Export development indicators as potential segmentation tools
A quantitative study of Swedish SMEs in the tech field

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Abstract

The “stage model” is a criticized but well-used segmentation method for categorizing firms into different export development stages based on their perceived export barriers. However, increasing presence of born global firms and lagging exports, particularly in the Swedish tech industry, require an updated segmentation tool. Export intensity, export experience and psychic distance to foreign customers are identified as alternative indicators of a firm’s perceived export barriers. The extent to which these variables can predict perceived export barriers of firms is tested. Collected data from 30 Swedish SMEs consisting of both born globals and traditional exporters within the tech field suggest that none of the three variables is a sufficient indicator of perceived export barriers on its own. Instead, each variable explains different export barriers to different degrees. The results indicate that each SME chooses its unique path of export development, making it difficult to establish a standardized stage model for modern SMEs.

Key words: Export barriers, Export development, Export intensity, Export experience, Psychic distance, Born globals.
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1. Introduction
The gradual increase in global foreign trade has benefited many small and open countries (Alesina et al. 2005). With exports representing almost half of its GDP, Sweden is one the most export-dependent economies in the world (World Bank, 2016). The exports constitute a crucial source of income that contributes towards creating prosperity and welfare for the Swedish citizens. However, this also leaves Sweden in a vulnerable position that requires continuous evaluation and improvements of export strategies and export promotion programs. During recent years, Swedish exports have started to lose market shares (Swedish government, 2015). The export growth in Sweden has been substantially lower than the global export growth rate (Swedish government, 2015). In particular, Swedish net exports of goods have decreased gradually over a long period and are now even showing net trade deficits (Statistics Sweden, 2016). It is “worrying that Swedish exports are losing market shares” and the government therefore identifies specific challenges related to foreign trade (Swedish government, 2015). One challenge is that “far too few small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) export their goods and services” (Swedish government, 2015). SMEs are small and medium sized enterprises consisting of less than 250 staff members with an annual turnover of no more than 50 million euros (European Commission, 2017). Another challenge is to focus more on new growth markets in Asia since 70 % of Swedish exports go to the European market (Swedish government, 2015). Overall, this calls for efforts to facilitate the work of export promotion agencies.

In order to address the contemporary issue of lagging exports, it is necessary to develop a better understanding of the factors that hinder particularly SMEs from exporting. Many scholars refer to these factors as export barriers, which are combinations of experienced obstacles that hinder a firm’s ability to export (Kahiya & Dean, 2015; Leonidou, 2004; Suarez-Ortega, 2003). There are on the one hand export promotion agencies that offer support to reduce these barriers (Business Sweden, 2017). The work of these export promotion programs can however be improved by finding more suitable methods of identifying the appropriate support for each individual SME (Wickramasekera & Oczkowski, 2006). Previously, the export development stage model has been used to segment firms according to their export behavior. The model explains how firms with similar export behavior face similar export barriers (Bilkey & Tesar 1977). The model has been used to explain how the perception of export barriers changes in different stages of the export development process.
(Kahiya & Dean, 2015; Suarez-Ortega, 2003). However, the results of these efforts have been mixed. Suarez-Ortega (2003) found that the perception of all export barriers decreases as firms move to later stages of their export development. Kahiya and Dean (2015) on the other hand found that the influence of some barriers decrease while the influence of others increase for firms as they move to later stages of their export development.

The export development stage model has also been criticized for not being able to explain the behavior of certain firms and industries (Wickramasekera & Oczkowski, 2006). For example an increasing number of firms are becoming so called “born global firms” (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996). Born globals challenge the traditional view that firms gradually internationalize by starting in psychically proximate countries (ibid.). Instead, born globals target customers in psychically far distant markets already in the earliest stages of their export development (ibid.). The born global phenomenon is most common among firms in high-tech industries (ibid.). It is therefore an increasingly difficult task to establish how the perceived export barriers of tech-firms evolve as their export development progresses. Moreover Swedish exports of high-tech industrial products are developing significantly slower in comparison with rival countries, particularly in comparison with Germany (Growth analysis, 2015). Therefore, the need of export promotion makes the tech industry a particularly relevant field of research.

This research paper examines three variables: export intensity, export experience and psychic distance to foreign customers. Export intensity and export experience have previously been identified as potential indicators of the perceived export barriers of firms (Kneller & Pisu, 2011). Moreover, psychic distance to foreign customers has been associated with the internationalization process of firms. In many ways the internationalization of a firm is similar to the export development process even though they are not synonymous. The inclusion of these three variables is therefore considered relevant for the prediction of the perceived export barriers. The concept of export barriers can be applied, not only to current exporters, but also to non-exporters that have the potential to become exporters and ex-exporters that previously have been involved in export activities (Leonidou, 2004). However this thesis only focus on current exporters since the variables of export experience, export intensity and psychic distance to foreign customers are not applicable to firms who are not currently exporting. The purpose of this thesis is to measure the extent to which these variables can explain the perceived export barriers of SMEs and whether they can be used in the construction of a standardized segmentation tool. An improved segmentation tool could benefit individual
SMEs and in the long run also increase Swedish exports to combat the loss of market shares and the net trade deficit of goods.

The research question is thus as follows: *To what extent are export experience, export intensity and psychic distance to foreign customers suitable indicators of a firm’s perceived export barriers?*

2. Theoretical framework

This section discusses the theoretical framework of the thesis. The first paragraph gives an introductory explanation of export barriers in general. The two succeeding paragraphs explain specific categories of internal and external export barriers in detail. Thereafter, the traditional export development stage model is presented and followed by definitions and explanations of born global firms. A general presentation of the variables connected to export development is then presented. This is followed by three individual paragraphs addressing the specific variables and why they are relevant to the thesis. The theoretical framework ends with a summarizing analytical model.

