study context.

In order to examine the motivations to study abroad, it is first necessary to identify an appropriate theoretical framework that can serve as a foundation for the various factors affecting college students' decision-making processes. In general, psychologists often differentiate between two types of motivations: intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Myers, 2010; Plotnik & Kouyoumjian, 2011). Intrinsic motivation are present when an individual chooses an activity because it is personally rewarding rather than the desire for some external reward. Examples of actions that are the result of intrinsic motivation may include but are not limited to volunteering in order to help others or assuming a challenge because you find it exciting. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, are present when we are motivated to engage in an activity to earn something or avoid a bad outcome. Some examples are preparing for an exam to get a good grade, or doing house chores to avoid punishments from your parents.

In the case of choosing a study program abroad, the student-choice theory (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John & Asker, 2001) and Perna's (2006) integrated model of college choice provide such a basis. This approach postulates that students' postsecondary decisions, such as whether to pursue college education, which institution to attend and which major to select, are all influenced by the nature and amount of human, financial, social, and cultural capital available to the student (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; St. John & Asker, 2001).

Human capital theory assumes that individuals' knowledge, talents and skills can be enhanced through investment in education, which is later

exchanged for increased wages, power, and employment status (Paulsen, 2001). Some frequently used measures of human capital include, but are not limited to, students' academic potential or ability, academic training, and educational achievements (Perna & Titus, 2005). When making decisions about education, individuals weigh the benefits of each option against the costs. Because college education requires sufficient financial capital, students' educational choices are made within the boundaries of their unique social contexts, often reflecting their socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, student-choice theory asserts that students' decision-making processes are made within specific contexts that mirror their beliefs, outlooks, ambitions, views and values as formed by their home and school surroundings (St. John & Asker, 2001). Cultural capital is often defined as an individual's cultural knowledge, language skills and educational background, based mainly on parents' social class (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Social capital refers to an individual's access to information, resources and support, acquired through participation or communication with others who participate in social networks or structures (Perna, 2006).

Whether or not to pursue a study experience abroad is an extremely significant decision. Students make decisions about a place to live and work, how their families adapt to the new setting, and a range of other related choices. The process of choosing a study experience abroad is composed of three stages: development of the intention to study abroad, the search for an appropriate study program abroad, and the selection of and departure for a particular location and program (Sullivan, 2004; Williamson, 2004). The first stage is when students are motivated to study abroad, and develop preliminary plans regarding potential educational and professional goals. During the search stage, students explore possible options and the requirements of each option, assessing them with respect to their perceived needs, expectations and preferences. Finally, students choose a particular institution or international study program.

The stages of the studying abroad choice process spread over an extended period of time. Literature on study abroad regularly describes the length of time from initial consideration of study abroad to departure for a specific program in terms of months and years, and emphasizes the importance of planning ahead (Williamson, 2004). The study abroad choice process also includes all the types of capital described as influential in the

student-choice construct. The process of choosing a study abroad program relates to decisions that are based on affordability, cultural accessibility, intellectual and professional applicability, and curricular viability (e.g., Sullivan, 2004; Williamson, 2004). Moreover, each decision affects the probability of potential options in follow-up decisions. When students choose a study abroad program that fits their budget, they compare the expected costs and benefits in terms of additional direct or indirect costs, family income, and other elements of financial capital. When students choose a program that meets their intellectual or career goals, they consider their academic ability, achievement or preparation, educational and career aspirations, and the perceived potential of a study abroad experience to instill the human capital necessary to reach those career goals. When students choose a program that is culturally accessible, they consider the ease with which they can adapt to the cross-cultural differences between their culture and the culture of the target destination (St. John & Asker, 2001). All of these factors influence a student's college-related decisions and shape an individual's accumulation of social, cultural, human and financial capital (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009)

Though the literature examining the motivations of study abroad participants is relatively limited, research on study abroad suggests that a wide range of motivations involving socio-economic status, home values, and capital affect students' decisions to participate in study abroad opportunities. Studies indicate that most international students tend to have traveled abroad previously, have highly educated parents, and have been academically successful (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990). Most choose the study abroad experience due to the belief that international education has greater quality than a local degree, the unavailability of local programs, gaining self-fulfillment that they cannot achieve in their country of origin, and the intention to immigrate after graduation from the program (Kistantas, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Ono & Pipper, 2004; Pimpa, 2003; Wiers-Jenseen, 2008). Different motivations for studying abroad may vary according to the country of origin. For example, students from rich countries are motivated to explore new cultures, while students from poor countries may go abroad in order to contribute to their country's technological and economic development (Goldsmith & Shawcross, 1985; Matsui, 1991; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012). Additional predictors of study abroad participation include an interest in learning a

foreign language (Dufon & Churchill, 2006; Goldstein & Kim, 2005), gaining a broadened global awareness, experiencing new and exciting cultures, having social interactions and meeting new people, and getting away from normal life (Jarvis & Peel, 2008).

Students' choices of a specific institution include: the institution's reputation for quality, an institution's links with other institutions familiar to the student, an institution's reputation for high-quality staff, an institution alumni base, the number of students enrolled at the institution, and the willingness of the institution to acknowledge the student's qualifications (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These choices are often shaped by the internet and agencies that provide information services about international education as well as peer persuasion (Pimpa, 2003).

