

Full Length Research Paper

Comparative analysis of factors influencing the decision to study abroad

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The international student market has become highly competitive globally. As competition continues to intensify, success in acquiring and retaining International students will depend on ability of a country and/or institution to understand and respond to the needs of the market. This article looks at the factors influencing the decision to study abroad. The purpose is to uncover the extent to which different factors influence this decision generally and specifically among different groups of students as well as implications of these factors on the marketing of higher education services in South Africa. The findings show that although supply related conditions in home country influence the decision to study abroad, the most important factors are those related to the conditions abroad. Students irrespective of group, mainly look to opportunities to enhance their career prospects through acquiring high quality education with qualifications that are recognised worldwide. The experience of studying abroad and its associated benefits is also important for most students.

Key words: International marketing, higher education, South Africa, postgraduates, undergraduates.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation of higher education through the movement of students from one country to another for the purposes of study has been on a very rapid increase since the mid 1990's. Statistics show that there were a total of 2.9 million students studying abroad in 2006 compared to 1.3 million in 1995 and 0.6 million in 1975 (OECD, 2008). Projections show that with an increasing world population and rising general income levels, participation in international education will continue to grow at a fast rate. According to International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) (2006) the number of students seeking education services abroad will grow to 7.2 million by the year 2025.

There are many benefits associated with the provision of education services across borders. International education contributes positively to a country's social, cultural, intellectual as well as economic engagement with the world. A country's competitiveness in the global economy depends, among other things, on international and cross cultural awareness on the part of its citizens (Australian Government, 2003). Through interaction with international counterparts, and the provision of diverse cultural and social perspectives to the learning experience that often result, international education helps

enrich educational experience of both students and staff. It thus helps in building up and strengthening understanding of other cultures as well as in promoting the development of national, institutional and personal ties that make it easier to do business or form business partnerships internationally. Provision of international education services through trade does also contribute to revenue growth on the part of the providers. For example according to the Australian International Development Program (IDP) (2008) export of educational services was Australia's third largest export earner in 2007 at A\$12.5 billion dollars and the top service export for the country replacing tourism whose export value stood at A\$11.5 billion. In the United Kingdom export of educational services were estimated at 28 billion Pounds based on student intake figures of 2003 - 2004 (British Council, 2007).

Owing to the many benefits of engagement in international education, competition for international students at both institutional and country level has been growing over the years. The stiff competition has resulted in many countries realising that efforts to attract more international students or the quality of students needed cannot be left in the hands of individual universities alone. Cubillo et al.

(2006) noted that competence for attracting international students has expanded to regional and national governments. Many host countries now have national bodies, supported by government and educational institutions, whose main aim is to promote the nation's education and research capabilities internationally. According to Bourke (2000), these agencies organise educational trade fairs in key target markets, operate advice and information centres and produce national guides on higher education offerings. Examples of such bodies include International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), British Council for the UK, Aus-trade for Australia and International Educational Board of Ireland (IEBI).

Problem investigated and research objectives

As competition in international provision of education intensifies, success will depend on institutions and countries' ability to invest their resources in developing solutions to enable them respond to the needs of the market. Maringe (2006) noted that a useful way to gain understanding of the student recruitment market is to have a clear grasp of their choice and decision making processes. According to Cubillo et al. (2006) it is very important for marketers to know the factors influencing purchase intention of students and to understand the nature of the relationship among the factors. Unfortunately there is currently insufficient information based on empirical investigation that can help better understand the international student recruitment market, more especially from developing country perspectives. This is despite substantial investments being continuously made in marketing and recruitment of international students.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate factors that influence the decision to study abroad using data obtained in an empirical study. Specific objectives include (a) to uncover the extent to which the different factors influenced the decision to study abroad (b) to investigate if there are significant differences in the factors influencing the decision to study abroad among different groups of students and (c) to examine the implications of the findings for South Africa in marketing its higher education services.

With this purpose in mind, a review of available literature on international marketing of educational services is presented next followed by a discussion of the methodology used in the study. Thereafter, the results of the analysis and discussion of the findings are presented followed by their implications and a conclusion.