2.1 Export Barriers

Export barriers refer to “all constraints that hinder a firm’s ability to initiate, to develop, or to sustain business operations in overseas markets” (Leonidou, 2004: p. 281). Some barriers are found within the organization and are therefore referred to as internal barriers (ibid.). These barriers can be categorized into managerial, resource, marketing and knowledge associated obstacles of exporting (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). Other barriers are created in the environment in which the firm is active and are therefore known as external barriers (Leonidou, 2004). Such barriers refer to challenges of export-procedures, economic obstacles and political-legal constraints. The impact of internal and external barriers changes as firms internationalize and as they reach more advanced export development stages (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). However, Kahiya & Dean (ibid.) conclude that they do not find support for the hypothesis that the influence of managerial focus and commitment varies across export stages. Moreover, they also conclude that the impact of economic, political and legal barriers is constant throughout all export development stages. There are also contrasting views as to how the perception of these barriers change as firms evolve into more advanced export development stages (Kahiya & Dean, 2015: Suarez-Ortega, 2003) which is discussed in the following two paragraphs.
2.1.1 Internal export barriers

“Internal resource barriers refer to the need for a firm to possess a series of resources in order for it to be able to initiate export activity” (Suarez-Ortega, 2003). This entails the challenge of “attracting and compensating qualified personnel, providing the required productive capacity, financing export operations with working capital, and funding the cost of market development” (Kahiya & Dean, 2015: p.77). The perceived impact of resource barriers among SMEs increases as firms evolve towards more advanced export stages, according to the findings of Kahiya and Dean (2015). It is argued that there is less pressure on resources in earlier export development stages since firms tend to start in a more stable and familiar environment such as the domestic market (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). In contrast to these findings however, Suarez-Ortega finds perceived resource barriers to be negatively correlated with export development (2003). She concludes that more experienced firms perceive significantly lower resource barriers (Suarez-Ortega, 2003). It can be argued that earlier stage firms are less able to finance working capital through leverage and that they are less inclined to consider risky alternatives such as venture capital or subcontracting (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). This results in the perception of higher resource barriers in the earlier stages of export development.

Internal marketing barriers refer to the need of adapting the marketing mix for customers abroad (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). This involves challenges of identifying appropriate distributors, complying with foreign quality regulation, adapting price and promotions for customers abroad (ibid.). As firms evolve into more advanced export stages, they are more likely to acknowledge that foreign markets require another market mix than in the domestic market (ibid.). The perceived impact of marketing barriers therefore increases as firms evolve into more advanced stages of export development according to the findings of Kahiya and Dean (ibid.). Suarez-Ortega (2003) on the other hand suggests that all export barriers decrease as firms move into more advanced stages of export development.

Knowledge and experience barriers involve the challenges of “locating foreign market opportunities, limited information to analyze markets, and inability to find reliable overseas representation [...] knowing foreign business practices, knowing how to market overseas and lack of overseas marketing experience” (Kahiya & Dean, 2015: p.78). Unlike other export barriers, the perceived influence of knowledge and experience barriers decreases as firms evolve into more advanced stages of export development according to the findings of Kahiya and Dean (2015) which is also supported by Suarez-Ortega (2003). Firms use pre existing knowledge and acquire new knowledge in foreign and local networks as they progress into
more advanced export stages, which in turn reduces perceived knowledge and experience barriers (Kahiya & Dean, 2015).

2.1.2 External export barriers
Export-procedure barriers on the hand refer to the value-chain or transaction related challenges of red tape, bureaucratic requirements, foreign payments, handling export documentation, and customs clearance requirements (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). There are high costs associated with the mismanagement of these procedural constraints, which may result in delays or fines (ibid.). Geographical and psychological distances can also create a risk of slower collection of payments (Leonidou, 2004). Thus, as firms evolve into more advanced stages of export development, the influence of procedural export barriers increases (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). Ortiz and Ortiz (2010) also identify the lack of knowledge about available export promotion programs as an important external export barrier.

2.2 Export development
The traditional export development stage model was developed by Warren J. Bilkey and George Tesar (1977) in an attempt to better understand the export behavior of SMEs. The authors set out to create a commonly accepted model that could explain how the behavior of SMEs change as they increase their exporting efforts (Bilkey & Tesar, 1977). By examining the behavior of 423 manufacturing SMEs in Wisconsin the authors were able to identify six different stages in a firm's export development. In the first stage the firm does not export and does not show interest towards the prospect of exports. At the sixth and final stage the firm exports frequently, has long export experience and actively explores opportunities for further export development into more psychologically distant countries (ibid.). The model has since its release been criticized for being deterministic, for not explaining the phenomenon of rapid and early export development and thus failing to explain the behavior of certain firms and industries (Bell, 1977). The model is also criticized for presuming that the constant direction of development is always forward and for ignoring concepts such as “deinternationalization” (Andersen, 1993). Despite the criticism, the stage model has been argued to be a valuable framework and an effective segmentation tool for export promotion agencies and since it’s publication a large number of alternative models with various number of stages has been suggested (Francis & Collins-Dodd, 2004; Ramaswami & Yang, 1990; Wickramasekera & Oczkowski, 2006).
In more recent years there have been several attempts to use the stage model to help explain the perceived export barriers of firms (Kahiya & Dean, 2015; Shaw & Darroch, 2004; Suarez-Ortega, 2003). However, the results of these efforts have been mixed. The differences in results could be attributed to the aforementioned critique of the stage model. The Export development might not always be as simple as the original model proposed (Wickramasekera & Oczkowski, 2006). One type of firm with a completely different approach to export development is the born global firm (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996).