Among barriers to participation in study abroad programs are increased costs, lack of awareness, perceived unimportance, complexity of the application and preparation process, social and familial obligations or constraints, inflexibly sequenced curricular requirements, and fear of discrimination or racism abroad (Carlson et al. 1990; Desoff, 2006; Spiering & Erickson, 2006). Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect that a similar combination of various types of capital manifestation might also influence students' intentions.

As for the motivations of Israelis to study abroad, Ritterband (1969) claims that students' motivations mostly depend on social class, and the type of high school from which the student graduated. Ritterband (1969) shows that the higher the social class origin, the more likely the student will earn a degree in Israel, unless he/she graduated from an academically oriented high school. Israel's educational structure also affects the study group's motives to study abroad. Because the number of places in universities in specific faculties is very limited, many Israelis choose to study in the United States. For example, if a student's focus in high school was exact sciences and he graduated from an average high school, his/her chances of getting into the 'Technion' (Israel's premium Science institution) are slim. Because higher education is partially subsidized, the faculties where the cost per student is the highest are the most competitive ones.

## **The MBA Context**

A brief introduction to the program is a key frame of reference in understanding the environment in which the research participants function in. As noted earlier, this MBA program is located in one of the top ten business schools in the country and is highly desired by both internationals and Americans. To illustrate, the number of MBA applications for this school for the 2008-9 academic year was 2697, out of which only 23% were accepted.

The popularity of the program does not indicate its affordability. The total direct cost, that includes tuition and other required fees of the entire 20-month MBA program, varies according to residency. While tuition for residents is \$85,979, nonresidents pay \$95,979. Expected living expenses for residents is \$63,053, with a recommended additional annual budget for nonresidents is \$68,053.

As noted before the tuition is very costly. The percentage of Full-time MBAs, who applied for financial aid for the current academic year, was 74 %. The percentage of Full-time MBAs who received financial aid in the current academic year was 74 %. The mean MBA financial aid package for the current academic year was \$52,308, and the median MBA financial aid package for the current academic year was \$62,000. Scholarships are awarded based on a combination of need and merit.

Fifty percent of the applications received were from international students. Yet, only 30% of the full-time students entering the class of 2009-2010 were international students. The percentage of applications received from women was 28 %. However, of the total enrolled students 33% were women. As for marital status, 15% of the students who enrolled to the program were married. Percentage of U.S. students in the 2009-2010 class is: African American: 8%; Asian American: 20%; Hispanic or Latino American: 4%; Native American: 1%; White (Non-Hispanic) 60%; Chose not to report: 7 %.

As specified in the school's website, to be considered for admittance, students need 5 years of work experience. Indeed, the mean months of work experience of students admitted to the class of 2009-2010 was 62. The requirements to have 5 years of work experience goes in line with the age of the students who seek such a degree. Statistics indicate that both the



median and the mean of the students entering the past academic year were 28.

To be considered for admission into the MBA program, prospective students must submit an application. The application elements are: GMAT score, resume/work experience, application essays, interview, recommendations, and undergraduate transcripts. All these elements have an equal relative importance to the application process. International students are also required to demonstrate a minimum score of English proficiency to be considered for admission. The English language proficiency tests accepted are: a Computer Based, an internet-based or a Paper-based TOEFL. The minimum paper-based TOEFL score required for MBAs at the university discussed above is 600.

In addition to the standardized tests, most schools want to know more about the applicant and why he/she wants to pursue an MBA in their specific business school. Therefore, a cardinal component of the application is the essays. Essays are used to foresee how candidates will benefit from a program and contribute to it. In most cases 4-5 essays are required. This gives the applicant an opportunity to portray themselves and express their goals. Another way of to get to know the applicant is through a personal interview. Applicant interviews go by invitation only. Interviews are conducted via the phone or in person during campus visits or by alumni in the applicant's home country or another convenient place for both parties. The percentage of applicants (admitted and denied) who were interviewed last year was 55%.

Typically, during the first year of MBA study, core classes are taken with the intent to lay a foundation for the rest of the student's business school education. Though the curriculum can vary from school to school, students are required to complete core courses regardless of specialization. While most business schools consider core classes mandatory in the first year of MBA study, other schools are more flexible. It is important to note that most MBA's often admits people without formal business backgrounds, and that for some students the core course that usually deal with the basics of finance, accounting, marketing, strategy or operations management is a new kind of literacy to acquire. To accommodate the various backgrounds, the courses in the MBA program are shorter (6-7 weeks as opposed to the standard 13-14 week semester course) in time and more intensive in content coverage.

Many of the courses are taught using the case method. This teaching method utilizes a class discussion of hypothetical as well as real-life situations companies may encounter with. Case-based learning simply places the student behind the manager's desk and gets him in the habit of analyzing data, and making business decisions accordingly. The rationale behind the case method is that it packs more experience into every hour of learning than any other instructional approach. Case studies stimulate students' thinking, challenge their capabilities, and prepare them for future managerial decision making.

After completing the MBA core curriculum, students have a good understanding of business concepts, students are permitted to choose from a variety of electives at the business school as well as other professional programs to reach a total of 57 graduate credit hours. In the last semester students are also required to conduct a team-based action field study. The purpose of the field study is to strengthen the connection between the acquired theoretical knowledge and the business world.