Literature review

Mahamood (1998) noted that many people in South Africa show reservations to marketing public education institutions. The reason is that they resent importation of

concepts of the commercial world into education, a sector mostly under government control. This can be attributed to the many preconceptions associated with what marketing is. The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) traditionally defines marketing as the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably (CIM, 2005). In 2007 they proposed a new definition which defined marketing as the strategic business function that creates value by stimulating, facilitating and fulfilling customer demand (MyCustomer.com, 2007). They noted that marketing does this by building brands, nurturing innovation, developing relationships, creating good customer service and communicating benefits. Armstrong and Kotler (2009) defined marketing as the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society. Marketing principles are thus applicable to both profit oriented and non profit oriented firms, including private and public institutions.

Unlike physical goods, services typically carry three main characteristics that make their marketing special. These characteristics include inseparability, variability and intangibility (Lamb et al., 2008; Lovelock and Wright, 2002; Bateson, 1995). The inseparability aspect of services means that services are often produced and consumed simultaneously, thus students or potential students experience the quality of the service while they are receiving it. The variability characteristic is due to the fact that it is difficult for a service provider to deliver consistent performance and quality. Mavondo et al. (2000) noted that service performance in higher education may vary from day to day and from office to office as well as from faculty to faculty. Services are intangible in that they cannot be touched or seen. This makes evaluation of service before making the purchase rather difficult. Lamb et al. (2008) noted that customers perceptions of a firm's service are influenced by tangible elements often referred to as 'cues'. In education services these cues may include things like physical facilities, staff profiles, and publications. As countries and institutions compete to be the favoured service providers, it becomes imperative that the cues be properly managed so as to send the right message about the service.

Mazzarol (1998) noted that the decision to study abroad is one of the significant and expensive initiatives that students may ever undertake. Studying abroad is not a frequent purchase decision and the high costs often associated with it makes it a complex decision to make requiring deeper buyer deliberation before making the final decision. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) noted that the decision process through which international students move when selecting a study destination involves three distinctive stages, namely deciding whether to study abroad or locally; deciding on the country to study in; and finally deciding on the institution to study with. Customers

in high involvement decision making cases want to be convinced that the benefits are worth the risk before they commit themselves to using one service provider and not the other.

When considering the core benefit associated with education Binsardi and Okwulugo (2003) noted that students are not buying a degree but the benefits that a degree can provide in terms of employment, status, and lifestyle among others. A host of factors may thus influence the decision to study abroad. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) noted that the key driver for international flows of students from Asia and Africa has been difficulties associated with access to higher education. As demand often exceeds supply capacity by far, the local entry requirements are often set too high and this may force students to seek higher education services abroad.

Lee and Tan (1984) found that apart from supply conditions in the home country, perceptions of the quality of tertiary education system available in the home country are an important factor in the decision to study abroad. In her study Bourke (2000) found that most students in the pre-departure stage held the opinion that there were better educational facilities abroad. McMahom (1992) found that the flow of students abroad is related among other factors to the relative sizes of the students' home economy compared to the host countries with most students going for countries more economically developed than theirs.

It should however be noted that even when domestic supply conditions are favourable or not students may seek studies abroad for other personal benefits which may include learning or practicing foreign languages; learning about new cultures; the need to broaden personal experience or be independent; enhanced career prospects and status implied in studying abroad (Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2005; Bourke 2000; Kemp et al., 1998). International education helps equip student with the essential knowledge and skills necessary for one to be well integrated in an international workforce.

Countries and institutions have a vested interest in understanding the factors that influence student application and enrolment decisions (DesJardins et al., 1999). Knowledge of these factors will enable countries and institutions ensure that there is a match between what the individual is looking for and what the country or institution can offer. This will help render recruitment efforts more effective especially in terms of ensuring effective use of limited financial and non-financial resources. It will also help avoid unnecessary retention problems that may result if there is no match between the two factors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data used in this study was collected through an online survey involving international students studying at University of Witwatersrand. Online study was chosen mainly because of its associated benefits including the ease and relatively cheap way of targeting the respondents and collecting data. Students were invited to

participate in the study using e-mail sent through the international students' office. A structured questionnaire looking at different facets relating to international study was the main instrument used to collect the data. On the factors influencing the decision to study abroad, questions were designed to measure the extent to which various factors influenced this decision. A five point bi-polar scale ranging from 1 = to no extent; 2 = to small extent; 3 = to moderate extent; 4 = to a large extent and 5 = to a very large extent, was used.