2.2.1 Born global firms

According to the traditional theories firms internationalize gradually by starting in psychically close markets and subsequently advancing towards more psychically distant markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). However, a rising number of firms contest this traditional notion by skipping the process of starting domestically and instead launching their business internationally from the start (Canonne & Ughetto, 2013). These firms, typically referred to as “born globals” are often distinguished by being small and tech-oriented (ibid.: p. 272). Due to the rapid development of technology, tech-firms are increasingly forced to enter foreign markets in earlier stages (ibid.). A born global firm is characterized by initiating business abroad in its first three years with at least a 25% turnover from foreign sales (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996). The majority of this type of firms has been found to emerge as a result of a technological breakthrough. These businesses often apply cutting edge technology while developing a unique product idea or a new way of doing business. The products that these firms sell often involve substantial value adding with the purpose of industrial use (ibid.). The technological breakthroughs of these firms and the substantial value adding of their business often result in long lasting market pioneer advantages (Robinson, 1988).

2.3 Variables that measure export development

In an attempt to enhance the work of export promoting programs in the U.S., the authors Czinkota & Johnston (1981) set out to test four different parameters that could be used as tools in order to segment exporting firms. The goal of the segmentation was to identify specific export needs within the different groups of firms. Four segmentation approaches were chosen for testing and closer examination. These segmentation approaches included: the level of international activities, managerial attitudes, size and the service orientation of the firm (Czinkota & Johnston, 1981).
By testing these different segmentation approaches on manufacturing SMEs in the U.S. the authors were able to conclude that a segmentation based on the firm’s level of international activities was most suitable since this had the strongest impact on perceived export barriers. In order to determine the level of international activities among the firms that were part of the study, the authors examined factors such as relative and absolute export sales volume, length of export experience, types of countries exported to, number of export customers and export transactions as well as manpower committed to exporting (ibid.). This research paper aims to test how three of these variables that have previously been tightly associated with the export development process of firms can explain the perceived export barriers of SMEs in the tech industry. The chosen variables are: length of export experience, relative export sales volume (export intensity) and type of countries exported to (psychic distance to foreign customers). The reasons for why these variables were chosen and how they have previously been associated to the export development process will be discussed in the following sections.

2.3.1 Export experience
The Uppsala Internationalization Process Model (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) explains the internationalization behavior of a firm. According to this model, firms first gain experience and knowledge in the domestic market before they move to foreign markets. To minimize the risks, firms will start their foreign operations in culturally and/or geographically close countries and gradually move towards more culturally and geographically distant countries. Firms will also start their foreign operations by using traditional exports and gradually move to using more intensive and demanding operation modes e.g. sales subsidiaries or joint ventures (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). One of the underlying assumptions and change mechanisms of this model is that the experience of being present in a foreign market and foreign business networks will yield new knowledge. This knowledge will in turn affect the decisions and behavior of firms and lead to an increased commitment in foreign markets (Andersen, 1993; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Rodgers, 1962). The notion that experiential learning plays a central role in determining the behavior of a firm is also a present theme in the various stage models. In these models it is expressed as the driving mechanism that causes a firm to move from one stage of export development to the next (Wickramasekera & Oczkowski, 2006).

The correlation between a firm’s export experience and its export development was established further in the publication “Barriers to exporting: What are they and who do they
matter to?” by Kneller and Pisu (2011). In this article the authors were able to conclude that among other firm-level characteristics such as R&D intensity, size and export intensity, the measurement of export experience, measured as the number of years exporting, was the single best predictor of which export barriers the firm perceived as hindering (Kneller & Pisu, 2006; 2011). Based on prior publications, the independent variable of export experience is therefore a given inclusion in this research paper.

2.3.2 Export intensity
In their research, Kneller and Pisu (2011) found that second to export experience, only export intensity, expressed as the firm’s relative turnover derived from exports, had any measurable impact on the firm’s perception of export barriers. More importantly, some of the barriers which were found to be dependent on export intensity, for example those that were connected to foreign exchange rates, were barriers for which export experience failed to make any equally strong predictions (Kneller & Pisu, 2011). Furthermore these two explanatory variables were shown to have reversed correlations for certain barriers. Kneller & Pisu (ibid.) found that the barriers “Identifying who to make contact with”, “Dealing with legal financial and tax regulations overseas” and “Marketing costs” decreased in importance as the export experience of firms increased. As export intensity increased however, the same barriers decreased (ibid.).

As previously mentioned, there are a rising number of firms that can be classified as born global firms (Canonne & Ughetto, 2013). This type of strategy for international expansion is most commonly seen in high tech SMEs (Kudina, 2008). Since the purpose of this research paper is to examine the exports of Swedish SMEs within the tech industry, the presence of born global firms within the sample is expected. Such firms rapidly derive a large portion of their revenues from exports (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996). For this reason the variable of export intensity, expressed as the firm’s relative turnover derived from exports, is included. The variable is likely to affect the perceived export barriers and reflect the export behavior of both traditional exporters and born global firms.

2.3.3 Psychic distance to foreign customers
The notion that firms first start their international expansion by entering markets that are similar to their domestic ones is well documented within this field of research (Bilkey & Tesar, 1977; Czinkota & Johnston, 1981; Kneller & Pisu, 2011). The underlying reason for this is something known as the “Psychic distance” between the firm and the market they are
trying to enter (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990). The term psychic distance refers to “factors such as differences in language, culture, political systems etc., which disturb the flow of information between the firm and the market” (ibid.: p.13). This means that when a firm enters a market that is very different from the one that they are currently operating in, they face high levels of uncertainty and thus also high levels of risks (ibid.). In order for the firm to overcome these risks they either need to have strong firm-specific advantages to offset this disadvantage or they have to commit a large amount of time and resources to gather the necessary information about the market (ibid.).

As explained by the aforementioned Uppsala internationalization process model, firms will for this reason start their international expansion by entering countries with a low psychic distance. As they gather knowledge and experience from being present in these markets they will eventually enter more and more psychically distant markets (ibid.). Based on this reasoning, the psychic distance to foreign customers is likely to be a suitable indicator of the firm’s current export development and is therefore included as one of the independent variables tested in this research paper.