Israeli economy is considered innovative and groundbreaking. MBA and MA management programs in Israel offer opportunity to learn more about different business cultures, creative thinking processes, negotiation techniques and marketing strategies, while experiencing life and work in Israel. International MBA is offered only at 7 institutions in Israel: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, Bar Ilan University (Ramat Gan), University of Haifa, Technion, IDC Herzliya and GIMI - Galilee International Management Institute (Nahalal, near Nazareth). The international graduate programs offered entirely in English include theoretical courses in various fields including finance, accounting and marketing. Most programs are designed to be completed in two years, over the course of four semesters. In most programs, students attend class two days a week and spend another day each week interning.

Israeli academic institutions base their decision on the candidates' undergraduate GPA (must be at least 3.2), their GMAT scores and recommendation letters. In cases candidates already completed another master's degree with high average or completed their B.A. or B.Sc. with extremely high average they will be exempt from the GMAT. In case students did not complete their undergraduate studies in an English speaking country, they need to take an English proficiency test, such as TOEFL. Candidates that did not complete their undergraduate studies in

related fields (business administration, economics etc.) will have to complete several undergraduate-level courses in math and economics.

Students of the two-year programs will pay \$17,000 - \$25,000 per year. The tuition fees of the one-year tracks are approx. \$30,000. However, tuition fees of the Nonprofit Management one-year track are \$17,000.

## **The Current Study**

Although much research has been done on study abroad, most of the studies are based on questionnaire data, which may limit the depth of information that is gathered. In contrast, the current study seeks to understand the motivations of international students to seek an international educational experience, using in-depth unstructured interviews to capture rich, descriptive detail about their motivations. In addition, much of the available research emanates from Asian groups studying in the USA and the UK, with a lack of current data on Israeli students abroad. It is important to determine whether findings from other groups of international students are present in the context of Israeli students abroad. In addition, past research (Ritterband, 1969) may not be as relevant in today's global climate. Using a qualitative methodology, the present study is designed to examine Israeli MBA students' motivations to enroll in an American program. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of this students group's motivations, to provide better insight into why they choose such a challenging experience. If we can identify the motivators of Israeli study abroad students, it may be possible to provide them with services and support to sustain those motivations.

Traditionally, MBA programs are designed to provide graduates with the knowledge and skills to make them better managers and leaders, and also with occupational attainment and career success (Baruch et al., 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). In recent years, however, the role of MBA programs has increasingly been questioned (Starkey & Tempest, 2005). Research has suggested that a business education does not correlate with career success (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Employers are also complaining that business students are more interested in achieving their personal career goals than in learning and development (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). Therefore, it remains unclear whether students seek a business education for career enhancement and the promise of a good paying job, or for knowledge and competencies

in pursuit of a management career as a profession. In order to understand the motivation of MBA study abroad students, it is important to get “inside their heads” to explore which factors influence their choice of an international management education, and how their values may affect their motivations.

## **Method**

Motivations have been traditionally examined using quantitative research methods, and because we know very little about the population from which the study group was drawn for this exploration, the design chosen was primarily qualitative (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). More specifically, this research adopts a multiple case-study approach which looks at a phenomenon from varying angles: the context, the actors and the experiences. Instead of randomly selecting participants to take part in the study, it is highly significant that reflective, discriminating and diverse subjects be involved in the study. For that reason, in this type of analysis purposeful sampling was utilized (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

A hallmark of case study research is the use of multiple data sources, a strategy which also enhances data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Potential data sources in case study research may include, but are not limited to: documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant-observation. In this study data from student interviews were complemented by interview data from an Israeli professor who writes official program documents such as the program's website and course syllabi. Data from these sources was then converged in the analysis process rather than treated separately, in the sense that each data source functioned as one piece of the “puzzle. This convergence added strength to the findings to promote greater understanding of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were 15 Israeli students studying abroad, between the ages of 28 and 35 (Mean age was 31.8), who are native Hebrew speakers, from one of the top twenty business schools in the U.S studying

for a Master's degree in Business Administration. All participants had studied English as a second language in Israel for at least 8 years prior to the beginning of their study abroad experience. All but one were males. Three were married and came along with their spouses, and five were married with children and brought their families with them (Mean family size is 3). With respect to participants' educational background, all but one got their bachelors degrees in Israel, and two also had a master's degree from their home country. Five students were in their second year of study and were about to graduate, while ten were first year students and were already in the program for 6 months already. It was made clear during the interview that any published material would not include the participants' names or any other identifying characteristics. Students were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity when quoting.

The business professor that participated in the study had himself been an Israeli MBA student abroad and is now teaching at the same institution and program from which participants were recruited. He has had experience in teaching business courses at various levels in top U.S Business Schools for the past 14 years.

All participants signed an informed consent prior to the interview, and all methods and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

## **Tools**

The current study seeks to characterize the motivations of Israeli study abroad to pursue an MBA abroad. In order to answer the question, interviews were used as a means of generating data that provides insight into people's experiential lives and beliefs. To justify the size of the sample, it is important to address the concept of data saturation. Data saturation is described as a process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new theoretical insights are being gleaned from the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation is not about the quantity, but about the richness of the data (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). In this study, by the 12th interview, the researcher has reached the point where it became "counter-productive" as "the new data" did not add anything to the overall story.