In order to establish possible factors that influence the decision to study abroad, the study made use of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and an examination of literature. The focus group discussions were done with two groups of international students namely undergraduates and postgraduates. Each focus group was composed of 8 members and lasted for about 1 hours. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 other students, each lasting for about 30 min. The main objective for the in-depth interviews was to get deeper insight into issues relating to individual students on an individual basis. Non-probability cross sectional convenience sampling was used in the selection of students for the focus group discussions and for the in-depth interviews. Diversity in age, gender, marital status, and nationality were the main factors considered in the selection of participants. This was done to ensure diversity of opinion on matters concerning international students.

The focus group discussions and in-depth interview protocols were audio tape recorded and transcribed on paper before being subjected to thematic analysis. A triangulation of the findings in literature and those from the focus group discussions as well as the in-depth interviews resulted in 14 items being included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was first pre-tested on 15 students before coming up with the final version to ensure that the wording used was clear and understandable as well as to estimate the time involved in filling the questionnaire.

A total of 188 usable responses were obtained on this subject. This was considered a sufficient sample to use in the analysis as it exceeded the minimum sample size required of five cases per variable as the acceptable lower limit (Hair et al., 2006; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). The sample size also compared well with those used in other studies found in related literature. The sample was made up of 116 male students and 72 female students representing 61.7 and 38.3% respectively. In terms of level of education, 88 (46.8%) were undergraduate while 100 (53.2%) were post-graduates. When asked on their first country of choice in the decision to study abroad, 100 (53.2%) indicated that South Africa was their first country of choice in their decision to study abroad while 88 (46.8%) indicated other countries as their first choice. The majority of the students (176 representing 93.6%) were from other African countries.

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 15 was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics, Factor analysis and T tests were the main statistical tools used in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the overall rank order of all the 14 factors associated with the reasons for studying abroad. Mean values have been used to come up with the rank order. Taking 3 as the mid-point for the five point scale, all mean values greater than 3 were considered the more important factors impacting on the decision to study abroad while those less than 3 were considered less important.

According to the results in Table 1, the most important factor influencing the decision to study abroad was in overall terms 'seeking qualifications with worldwide

Table 1. Reasons for studying abroad.

	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Seeking qualification with worldwide recognition	188	4.09	1.194
The want to broaden personal experience.	188	3.77	1.231
High quality of education abroad.	188	3.70	1.227
Studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects.	188	3.59	1.286
The want to have new experiences.	188	3.55	1.264
Unavailability of course at home.	188	3.09	1.659
Higher status associated with studying in economically more powerful countries abroad.	188	2.99	1.389
The want to learn about new cultures.	188	2.95	1.373
The want to be independent.	188	2.85	1.510
The want to experience living in a more developed country than in the home country.	188	2.64	1.504
The want to live in a foreign country.	188	2.41	1.421
The want to practice/improve foreign language skills.	188	2.39	1.397
Highly competitive entry requirements in home country.	188	1.89	1.328
Inability to get a place in a course you wanted to study at home.	188	1.86	1.393
Valid N (listwise)	188		

recognition'. This was the only variable with a mean value of greater than 4. Other important factors included the want to broaden personal experience, high quality of education abroad, the fact that studying abroad can enhance ones future employment prospects, the want to have new experiences and the unavailability of courses at home.

The two least important factors were 'highly competitive entry requirements in home country' and 'inability to get a place in a course one wanted to study at home'. These two factors were the only ones with mean values of less than 2.

In trying to understand these results, it is important to note that the study involved students from a premier University in South Africa. The University of Witwatersrand is considered among the best not only in Africa but the world as well by many rating agencies (IEASA, 2009; Webometrics, 2009). It would thus be expected that a premier University would have more students wanting to study with it. As demand would be high, it is easy for such universities to be more selective in their choice of students. Those gaining access to such universities would thus be readily accepted in most other universities especially those with lower rankings.

After looking at the 14 items individually, an exploratory factor analysis was undertaken to identify any underlying dimensions that were present in the data. The purpose was to reduce the data to be used in the comparisons of means between different student groups. Tests were first done to see if the data was suitable for factor analysis. The results of these tests revealed a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy of 0.819 with Bartlett's

Test of Sphericity value of 984.3 and significance of 0.000. A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.8 and a Bartlett's Test of Sphericity significant at levels of less than 0.5 indicate that the data is suitable for factor analysis (George and Mallery, 2007; Hair et al., 2006). Four components with Eigen values of at least 1 explaining 64.7% variance and incorporating all the 14 items were identified. Only items with loadings of 0.5 were included in each component as those with loadings of less than 0.5 are considered of not much practical significance (Hair et al., 2006).

New composite variable values were computed for each case using summated average of all variables loading on a factor. The composite variables were renamed after critically looking at the variables loading on each.