2.4. Analytical model

As discussed in the theoretical section, firm characteristics such as export intensity, export experience and psychic distance have previously been associated with the stage of export development of a firm (Czinkota & Johnston, 1981). The export development stage has in turn been used in order to segment firms and to predict their perceived export barriers (Kahiya & Dean, 2015; Suarez-Ortega, 2003). This segmentation tool has yielded mixed results and the stage model has been criticized for not explaining the export behavior of certain firms, especially within tech industries (Andersen, 1993; Bell, 1977; Wickramasekera & Oczkowski, 2006). For this reason this research paper examines how individual firm characteristics affect different categories of perceived export barriers for SMEs in the tech field. This is done for the purpose of yielding a deeper understanding of how these firm characteristics are connected to the different categories of export barriers and whether such characteristics could be useful in the creation of a new updated segmentation tool.
3. Method

This section starts with an overview of the chosen research approach, explaining for instance the choice of a quantitative method. It then discusses the sample of SMEs before presenting the operationalization of the theoretical framework. This is followed by a presentation of the data collection and response rate, research ethics and then also of the data analysis. The section ends with a discussion on the weaknesses of the chosen method.

3.1 Research approach

The analysis in this research paper is based on the results from a quantitative study of Swedish SMEs in the tech field. Considering that the purpose of the research is to examine the relationship between variables which have previously been measured quantitatively and then analyzed statistically, the choice of a quantitative research approach is considered fitting (Saunders et al., 2015: p. 166). The use of a quantitative method also enabled comparisons of the results of our research to the results of prior quantitative studies, such as Kahiya and Dean (2015) and Suarez-Ortega (2003).

3.2 Sample

The firms that were contacted were chosen through purposive sampling from two different lists of Swedish SMEs. The first list was found at Uppsala innovation Center’s (UIC) website and contained firms that receive or have received business development support from UIC. The organization offers knowledge and tools for innovative projects and growth firms that want to advance, scale-up and reach an international market (Uppsala Innovation Center, 2015). The list contained firms within the industries of Tech, Cleantech, IT and Information & Communication Technology. The second list was found on the website Nordicgreen.net and consisted of Swedish SMEs in cleantech industries. This website is striving to increase publicity and investments in new firms with an eco friendly business plan (Nordic Green, 2016).

The choices of which firms to include from these lists was done based on the information found on each firm’s website. The two main conditions considered were whether or not the firm sells any physical goods and whether or not there is any available contact or firm information in English. The reason for limiting the sample to firms selling physical goods and to exclude firms involved in selling software or other kinds of intellectual property is that these firms will generally not be affected in the same way by export barriers connected
to logistics and production capacity. Firms that do not offer any information in English are excluded, as they are considered unlikely to have current sales to foreign customers. A total number of 105 firms fit these criteria and were chosen from the lists. While the firms on these lists might not be representative of the entire population of Swedish tech SMEs, it is deemed a good fit considering that these are firms that, in most cases, strive to expand internationally and are therefore more likely to be engaged in exports.

3.3 Operationalization

The operationalization first covers the conducted pilot test before addressing firm characteristics, including general information about each firm and also the three specific indicators of the firms export development. This is followed by a section that discusses the questions related to the perceived export barriers of the firms.

3.3.1 Pilot Test

In order to assess the validity and reliability of the data that was collected, a pilot test consisting of 10 exporting SMEs was performed (Saunders et al., 2015: p. 473). This test also aimed to identify poorly phrased questions and to test how the survey was received by the participating firms. Based on the experience and feedback from the pilot test, adjustments to the survey questions were made concerning the phrasing of the questions.

3.3.2 Firm characteristics

All questions in the questionnaire are presented in attachment 1.0. It is necessary to first deduce whether the respondent currently exports since the purpose of this thesis is to examine the behavior of current exporters. “Does your firm currently have foreign clients?” is therefore a control question to which respondents can either answer yes or no. If the respondent answers affirmatively, it is possible to proceed with the survey. If the respondent answers negatively, the respondent will not be able to participate in the survey. Question 1-3 concerns the firm’s: length of export experience, export intensity and countries in which it currently has foreign customers. The purpose of this thesis is to examine these factors and how well they can be used as indicators of the perceived barriers to export among SMEs. Therefore question 1: “What year did your firm first sell products to foreign customers?” is asked in order to obtain information on the length of export experience. Question 2 asks: “How large share of your sales does exports constitute?” in order to collect data on export intensity expressed as percentage out of total sales.
Question 3 asks: “In which countries do you have customers?” in order to assess psychic distance to foreign customers. Question 4 asks the respondent “When was your firm started?” in order to put the length of exports into perspective of the firm’s overall length of existence. Thereby, it is possible to characterize the firm as a born global if its share of exports is at least 25% within its first 3 years.

3.3.3 Export barriers
The following set of questions (question 5-19) prompt the respondent to provide their perception of the extent to which specific internal and external export barriers hinder their firm’s propensity to export. For each question relating to the different barriers, the respondent is asked to rate to which degree they perceive a specific export barrier as restricting or hindering when initiating exports to foreign customers. The rating is done on a scale of 1-7 where if the answer is 1, the respondent does not perceive the specific barrier as hindering or restricting at all. A rating of 7 means that the respondent perceives the specific barrier as completely hindering or restricting their opportunity to initiate exports to foreign customers.

In terms of resource barriers, Kahiya and Dean (2015) identify insufficient production capacity, working capital and cost of market development as significant barriers to export activity. Therefore question 5, 6 and 7 ask the respondent to assess the extent to which their firm’s production capacity, working capital and costs of market development hinder their propensity to export. High costs of labor, lack of skilled and flexible labor are also identified as potential resource barriers (Kahiya & Dean, 2015). However, these barriers are excluded from the survey since we expect many of the firms to have a significantly low number of employees.