Interviews were conducted from January through April 2009. Each interview took approximately 120-150 minutes. The language of the interview was Hebrew. To capture participants' motivations to study MBA abroad, postmodern interviews were used. In postmodern interviews, interviewers and interviewees together construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. In any case, both are active creators of knowledge (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003), and both benefit from the process (Hiller & Diluzio, 2004). Accordingly, interviews were respondent-centered (Maxwell, 1996) and for the most part unstructured, beginning with one open-ended question that aimed at understanding how the participant ended up in the specific program, university, state, and country.

Data collection and analysis used in this study included a narrative component, as it was a form of inquiry in which the researcher explored the lives and experiences of people interviewed. This information was then recomposed by the researcher into a narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hence, the narrative component was both the object of the research and the means to analyze the data (Lieblich et al., 1998). In addition, since this research investigated real-life problems, the narrative inquiry method provides more in-depth understanding. Assuming that the type of data that can be obtained from these stories could not have been obtained from questionnaires or structured interviews, the narrative inquiry was found appropriate for the study of motivations. Human beings naturally produce stories, and the narrative inquiry is a way of characterizing them. Narratives help us understand how speakers perceive the present in relation to the past, and are especially appropriate for the exploration of decision-making processes (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

## **Procedure**

The interviews were recorded and digitally stored on the computer. They were carefully transcribed, eliminating all identifying characteristics of participants. The transcription job began half way through the interviewing phase. A peer assisted in documenting the interview, and the written transcripts were then compared with the recorded data by the researcher. Any inaccuracies were immediately corrected. Data analysis was inductive and data-directed. Participants' responses were analyzed using the

categorical-content method (Lieblich et al., 1998) using a three-step process: creation of thematic categories, verification and modification of the initial categories, and evaluation of coding system.

The first stage began during the first interview due to my familiarity with the topic and my experience as an Israeli in study abroad context as Schwandt (2000) notes “analysis in qualitative inquiry is recursive and begins almost at the outset of generating reliability. Interview data” (7) Initial themes about literacy experiences and cultural negotiations started to emerge as more interviews were conducted.

The second stage started once all the interviews were transcribed. While reading the transcriptions, carefully I jot down comments in the margins. During this process, I had a very vague idea of the categories that can be extracted from the data, but as I read the interview transcriptions over and over again, I started to notice that the information can be classified to intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Working thoroughly on each type of motivation I used colored markers to sort out the different sub-categories. During this process, I added more and more sub-categories until all the data pertaining to the research questions was highlighted using my markers. A different colored marker was used to highlight all the data that related to a specific code.

In the third stage, the interviews were read by two peers who served as raters. Each rater proposed a coding system of categorical content themes to fit the data, and these themes were discussed until agreement was reached. Each rater then independently verified the coding system for the same set of 5 interviews (33.3% of the sample), to test for inter-rater reliability. When raters disagreed, a discussion was held until agreement was reached.

In this study, translation issues were also given adequate thought and attention (Van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). With participants and the researcher speaking the same language, no language differences are present in data gathering, transcription and during the first analyses. However, because the manuscript is written in English, raters have also worked on the back translation of participants' quotes to the original source language in order to verify that the message communicated in the source language is transferred into the target language in such a way that the receiver of the message understands what was meant.

Finally, as a qualitative researcher and an Israeli, I realize I cannot separate participants' descriptions or interpretations from my own

experiences. I acknowledge concerns regarding the fact that I played the dual role of researcher and an involved narrator, yet I believe that the nature of the research question necessitated an individualistic, subjective approach. Every researcher inevitably interprets data through the lens of his/her culture, language, experience and expectations. Having the advantage of an insider who understands the nuances of the participant's responses, I acknowledge that there may be more interpretations than the single possibility I presented here. Nevertheless, every effort has been made to ensure highest levels of objectivity.

## **Results and Discussion**

As expected, MBA students provided a wealth of information about why they chose an international MBA program and their perceptions about the program. The categories used to group their responses to each of these issues are presented with examples.

### **Intrinsic Motivations**

#### **I had a dream**

I began each interview by asking the respondent to briefly tell me his/her study abroad story, and describe how they ended up here, what jobs they held in Israel, and from which academic programs they graduated. Despite the fact that the stories had some variations, the prevalent motivation that runs through most of the narratives is the dream. Students feel passionate about getting an MBA. Thus, studying becomes a cause rather than a means to an end.

MBA has always been in the back of my mind. I remember that when I met my wife, the first thing I told her was "let's not waste time". I am going for an MBA abroad, and if you want to be with me, you will have to relocate to the States. Reuben

I have always known that I would get an MBA sometime in the near future. I have always wanted to do this, and when the opportunity opened up for me, I went for it at full speed. Although



I wasn't accepted the first time I applied, I kept trying until I got in.  
Zebulun

### **A local MBA program doesn't have the added value of an international one**

The decision to get an MBA for most of the respondents, had been made a long time ago. Regardless of the different motivations that led them to take this step, the question that came to my mind while we were discussing this was: so 'why in the U.S? As' Many of the literature indicates, many international students believe that international education is more qualitative than a local one (Kistantas, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Ono & Pimper, 2004; Pimpa, 2003; Wiers-Jenseen, 2008). Similarly, participants in this study expressed the opinion that getting an MBA in Israel is not as valuable as getting it from a North American institution. Judah spoke for several others about the fact that Israeli business schools are not among the leading institutions in the field.