According to Table 2, the first component was made up of 6 items all of which were closely related to the experiences relating to living or studying abroad. The new factor resulting from these items was renamed as 'experience oriented reasons'. The second component was made up of five items most of which related to either the actual studies pursued or the career benefits of studying abroad. The least loading item on this component was an item that can be considered experience oriented. It should however be noted that 'the want to experience living in a more developed country than in one's home country can also be in relation to the possible impact this may have in enhancing one's career prospects. For this reason the item was left in this component which was called 'career oriented reasons'. The third component consisted of two items all related to problems associated with gaining entry in the home institutions.

Table 2. Factor analysis - rotated component matrix (a).

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
The want to have new experiences.	.835			
The want to learn about new cultures.	.806			
The want to broaden personal experience.	.766			
The want to live in a foreign country.	.696			
The want to practice/improve foreign language skills.	.677			
The want to be independent.	.595			
Seeking qualification with worldwide recognition		.836		
High quality of education abroad.		.757		
Higher status associated with studying in economically more powerful countries abroad.		.723		
Studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects.		.587		
The want to experience living in a more developed country than in the home country.		.513		
Highly competitive entry requirements in home country.			.808	
Inability to get a place in a course you wanted to study at home.			.698	
Unavailability of course at home.				.839

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. A Rotation converged in 7 iteration.

Table 3. Rank order – factors.

Factors	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Career Oriented Reasons	188	3.40	0.978
Course Unavailability	188	3.09	1.659
Experience Oriented Reasons	188	3.00	1.031
Entry Problems	188	1.88	1.077

The new composite variable was thus called 'entry related problems'. The last component had only one item loading on it. It thus retained its related name 'course unavailability'.

A rank order analysis of the factors, according to Table 3 shows that career oriented reasons were the most important motivator to study abroad followed by course unavailability and experience oriented reasons. The mean values for these three factors are however not very far apart with the highest at 3.40 and the lowest at 3.0. This means that although students may for example cite career oriented reasons for choosing to study abroad, they are at the same time very much interested in the experiences associated with studying abroad. Entry problems in the home institutions were not a very important factor. Its mean value was less than 2.

Table 4 represents results of Independent Sample T-test. Independent Sample T-test compares the means of two different samples (George and Mallery, 2007). A closer look at the mean values for the different groups shows that grouping students by gender as well as by

first country of choice, results in exactly the same rank order for each group as in the overall sample with career oriented reasons being the first followed in order by unavailability of course, experience oriented reasons and entry related problems at home. The mean values of students grouped by level of education however show a different rank order. For undergraduates the most important factor was still career oriented reasons with a mean average of 3.56. This was followed in order by experience oriented reasons (3.14), course unavailability (2.86) and entry problems (2.01). For the postgraduates, the most important factor was course unavailability at 3.28 followed in order by career oriented reasons (3.26), experience oriented reasons (2.86) and entry problems (1.76).

A test of whether there were significant differences between the mean values of different groups show that there were no significant differences between male and female students; postgraduate and undergraduate students as well as between students who indicated South Africa as their first country of choice in the decision to study abroad

Table 4. Independent sample t test.

Variable	Mean	T-Test for Equality of Means					
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the Mean	
						Lower	Upper
Gender							
-Experience orientation	Male 2.89	-1.676	186	.095	-.26	-.561	.046
	Female 3.15						
-Career orientation	Male 3.45	0.832	186	.406	.12	-.168	.412
	Female 3.33						
-Entry problems	Male 1.88	0.000	186	1.000	.00	-.320	.320
	Female 1.88						
-Course unavailable	Female 2.99	-0.983	186	.327	-.25	-.736	.246
	Male 3.24						
Education level							
-Experience orientation	Undergraduate 3.14	1.881	186	.062	.28	-.014	.577
	Postgraduate 2.86						
-Career orientation	Undergraduate 3.56	2.098	186	.037	.30	.018	.577
	Postgraduate 3.26						
-Entry problems	Undergraduate 2.01	1.636	186	.103	.26	-.053	.566
	Postgraduate 1.76						
-Course unavailable	Undergraduate 2.86	-1.726	186	.086	-.42	-.892	.059
	Postgraduate 3.28						
1st Country choice							
Experience orientation	South Africa 3.01	0.282	186	.778	.043	-.255	.341
	Other countries 2.96						
-Career orientation	South Africa 3.45	0.758	186	.449	.11	-.174	.391
	Other countries 3.35						
-Entry problems	South Africa 1.86	-0.203	186	.839	-.03	-.343	.279
	Other countries 1.89						
-Course unavailable	South Africa 3.06	-0.221	186	.826	-.05	-.533	.426
	Other countries 3.11						