In terms of marketing barriers, Kahiya and Dean (ibid.) identify the challenges of shipping and distribution overseas, need to adapt products to foreign markets and pricing and promotion as significant barriers to export activity. Therefore question 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 ask the respondent to assess the extent to which shipping, distribution, the adaptation of products to foreign markets, pricing and promotion hinder their firm’s propensity to export.

In terms of knowledge and experience, Kahiya and Dean (ibid.) identify the challenges of limited knowledge and experience of how to market abroad, limited knowledge of foreign business practices and identifying foreign opportunities as significant barriers to export activity. Therefore question 13 and 14 ask the respondent to assess the extent to which limited knowledge and experience of marketing abroad are significant export barriers while question 15 and 16 ask to what extent the foreign business practices and limited ability to
identify foreign opportunities abroad hinder their firm’s propensity to export. In terms of external export barriers, Kahiya and Dean (2015) identify the challenges concerning export procedures, handling export documentation, collecting and transferring funds as significant barriers to export activity. Question 17 and 18 ask the respondent to assess the extent to which export documentation and transfer of funds hinder their firm’s propensity to export. Ortiz and Ortiz (2010) also identify the export barrier concerning the lack of knowledge about available export assistance programs. In the pilot test however, it is apparent that a lack of knowledge about such programs is not relevant for the responding firm’s export behavior. Instead, the firms in the pilot test state that the utility of such export assistance is in many cases very limited and that this is much more limiting factor for their exports. Therefore question 19 asks the respondent how a lack of utility from current export promotion programs limits their firm’s possibility to export.

3.4 Data collection & Response rate

The data collection was made through the use of a telephone questionnaire. This method was chosen because it is more likely to yield a satisfactory number of respondents given the available time and resources (Saunders et al., 2015: p. 442). The telephone survey was conducted throughout five weekdays between 9:00 and 17:00, in which several attempts to get in touch with each firm was made. From a total sample of 105 SMEs a number of 64 firms were reached. The remaining 41 firms either had an outdated and invalid phone number listed on their website or simply did not pick up the phone during any of the attempted calls. Out of the 64 firms that answered, 21 reported that they did not currently have any foreign customers. A common answer received was that these firms were still in the product development stage or that they were preparing to start selling their products abroad but had not done so yet. From the remaining 43 firms, 13 reported that they did not at this moment have time to answer questions and participate in the study. The analysis of our research paper is based on the answers given by the remaining 30 firms who were currently involved in exports and had the time to participate in the study.

3.5 Research ethics

Ethical principles are taken into consideration throughout the entire process of preparing and conducting the survey. The decision to participate or not is completely voluntary and respondents are provided with information about the survey, its purpose and the implications
of participation in order to ensure informed consent (Saunders et al. 2015: p. 244). Respondents are treated anonymously in order to protect their confidentiality (Saunders et al. 2015: p. 244).

3.6 Data analysis

The data obtained in the survey was compiled and processed using SPSS Statistics computer software. In order to answer the research question of this paper the main objective of this processing was to identify statistically significant correlations between the various export barriers and export experience, export intensity and psychic distance to foreign customers. The dependent variables were measured by asking the respondents to “rate” each barrier on an ordinal scale. Since the data was collected was according to an ordinal scale and not a ratio scale, Spearman’s correlation coefficient was used (Saunders et al., 2015: p. 545). Since different categories of barriers contain varying numbers of survey questions, a firm’s average answer to the questions for each category was used in order to calculate the correlations to our independent variables. These significant correlations were then used in order to create linear single regression functions with the barriers as dependent variables. The regressions were created in order to test the explanatory power of the independent variables and to identify the causality in the correlation between our variables. Beyond the correlations and regressions, various descriptive statistics were produced in order to describe the export behavior of the firms in the sample.

When assessing psychic distance to foreign customers, it is important to take linguistic, cultural, economic, political and legal aspects into account (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990). According to previous research, firms start by expanding into countries that are similar to their own (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). As they gain experience and knowledge firms will eventually venture into more psychically distant countries (ibid.). Each SME will therefore receive a score based on the most psychically distant country that it currently exports to. The score does not take into consideration all the countries that the firms export to but merely the most psychically distant country. Measuring psychic distance according to an ordinal scale is however difficult and requires some form of coding with limited arbitrariness (Prime et al., 2009). It is possible on the other hand to make a reasonable judgment as to how this distance should be measured. First, the Nordic countries can be argued to be the most linguistically and culturally close countries to Swedish firms. Regarding economic, political and legal aspects, all Nordic countries share a high standard of living, similar economic models and participation in the EU’s single market through EU or EFTA (The European Free Trade
Association, 2016; European Union, 2016). Therefore the Nordic countries are given a 1 on a scale of 1 to 4 of psychic distance. Other countries in the EU are to some extent linguistically and culturally more different even though they share many institutional, political and economic similarities with Sweden through EU’s single market. Therefore all countries in the EU except for Nordic countries are given a 2 on the scale of 1 to 4 of psychic distance. The U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand are closely linked to Europe through trade even though they are not members of EU nor do they have current free-trade agreements with the EU. The linguistic and cultural differences are relatively low and therefore, these countries score a 3 on the scale of 1-4. The rest of the world, including African countries, Asian countries, Middle-Eastern countries and South American countries are even less linked to Sweden. Politically, economically, linguistically and culturally, these countries are even more distant and are for this reason given the score 4. Hence, the score ranging from 1-4 gives an indication of the psychic distance between the firm and its clients.