I have always wanted to study abroad. Now, a B.A has no added value if you do it abroad. But when you are talking about an MBA... its different because the business schools in Israel are not recognized, they are not even in the top 100. MBA is a classic degree and it fits my personality. I like to know a lot of main ideas about a lot of things. I don't like to dig into a specific topic. There are thousands of schools that give you an MBA, and they all teach you concepts of marketing and finance and strategy, etc. The added value is the school as a brand name and its alumni network.

According to the interview data of the business professor, this is not necessarily true and depends on your goals. If one lives and works in Israel, an International MBA degree is unnecessary, as he notes:

It is very likely that an Israeli MBA won't get you the desired position at an international company, since the business schools in Israel are not among the top 100 elite universities in the world. In a report of the best 400 universities in the world published Feb 25 in [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com), the Hebrew University's global rank was 102, Tel Aviv University's ranked 114 and the Technion reached the

132th place. However, if one already has a position in Israel, and would like to enrich their theoretical background and practical skills in business administration, getting an MBA at Tel Aviv University or the Hebrew University, two of Israel's premium universities, should suffice.

This is officially formulated in the goals of MBA education, as presented in <http://www.hbs.edu/mba/hbsadvantage/>. According to the Harvard Business School webpage, MBA is an intense period of personal and professional transformation that prepares the student for leadership challenges in the world. The goal of MBA is to prepare the manager to make a decision that will lead to a change in the world. For that reason, the MBA is crafted to help the student develop a capacity for analysis, assessment, judgment, and action in a complex and changing environment. At its core, the MBA experience is enriched with school-based events such as club events, student organizations, guest speakers, seminars, sports, conferences and more, which are aimed at encouraging collaboration enriched by diverse perspectives for a richer learning experience, and a network of support.

### **It's a once in a lifetime experience**

While many of the interviewees describe the decision to go to business school as an investment, some stress the experience and the exposure to people from other cultures. Reuben, for example, explained that the MBA is his second study abroad experience.

This is not my first study abroad experience. After the army, I wanted to get a degree in law. I had two cousins and a friend who graduated from the University of Sheffield in England, and they told me about the program. I wanted to be exposed to something beyond Israelis. Reuben

This concept was raised during the interview with the business professor, who assumes that going through the process of applying to business school, students have probably come across this idea in each business school webpage they surfed, and every convention they attended, as he notes:

This is one of the selling points of an MBA program. It is the characteristic that makes it attractive to students, and it is stressed in advertising and marketing of MBA programs. The global angle of the MBA program and the exposure to people from other cultures and their views on business is constantly emphasized and is drilled into people's minds from the very early stages of the application process.

Shimon provides an interesting perspective and describes his motivation quite differently. When we talked about his motivation, unlike some other students who viewed this journey as an investment, Shimon suggested a more internal motivation.

Before I came here I used to work as a lawyer. There were good days and bad days, but after a while I realized that it doesn't make any sense for me to live in Tel Aviv and have the most conventional life. I felt that the office is too small for me, and that my short life is unfulfilling, so I went to my boss and I told her that I can't take it anymore. She was very receptive and said she understood how I felt, and then I left. I wasn't married and didn't have any children, so I said to myself that I will be unemployed until I find my way. I believed that every person owes himself an odyssey, and it may mean different things to different people, but a person needs to extend himself and go beyond the known and the familiar. Shimon

From the standpoint of a business professor, the above quote is a good general depiction of international students' view, as he says:

They are all highly motivated, he explains, sometimes more than the American students, and appreciative of the global experience. One of the possible reasons for this positive attitude is that to get here they had to leave a job, family, friends behind. In the US they are 'disconnected' from their previous life and immerse themselves in the MBA experience.

## Culture and language learning

A recurring pattern among a number of respondents was that they believed that international education, particularly an MBA gives you a global perspective and understanding of other cultures. As previous studies have shown, many international students believe that international education will help enhance their global awareness, help them experience new and exciting cultures, have social interactions and meet new people (Jarvis & Peel, 2008). In this study too, many of the students commented on the 'edge' that people who experienced other cultures have. Shimon also alluded to this aspect of study abroad when he said:

I always believed that those who spent a few years abroad have some added value, they have a different perspective, they know how things are done in other places and they know how to handle people from a different culture, I wanted that. You see, you sit in a room with a group of people from all over the world and they don't understand the same things, and they hold different beliefs and that's when you discover that there are ideas you didn't think about, and you understand that the Israelis are the only smart people in the group. Growing up in the Israel, you are taught that we are the chosen people and that we are the smartest, and when you get here you understand that this is not the case, that there are other chosen ones. Shimon

Although this may sound like a generally representative view among international students, the interview with the business professor discloses that the "Israeliness" of the students is reflected here as well.

This study group, similarly to other national groups, can be quite ethnocentric. From an early age they are led to believe that Jews are the Chosen People, and that they are the best and the smartest. The origin of this response may be the biblical concept that views the Jewish people as the 'chosen people' or as the Bible says "*Am segula*, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus, 19:6). The experience of studying abroad shapes their understanding of their supposed intellectual superiority, forcing them to contextualize their "Israeliness" within global human thought.