and those that did not, on all the factors expect for career orientation among the undergraduates and postgraduates. T test results showed that the mean value for career orientation reasons was

significantly higher for undergraduates than for postgraduates at 0.05 level of significance (0.037, $p < 0.05$). This is likely due to the fact that for undergraduates, the first degree helps determine

what they will do later in life career wise while postgraduates are in a way already largely set on the career path. Thus although for both groups career oriented reasons are important, for under-

graduates, they are even more critical.

Implications

Results of the analysis above have wide implications on the marketing of a country and its institutions of higher learning to international student. The results show that the decision to study abroad is in general influenced by a number of factors. These range from supply related conditions in the home country to those in the possible hosting countries. There is not much that marketers in a possible hosting country like South Africa can do in terms of supply related problems in the home countries of prospective students. However continued existence of such conditions helps ensure availability of a sizeable market for the hosting nations. Since many other hosting nations are competing for the same students, South Africa needs to ensure that it can compete with the major players in the industry.

Supply conditions in the hosting countries are thus very critical in ensuring the effectiveness of recruitments efforts. Countries as well as institutions can only use factors under their control to impact on a student's decision to apply. The results of the study show that irrespective of grouping, international students are mostly interested in factors relating to the quality of education services provided. Ensuring that qualifications have wider recognition beyond borders of the hosting countries is very critical in attracting international students. This will require on the part of the country and its institutions that internationally acceptable quality control measures be put in place and adhered to.

Apart from the core service provided, that is, studies towards a recognized qualification, the results of the analysis also show that the experience component during time abroad is also critical in the decision to study abroad. Most students felt that studying abroad would help provide new experience and thus broaden their personal experience. Such experiences and skills that come with it would greatly help prepare one for working or doing business internationally. Hosting countries and institutions need to thus ensure that adequate opportunities are provided for international students to mix with local students and learn more about the host country than what is provided in formal classes only. Interest need to be developed to ensure that adequate support services are provided to international students to ensure that their time of stay in the host country is as enjoyable as possible. Students who have had a good time in a country are likely to talk well of that country and the institution when they leave, thus helping in marketing the country and its institutions.

For hosting countries and institutions, knowledge of the factors that influence the decision to study abroad is only going to be beneficial to the extent that this information is used in the development of its marketing strategies.

Availability of information to prospective students is critical in this regard. Bourke (2000) noted that students tend to consider studying in countries which are rich in information and have processes and support systems in place to make data freely available which is accurate, up to date and well presented. She further noted that the level of national promotion undertaken by host nations in target markets influences country preferences among intending foreign students. Measures that can help ensure that the available information is communicated using the most effective means possible need to be considered. Having a centralized body coordinating promotional information flows on behalf of individual institutions in strategic markets would be a cost effective way of ensuring effective information flows. Developments in the field of information technology, the internet in particular, if well taken advantage of, would also prove a valuable tool in ensuring timely availability of relevant information about a country and its institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

Development of effective marketing strategies in any business requires a good understanding of the market. This study investigated factors that influence the decision to study abroad. The findings show that students look for high quality internationally recognized education services. They also at the same time want the experience associated with studying internationally as it helps broaden their experiences as individuals. No major differences were found between different groups of students in most of the factors affecting the study abroad decision.

The findings of this study are useful to those promoting their countries and institutions as international study destinations as well as other service providers in the industry. For the marketers the findings can help them better refine their strategies so as to ensure that possible concerns of prospective students that is, educational quality issues and life on campus and in the country are addressed. In doing so marketers would help ensure that their limited resources are optimally located in efforts that are likely to lead to better recruitment efforts of international students.

As the ultimate aim of any marketing effort is to meet the needs and want of customers, all players in the higher education industry have a role to play in ensuring that not only good promises are made to prospective students but that the country and its institutions are also able to consistently deliver on those promises. Players in the industry, be it governments, individual institutions and staff working in them, need to realise that they are operating in the global market and their competitors are from all parts of the globe. Provision of quality education needs to be based on internationally accepted quality standards. Hence it is important that factors that help

contribute to high reputation in terms of quality of education provided are investigated and addressed.

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