3.7 Weaknesses of chosen research approach

Data from a systematic probability sample representative of the entire population of Swedish tech SMEs could not be collected due to the difficulty of reaching out to a large number of firms. The use of a purposive sampling method containing a relatively small number of firms limits the applicability of the given results and we cannot with certainty draw any conclusions about the entire target population. A relatively low number of participating firms also reduce the statistical power of the research and the likelihood of identifying statistically significant results (Saunders et al., 2015: p. 279).

Another weakness is the difficulty of measuring the psychic distance to foreign customers. An attempt to code psychic distance is done based reasonable judgments of the relative linguistic, cultural, economic and political/legal differences (Prime et al., 2008). This method is very basic and more accurate results might be obtained by using a more complex approach. There is however, currently no universal tool for how to fully measure the psychic distance between different nations. The proposed methods for how to measure this have been criticized for being inconsistent and for not fully measuring the concept of psychic distance (Prime et al., 2008).
4. Results

This section first outlines a general overview of the results and then gives a detailed in-depth presentation of the correlations followed by a regression analysis.

4.1 Export development

Table 1 shows that the firms average relative turnover derived from exports (export intensity) was 56.47%, the average number of years they had been exporting (export experience) was 7.77 years and that the average “psychic distance score” reflecting the countries they exported to was 3.03. Although not visible in Table 1, 6 out of the 30 firms were founded after the year of 2013. Out of these six firms, there are today three with an export intensity of over 25%. These firms derive more than 25% of their revenue from exports within their first three years of doing business, which makes them fit the general description of a born global firm. The results also show that a total of 15 firms started to export within their first three years of doing business. While nothing can be said about the export intensity of these firms at the time when they engaged in exports it is likely that some of these would also fit this description.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics - Independent variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Export intensity</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>56.47</td>
<td>39.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export experience</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>7.323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychic Distance</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Spearman’s correlation coefficients

Table 2 displays the correlations between the various export barriers and the chosen indicators of export development (export experience, export intensity and psychic distance to foreign customers). Each cell exhibits the correlation between two variables, as well as the p-value of the correlation. The green cells represent the correlations that have a p-value lower than 0.05. A p-value equal to or less than 0.05 makes the correlations statistically significant at the 5% level and allows for statistical conclusions to be made. A p-value of 0.05 tells us that there is a 95% probability that the observed correlation actually exists and that there is a 5% probability
of it occurring purely by chance. The white cells show results with p-values of above 0.05, which makes them not statistically significant. Export experience, export intensity and psychic distance to foreign customers are below referred to as independent variables while the export barriers are referred to as dependent variables. However, the correlations do not illustrate the causality of the relationships between these variables. The correlations merely indicate that the variables are connected but do not reflect a cause-and-effect relationship. This relationship is instead tested in the regression analysis.

In the “Export intensity” column, none of the correlations with export barriers are statistically significant except for one barrier. Knowledge and experience barriers display a negative correlation with export intensity of -0.397 and a p-value of 0.030. This means that there is a 3 % chance that the observed relationship is coincidental, and that there is a 97 % probability that the observed negative correlation actually exists. Similarly in the “Export experience” column, none of the correlations are statistically significant except for the correlation between resource barriers and export experience. The correlation between resource barriers and export experience shows a -0.441 correlation and a p-value of 0.015. This indicates that there is a 1.5 % chance that the observed relationship is completely coincidental, and that there is a 98.5 % probability that the observed negative correlation actually exists. In the psychic distance column, none of the correlations are statistically significant except for the correlation between psychic distance and marketing barriers, which shows a negative correlation of -0.395 and a p-value of 0.031. This indicates that there is a 3.1 % chance that the observed relationship is completely coincidental, and that there is a 96.9 % probability that the observed negative correlation actually exists. There is no statistically significant correlation between the procedural export barriers and the independent variables. There is on the other hand a statistically significant correlation between two of the independent variables, namely psychic distance and export experience. The positive correlation of 0.384 is significant on a 0.036 level. There is hence a 3.6 % chance that the observed relationship is completely coincidental, and a 96.4 % probability that the observed correlation actually exists.

Although the correlations in the white cells are not statistically significant it is still interesting to note the tendency that can be observed between export intensity and resource barriers. This is the only case where a positive correlation coefficient is observed between a dependent and independent variable. While no conclusions can be made with certainty about a correlation that is not statistically significant, it is possible that a similar significant correlation would be identified using a larger sample size. None of the independent variables seem to be correlated
to the perceived procedural barriers. All the correlation coefficients related to these barriers are very weak with p-values far above the accepted 5% significance level.

Table 2. Spearman’s Correlation Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Export intensity</th>
<th>Export experience</th>
<th>Psychic distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Export intensity</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.272 p-value: 0.146</td>
<td>0.291 p-value: 0.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export experience</td>
<td>0.272 p-value: 0.146</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.384 p-value: 0.036*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychic distance</td>
<td>0.291 p-value: 0.118</td>
<td>0.384 p-value: 0.036*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource barriers</td>
<td>0.239 p-value: 0.203</td>
<td>-0.441 p-value: 0.015*</td>
<td>-0.106 p-value: 0.576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing barriers</td>
<td>-0.173 p-value: 0.359</td>
<td>-0.055 p-value: 0.773</td>
<td>-0.395 p-value: 0.031*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and Experience barriers</td>
<td>-0.397 p-value: 0.030*</td>
<td>-0.171 p-value: 0.365</td>
<td>-0.163 p-value: 0.390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural barriers</td>
<td>-0.057 p-value: 0.764</td>
<td>-0.068 p-value: 0.721</td>
<td>-0.012 p-value: 0.949</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

4.3 Regression analysis

Based on the statistically significant results from the correlations above, the following three regressions are produced. Unlike the correlation coefficient, the regression measures the strength of a cause-and-effect relationship between a dependent and independent variable. The two most relevant values for interpreting the regressions are the adjusted R-square value and the Sig. F Change. The adjusted R-Square value reflects the explanatory power of the independent variable (Saunders et al., 2015: p. 547). The Sig. F Change expresses the p-value and the statistical significance of the regression.
Table 3 examines the degree to which the perceived knowledge and experience barriers of a firm can be explained by how much the firm exports (its export intensity). An adjusted R square of 0.107 tells us that the level of export intensity explains 10.7% of the variance in perceived knowledge barriers. This regression function also displays a p-value of 0.043, which makes it statistically significant at the 0.05 level. There is hence a 4.3% chance that the observed relationship is completely coincidental and a 95.7% probability that the observed relationship actually exists.