In addition to the motivations already identified, a common motivation among respondents was improving their English language skills through studying and living in a country where the language is spoken. Similarly to Dan who believed that "this is an excellent chance to upgrade your English skills", many other respondents shared the idea that international education would take their English to the next level, because it would provide an opportunity for natural acquisition (Dufon & Churchill, 2006; Goldstein & Kim, 2005). Reuben, for whom this is a second study abroad experience, admits:

Although I have good English, I want to improve my proficiency. I have good English and not because of school. I just have a knack for English. I don't know about other languages, because I haven't tried any other languages. Reuben

Even though they feel that that is adequate, they would like it to be better, and they see international education as a way to achieve this goal which is closely connected to their desire to use English just like native speakers.

## **Extrinsic motivations**

### **An economic investment**

The basic assumption is that an MBA from a top ten institution appeals to employers; it is a boost for your career prospects. As a general rule, if one is accepted to one of the most selective and prestigious graduate schools in the U.S, this degree will make them a strong candidate no matter where they live after graduation, having better chances of getting jobs than their counterparts at lower ranked universities. That's why the interviewees discuss going to business school as a business decision. In line with the Human Capital Theory (Paulsen, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005), getting an MBA is considered as an investment, and can be judged using the payback criterion of payback or "return of investment", as Benjamin says. Student's. Students' beliefs that business education is known to be translated back into dollars and cents were widely reflected in the interviews. However, this belief is replicated in a range of responses, some of which are more

moderate than others. Reuben's radical response to my question regarding his motivation for study abroad generated the following statement:

I will tell you how I see business schools. Business schools are top prestige organizations that provide employment services to companies like Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers etc. They do the filtering, they choose the top and then they invite the companies and tell them "Come on guys, come and choose from the best". It's a 90% employment services company and a 10% academic institution. It's not like I don't study, I do, but the recruiting takes up so much of my time. That's my focus. Reuben

This is clearly an extravagant overstatement. However, as an insider to this context, the business professor exposes the attitudinal difference between American and Israeli students in the program.

While most American students view MBA mostly as an educational experience and, more importantly, as an important place to start their networking connections, Israelis usually put greater emphasis on the outcome of the MBA – a good paying job. The professor admits that recruiting takes a disproportionate amount of time. However, most students would assign more than 10% to the academic portion of the experience.

According to the data presented, most students underestimate the academic experience, not considering the contribution of academic studies to their success in finding a job.

Finding a job is the main focus right now, and for that reason the courses are marginal. It creates a situation where school projects are not taken seriously. There's a textbook, but nobody reads it. There's just no time. You've got to find an internship for the summer. Asher

School work can never be the main issue here. There's no time for school work around here. I wish I could invest more time in school. I wish I could be active in another club. But I need a job. I feel like a failure and it's so frustrating that we don't have jobs now. Reuben

## **You can't fail MBA**

All of the students interviewed in this study shared the perception that there are slim chances to fail the MBA. As previous studies have shown, (e.g., Sullivan, 2004; Williamson, 2004), when students choose a study abroad program, they consider their academic ability, achievement or preparation. In this study, both first year students and second year students were very confident that they would pass all the courses even if they didn't work so hard. In fact, given the grading system in the business school, students had very good reason to believe that they had little to worry about in terms of failing courses. This view was reflected in Zebulun's comment when he said:

Most Israelis will tell that it's a very stressful framework, but the stress is not the courses. If you do a good job you'll get 'excellent' or 'good', if you do ok you will get 'good' or 'pass'. If you do less than OK you will get a 'low pass'. But you won't fail. You have to make a real effort to fail a course. Because it's not like you have a scale of grades that ranges from 0 to 100. There are only 4 options, and there are always the overachievers, but it isn't so competitive.  
Zebulun

This is an accurate description of how grades are given in this program. The following is a typical grading section that can be found in syllabi:

Final grades will approximate the distribution below in accordance with the school's established grading norms for core classes. This is the maximum allowable for each category: Excellent 25%; Good 35%; Pass 35%; Low Pass 0-5%; Fail 0-5%

The business professor confirms that while there is some truth to the fact that MBA students rarely fail core courses, it is essential to keep in mind that top business schools only admit very smart and capable students, so it's not the sample of population that is likely to fail.

Shimon might have been one of the few students who had difficulty with this new way of thinking, of not having to excel. His description reveals that he learned the hard way about the assessment culture or the spirit of evaluation in the American business school. In accordance with the

motivation to pursue business education abroad, the prevalent perception from the data was that grades are unimportant, that they don't reflect success. Success is measured by a different scale – the number of job offers one gets. Shimon explains this principle:

In the first semester I worked very hard. I sat in the library for hours, but in the second semester I slowed down significantly, because I realized that whatever I do I will pass the course, since that's the way the system works. Grades are not important, and although true that it's nice to have high grades, it's much nicer to have a job and lower grades. And it's not my cup of tea, and it's hard for me to work this way. Shimon

The interview with the business professor verifies that this is a myopic point of view, as students who invest more in studying will do better in job interviews and are also likely to get good grades.

Yes, grades may not be the most informative signal about students' ability; but a student with low grades has likely spent less time studying and did poorly on class assignments and exams; and is less likely to find a job than a student who studies hard. The perception in these quotes, that one can find his dream job without working hard, is false.

The perception of respondents about the chances of failing had a great deal to do with their view of the application process. Because getting accepted to one of the top ten business schools in the States was such a long, Sisyphean process, the interviewees think that once they've been accepted, they can relax. The use of the Latin expression 'via dolorosa' in Reuben's text is a metaphor for how hard it had been to fulfill all the application requirements, especially the essays which caused true grief. Reuben also describes it as a long, stressful process with an unknown ending.

Whoever gets into the MBA program and has gone through this "via dolorosa", after investing so much in the application and writing the essays, will graduate. Nobody will fail the program unless you deliberately do things that will make you fail, such as



not submitting papers. If you hand in a bad assignment, you will get a 'low pass', and no professor will flunk you. Reuben

Data derived from the business professor reveals that this is an incorrect response and shows great misunderstanding of the objectives of a graduate business program.

Some students flunk in the core courses, and it's probably worse to get a 'pass' grade when many others get 'excellent' than to fail and retake the course. Contrary to the widespread belief, flunking, to a large extent, is irrelevant and is the wrong focus; Business school education is more about distinguishing yourself as a super smart future business leader among a group of very smart people.

### **MBA is not an academic degree**

A common view among the respondents was that the MBA is not an academic program. Some respondents viewed it as a vocational school, suggesting that it's like a training program your boss sends you to, while others saw it as an employment-based human resources organization. Like several other respondents, Gad noted:

In my opinion, the MBA is not an academic program. You have to make a switch when you come here. I came here to get knowledge, but this knowledge is financial tools. During my B.A. when I studied education, I took courses and I learned about cutting-edge research about what's going on in the field of education for example, how autism is defined and so on. There is no such thing in an MBA program. Yes. Professors publish articles but we don't study them. There's no empirical research. It mostly bla bla bla... MBA is like a training program your boss sends you to. Gad

Examining the frequency of the reading and writing assignments MBA students are required to complete, one can infer that this is not a classic graduate degree that focuses on research, or as Issachar puts it: "MBA is a general degree. You get a little of everything without being too specific". Yet academics play an important role. Research is required for the bigger projects, and there's emphasis on the academic honor code. Furthermore, as

in other top business schools, this program hires research active faculty who tend to publish in highly prestigious business journals, and a business professor affirms that some of that research is somehow brought into the classroom, even if the students don't realize it.

The perception that the MBA is not an academic degree may relate to the fact that the MBA has to accommodate the different backgrounds and interests of the students, as noted by the business professor.

The academic degrees of the respondents vary greatly, and not all of them have, as one would expect, math-related educational background. In addition, because there are many specializations (investment banking, general management, consulting, healthcare, high-tech, bio-technology, etc.) in the business world, courses have to remain rather general. Like several other respondents, Levi alluded to this feature of a business program.

The professor also explains that a business program gives you hands-on experience and not so much theoretical background as other graduate degrees.

Now, unlike an M.A. or M.S., as well as other graduate programs that aim at broadening the student's knowledge of a certain field of study, the MBA is more of a professional degree, with a goal of admitting practicing professionals and, in a two-year program, enhancing their general skills in business and improving their skill set for when they return to the marketplace. Since the objective of an MBA program is making you a better practitioner, applicants have to work in an organizational setting prior to enrolling in the program to fully comprehend and appreciate the full potential of an MBA.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This paper examined the study abroad motivation, from the development of Israeli study broad students pursuing a MBA in the U.S (Sullivan, 2004; Williamson, 2004). In line with findings from previous research that students who come from the same country share the same motivation for studying abroad, a conclusion supported by Goldsmith and Shawcross

(1985), it appears that the same motivations repeatedly appear in the data derived from the Israeli study abroad MBA students. While some are in essence the selling points of MBA and are intrinsic in nature, stressing the dream of studying abroad, the experience, exposure to people from different cultures and polishing a foreign language, the more dominant ones are purely instrumental as highlighted by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), including career and economic betterment.

In general, the common conception (or perhaps misconception) is that studying abroad for an MBA degree is a springboard to becoming an international business professional; MBA is a career booster and the end here is clearly the financial compensation into which the MBA is translated, as a ticket to the high-status job market. Participants cited the reason of finding a job at an international company as the main reason for choosing an American MBA program. Although this motivation is described in previous research, the way it is portrayed in this study is much more passionate and fantastic. This finding corresponds with the theoretical framework chosen to inform this study. In light of the student-choice theory, (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John & Asker, 2001) and Perna's (2006) integrated model of college choice assuming that students' educational decisions are influenced by the nature and amount of human, financial, social, and cultural capital available to the student, it appears that the participants were motivated to study abroad in order to enhance their knowledge, talents and skills through investments in education with the intention, in order to achieve greater wages, power, and employment status. The study suggests that Israeli study abroad MBA students hold the extreme view that the MBA is for the most part an investment that will bring about a change in the graduate's compensation potential in the job market. Considering their academic ability, achievement or preparation sufficient (St. John & Asker, 2001), they don't view it as an academic challenge, so they therefore put greater emphasis on the MBA's outcome – a well-paying job, while underestimating the academic benefit. This suggestion is substantiated in Sela-Sheffy's (2004) research, where the researcher points out that the study group is motivated by materialistic purposes.