Table 3. Linear single regression, Knowledge and Experience barriers - Export intensity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Summary</th>
<th>Change Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.372</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), Export intensity

Table 4 shows that the export experience of a firm can explain 9.2% of the variance in perceived resource barriers. This relationship is however not statistically significant as its p-value of 0.057 is slightly above the accepted level of 0.05.

Table 4. Linear single regression, Resource barriers - Export experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Summary</th>
<th>Change Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.351</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), Export experience

Table 5 shows that psychic distance to foreign customer is able to explain 18.5% of the variance in perceived marketing barriers. This relationship is also significant at the 0.05 level with a p-value of 0.010. There is hence a 1.0% chance that the observed relationship is completely coincidental, and that there is a 99.0% probability that the observed relationship actually exists.
Table 5. Linear single regression, Marketing barriers – Psychic distance score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
<th>R Square Change</th>
<th>F Change</th>
<th>df1</th>
<th>df2</th>
<th>Sig. F Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.461</td>
<td>.213</td>
<td>.185</td>
<td>.86760</td>
<td>.213</td>
<td>7,570</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>.010*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), Psychic distance score

5. Analysis

The analysis starts with a discussion of the independent variables and the extent to which they correlate with each other. Thereafter, the correlation between each individual variable and export barriers is analyzed in separate paragraphs.

5.1 Independent variables

The independent variables of this study have been chosen based on previous research where they have been linked to the export development process of a firm. For this reason a strong positive correlation between export intensity, export experience and psychic distance to foreign customers was expected. However, even though positive tendencies were observed between all variables, only the relationship between export experience and psychic distance was statistically significant. The correlation between export experience and psychic distance is consistent with Johanson and Vahlne (2009) who suggest that firms enter more psychically distant markets as they acquire experience. Export experience and psychic distance were significantly correlated to each other but not to export intensity. The reason for why export intensity is not significantly correlated to the other independent variables might be that the sample includes born global firms. These firms are characterized by a high level of export intensity within their first years of exports. This could have resulted in a weakened overall relationship between the export experience and the export intensity of the firms in the sample. None of the independent variables could explain the degree to which the firms perceived procedural export barriers.
5.1.1 Export intensity
Even though export intensity is not correlated with export experience or psychic distance in a statistically significant way, it is the only independent variable that can explain the perceived barriers related to knowledge and experience. The correlations show a statistically significant inverse relationship between knowledge and experience barriers and export intensity. The regression analysis also shows that the actual explanatory power of export intensity on the perceived knowledge barriers was 10.7%. This relationship was also found to be statistically significant. This means that the higher the percentage of relative turnover derived from exports, the less hindering the firm perceives export barriers related to knowledge and experience. This trend corresponds with the results of both Suarez-Ortega (2003) and Kahiya and Dean (2015). They find that perceived knowledge barriers decrease as firms evolve into more advanced export development stages (Kahiya & Dean, 2015; Suarez-Ortega, 2003). The choice of tech industries and the inclusion of born globals might explain why export intensity was the independent variable with the strongest relationship to perceived knowledge and experience barriers. Born global firms skip the first traditional steps of gathering knowledge and experience in order to expand business operations abroad. Instead, they target customers in psychically far distant countries from the earliest stages of the firm’s development. Therefore, this may initially result in a perceived lack of export knowledge and experience. For instance, there might be difficulties of knowing how to identify new foreign customers. However, when a customer is found and the firm starts to sell its products to this customer, the firm establishes itself in a foreign business network. Johanson and Vahlne (2009) mention that networks are good platforms for the creation of knowledge and experience. Therefore the perception of lacking knowledge and experience might drastically diminish, assuming that increased presence in foreign business networks means increased export intensity.

5.1.2 Export experience
Export experience is the only independent variable, which can, in a satisfactory manner, explain the level of perceived resource barriers of a firm. The correlations show a statistically significant inverse relationship between export experience and perceived resource barriers. This means that the longer a firm has been exporting, the less restricting it will perceive export barriers related to resource constraints. The regressions show that the explanatory power of export experience on resource barriers is 9.2%. This regression is however slightly above the accepted p-value and is therefore not statistically significant. This is however likely due to the limited sample size of the survey. The weak explanatory power of export...
experience might also reflect the presence of born global firms. The negative correlation corresponds with the findings of Suarez-Ortega (2003) who suggest that resource barriers decrease in importance as firms evolve into more advanced export development stages. It does however contradict with the results of Kahiya and Dean (2015) who instead suggest that the impact of resource barriers increases as a firm moves to the later stages of export development. The reason for why the findings of this research paper and Suarez-Ortega (2003) differ from the findings by Kahiya and Dean (2015) might be that the latter measured export development by having the participating firms identify themselves with one of six predefined export development stages. A significant part of how Kahiya and Dean (2015) define these stages is by how much and often the firm exports. Tendencies of a positive correlation, similar to the findings of Kahiya and Dean (ibid.), are however observed when instead examining the relationship between resource barriers and export intensity. The result that export experience and export intensity could have reverse relationships to certain exports barriers is in line with the findings by Kneller and Pisu (2011). While the correlation between export intensity and resource barriers is too weak to be statistically significant it might still explain why the results of Kahiya and Dean (2015) regarding the relationship between resource barriers and export development differ from the results of Suarez-Ortega (2003). The original six-stage model that was used by Kahiya and Dean (2015) might therefore reflect export intensity more than it reflects export experience and psychic distance to export countries.

5.1.3 Psychic distance to foreign customers
The correlations show that there is an inverse relationship between psychic distance to foreign customers and perceived marketing barriers. This means that firms that export to more psychically distant countries perceive marketing as less hindering than firms that export to countries with a lower psychic distance. This contradicts with the results of Kahiya and Dean (2015) who suggest that there is a positive relationship between perceived marketing barriers and export development stages. It might seem paradoxical that perceived marketing barriers are greater for SMEs operating in psychically proximate countries. The regressions also show that this correlation between marketing barriers and psychic distance is the strongest relationship with an explanatory power of 18.5%. A possible explanation of this result might be the chosen high tech industry and the inclusion of born global firms in the sample. Firms in tech fields are often characterized by cutting-edge technology and very unique and niched business solutions. This is especially true for born global firms that often target the world
market from inception rather than the domestic market (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996). The cutting-edge technology and unique solutions can put these firms in a leading position in their niche market with limited competition, which in turn lowers the need of active marketing efforts (Robinson, 1988). Therefore, the results do not necessarily mean that marketing barriers are less of a hurdle in more psychically distant countries. Firms that are present in these countries might instead just be less dependent on marketing their products overall.

6. Conclusions
The purpose of this paper was to examine the extent to which export intensity, export experience and psychic distance to foreign customers are suitable indicators of the perceived export barriers of SMEs. The study was conducted on tech firms as a way of addressing an industry that is lagging behind in exports. The Swedish tech industry was also particularly interesting to investigate since it is characterized by large amounts of born global firms. The stage model is commonly criticized for being outdated and for failing to explain the behavior of certain firms especially in tech industries. The individual variables; export intensity, export experience and psychic distance were therefore tested as indicators of perceived export barriers. This could generate a useful tool for segmenting SMEs according to their stage-specific challenges. Even though none of the individual firm characteristics were able to explain all the perceived export barriers, each variable was able to explain a specific category of barriers. Export intensity was found to be correlated with knowledge and experience barriers while export experience was correlated with resource barriers and psychic distance to foreign customers correlated with marketing barriers. Each of these statistically significant correlations was negative. This suggests that the perceived impact of the mentioned export barriers decreases as the export development of a firm progresses. When the relationships were tested through a regression analysis, only the explanatory power of export intensity and psychic distance to foreign customers was found to be statistically significant. This is likely to be a result of a relatively small sample size but it could also be due to the presence of born global firms. None of the chosen independent variables showed any sign of being able to explain the perceived procedural barriers, indicating that such barriers might not be dependent on the export development of a firm. Deciding which individual variable that is most suitable as an indicator of the perceived export barriers is not feasible. Instead, each factor explains different export barriers to various degrees. Different SMEs choose different paths of internationalization with varying intensity, at different paces and with different psychic
distances to foreign customers. The development of new segmentations tools that capture all these aspects could benefit individual SMEs, export promotion agencies and in the long run also Swedish exports.

6.1 Suggestions for future research

One of the weaknesses of this research paper is the relatively small sample size which limits the implications of the given results and makes it more difficult to identify results that are statistically significant. For this reason, similar a study with a more robust data collection is needed in order to ensure that the results actually reflect the target population. A more extensive study would probably also result in more statistically significant findings. In order to more accurately measure the psychic distance to foreign customers, the development of a more robust conceptualization of how to rate this variable is encouraged.

The perceived procedural barriers were not significantly correlated to any of the independent variables that were tested. Thus, the identification and testing of additional variables connected to the export development of SMEs is encouraged. Finally we recommend that a model for how to determine the export development stage of a firm is developed. This model should contain the three variables that are discussed in this research paper but could also include other variables that are related to the perceived export barriers. Such a segmentation approach would be a powerful tool for export promotion agencies in identifying the appropriate support for each individual firm.
7. References


Attachment 1: Survey script


Kontrollfråga: Har ni idag utländska kunder?

Arbetet handlar om att undersöka hur faktorer såsom exporterfarenhet, exportintensitet och exportländer kan påverka upplevda exportbarriärer hos små- och medelstora företag.

Fråga 1: När var första gången ni sålde till en utländsk kund?

Fråga 2: Hur stor andel av er försäljning går till utländska kunder?

Fråga 3: Vilka nationaliteter har era utländska kunder?

Fråga 4: När grundades företaget?

Fråga 5 - 19: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att följande faktorer hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda export till utländska kunder? (skala 1 - 7 där 1 motsvarar hindrar/begränsar inte alls och 7 motsvarar hindrar/begränsar helt)

Resource barriers

Fråga 5: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att en begränsad produktionskapacitet hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 6: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att ett begränsat rörelsekapital hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 7: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att kostnader för att identifiera nya kunder hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?
Marketing barriers

Fråga 8: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att frakt av produkter till utlandet hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 9: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att distribution av produkter inom utländska marknader hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 10: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att anpassning av produkter till utländska marknader hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 11: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att promotion i utländska marknader hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 12: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att prissättning i utländska marknader hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Knowledge and experience barriers

Fråga 13: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att begränsad kunskap om marknadsföring utomlands hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 14: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att begränsad erfarenhet av marknadsföring utomlands hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 15: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att begränsad kunskap om utländska affärsmetoder hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 16: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att er förmåga att identifiera affärsmöjligheter utomlands hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Export-procedure barriers
Fråga 17: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att exportdokumentation hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 18: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att betalningsprocesser hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?

Fråga 19: I vilken utsträckning upplever ni att brist av relevant rådgivning från exportfrämjande verksamheter hindrar eller begränsar er möjlighet att inleda försäljning till utländska kunder?