This situation impacts the learning experience of the students. Because they have the financial burden of paying off their tuition loan, schoolwork is pushed down in the list of priorities. Moreover, stress and frustration are

constantly mentioned (Andrews & Henze, 2009; Thortensson, 2001), although the source of stress in this study may be less cultural, as the literature shows (Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003, Langley & Breeze, 2005; Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Scheyvens et al., 2003), as it is economic. Indeed, previous research shows that international students have a high-risk of economic stress, and that many return home (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008; Storen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2010). One of the most important implications of learning about prospective students' motivations is the effect these motivations will have on the academic experience, which will clearly be undervalued in comparison to employment seeking efforts. However, it is important to note the specificity of the business context in which this research was carried out; this is perhaps a unique finding of this study, that the business aspect of business education has penetrated the academic arena. Whether or not to invest in the educational experience has become a business decision that may be controlled by cost-benefit analysis.

Though no one mentioned it directly, perhaps due to a shared unspoken agreement, getting away from the stressful day to day Israeli context might also have played a role in the decision to go abroad. In Israel many consider the U.S as the country that offers the best quality of life and the most freedom, so that getting an education there is probably the simplest and most reputable way of being a part of the place and the great dream associated with it. For that reason, getting an MBA in Israel was not even considered as an option, as it doesn't serve the genuine motivation, and the explanation that business schools in Israel are not among the first 100 elite universities in the world may just be an excuse. Living (and hopefully working) in the U.S is portrayed as a dream, and the only legal way to bypass the barriers of immigration is probably enrolling in a graduate program. Alternatively, getting an MBA in the States, and going back home is not a great investment.

From my past personal experience as an international PhD student in the U.S., and according to the business professor's interview data, it was somewhat surprising that no one said that they got tired of living in Israel and needed a few years break. Getting away from Israel's stressful environment may have played a role in the decision to go and study abroad. Being vague about this motivation is understandable, in view of the unpatriotic way many native Israelis view people who leave Israel. Hence, to say that one leaves Israel because they don't want to live in Israel

anymore and that it's permanent is probably less palatable than saying that it's for educational purposes. As someone who was born and raised Israel, the intensity of life may have played a role in the subjects' decision to study abroad. Also, it's strange that no one mentioned the legal issue of having a visa to stay in the United States. An MBA in the US is a legal way to enter the country and then stay and work on a student visa for another two years or so. The business professor who was interviewed verified that after the two years, most get a legal working visa, emphasizing that otherwise it's almost impossible to fulfill the dream of moving to the US.

This study can be particularly useful to business education institutions that are interested in learning about their international students' motivations. The data in this study elucidate that the participants' discourse is replete with myths, misconceptions and misinformation about the nature and objective of their business training and the context in which it operates. These myths and misconceptions are significant predictors of how the participants experience the program, and educators in this setting should be aware of that and consider these findings while recruiting international students for MBA programs. If graduate-level business education is to effectively provide sufficient business training, then necessary to identify these students, help them understand the discrepancies and address a remedy. In addition, since business job market requirements and students' knowledge and skills are continually changing, continuous evaluation of students' perceptions and performance is required in order to evaluate the extent to which MBA education is adequately preparing students for their post-graduation job and today's global economy. Institutions might also consider targeting specific nationalities and catering to their specific demands, thereby more precisely satisfying students' needs.

This study has some limitations that need to be mentioned. I acknowledge concerns regarding the fact that I share culture, language and social context with the participants. However, these same characteristics enable me to deeply understand participants' comments, and this increases the validity of the interpretation presented here. I don't mean to overgeneralize nor to stereotype. I know that by doing that I exclude other groups that contribute to the diversity of the Israeli culture. Neither do I intend to provide an exhaustive discussion of the various components of Israeli culture. That would be unprofessional and irresponsible, and I frankly lack the expertise to portray a multifaceted and multifarious

phenomenon such as Israeli culture (Sela-Sheffy, 2004). Still, because participants' past experiences are deeply rooted in social context, it is possible that the origin of the respondents' misconceptions is the surrounding Israeli communal context in which they grew up.

However, beyond the duality of the researcher's role, the unique characteristics of the study group constitute the main limitation in this study. Being accepted to one of the top ten business programs in the U.S, this group of students has unique characteristics that the entire population of international MA students might not have. Recruited from one highly competitive research-oriented university with a fair percentage of study abroad students, the extent to which these findings are applicable across other MBA programs may or may not have influenced the results of this study. Further investigation will determine the extent to which the findings of this research can be generalized beyond the cases studied.

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## Appendix

Tabla 1  
*Participants' Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender/Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Educational Background</b>	<b>Year in Program</b>
Reuben	M/35	Married+1	LL.B Law (England)	2nd
Levi	M/33	Married	M.A Economy	2nd
Lea	F/31	Married	M.Sc Biotech	1st
Judah	M/30	Single	Msc. Computer Science/Biology	1st
Asher	M/31	Married	Msc. Industrial Engineering	1st
Abraham	M/31	Married	B.A Psychology/Biology	1st
Naftali	M/35	Married+2	LL.B Law	2nd
Dan	M/30	Married	Msc. Biotechnology Engineering	1st
Joseph	M/30	Single	Msc. Computer Science	1st
Jacob	M/35	Married+2	Medicine (partial)	2nd
Zebulun	M/28	Single	Msc. Computer Science	1st
Benjamin	M/31	Single	Msc. Computer Science/Biology	2nd
Gad	M/32	Married+1	B.A Education/Economics	1st
Issachar	M/30	Single	Msc. Computer Science	2nd
Shimeon	M/35	Single	LL.B Law	1st