A Social Marketing Approach to Choice of Study Destination: An Exploratory Study on International Postgraduate Students from Asia.

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Abstract

Using structural modelling, this paper investigates the relationship between non academic factors of choice of study destination and satisfaction among Asian postgraduate students studying in Australia from a social marketing perspective. The results indicate that four factors, recognition of the institution, Information, infrastructure and cultural support, are major factors of choice which influence overall satisfaction among the cohort of students. The study concludes that universities need to place a strong emphasis on non educational aspects in order to improve satisfaction levels of students.

Introduction

As part of the growth of non-profit strategic marketing, leading social marketing writers have recommended that the paradigm has application in the marketing of higher education (Andreasen and Kotler 2003). While it has been acknowledged that further development of the paradigm is desirable, there has been a strong recommendation that the social marketing approach should be actively marketed to a larger range of practitioners as the paradigm has been shown to be appropriate for use in a diverse range of applications (Andreasen 2002). Some may even attempt to argue the nuances between marketing, social marketing, and non-profit marketing as each of these paradigms have developed. In addition, there has been a recent suggestion to promote the relationship aspect of social marketing in non-commercial marketing applications (Hastings 2003). Administrators within the higher education sector are keen to use any opportunity to attract student numbers and the international market has been actively targeted in an effort to gain full-fee paying students. Although some have argued that a governmental push to increase student numbers is a ‘quasi-commercial’ attempt to supplement government funding of higher education by ensuring that participation rates are maintained and fees continue to rise (Brooks 2003).

Non-profit marketing in higher education has established that by improving or maintaining the level of university prestige is a worthwhile attribute of marketing programs. It has been shown that by developing supportive behaviours towards higher education students it will promote efforts to recruit new students and foster the support of past students by way of alumni support (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003). It is against this backdrop that this study has been conducted into the marketing of international higher education.

Literature Review

The factors of choice of study destination by international as well as domestic students have been investigated by a number of researchers and it appears that in terms of importance these factors vary between these student groups. This study has focused on four major non academic factors – recognition, information and support, infrastructure, cultural support - that
postgraduate international students consider most important in terms of their choice of study destination.

The recognition of the university is a major appeal among students. This is evaluated in terms of the university’s image and prestige in Australia, internationally and most importantly in the home country. Some universities have built up a reputation for certain academic disciplines which impacts on its image and prestige. Mazzarol et al. (2001); Mullins et al. (1995); and Nesdale et al. (1995) identified this variable as a key factor of choice. The students expectations in regard to the status of the university are formed on the information gathered on the courses, teachers and comparative ranking with other universities.

Many Asian international students go through stress and adjustment difficulties during the initial period of their enrolment at a university. There is evidence of postgraduate students going through adjustment problems related to both living support and language (Houston and Rees 1999) and an important factor is that most students go through academic stress (Rautopuro and Vaisanen 2001). Although university counsellors may not be the first port of call in the event of a crisis (friends, relatives and in most cases the lecturer or tutors are consulted first) students expect universities to provide counselling facilities should the need arise Arambewela (2003). Cultural support is a major factor influencing students’ choice of study destination. This cultural support has been identified as an important factor of choice of study destination (Duan 1997; Nesdale et al. 1995).

In pursuit of independent information and guidance, international students turn to Australian diplomatic missions or other government-sponsored agencies such as the International Development Program (IDP). The latter, in particular, plays a major role in promoting Australia as a study destination. Studies have found that the ‘availability of information to students’ as an important factor influencing choice (Mazzarol et al. 2001; Zikopoulos and Barber 1986). Students expect the Australian diplomatic missions, and IDP offices in source countries to provide information on universities, courses and support facilities to assist their decision-making.

There appears to be a general consensus of opinion among international students that the infrastructure costs (cost of living, transport services, and accommodation) are extremely high in developed countries compared to their own and hence Australia is no exception. While students are prepared to accept higher costs, they would expect the costs to be reasonable. One of the key comparative standards they use is the cost incurred by past students.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to collectively evaluate factors of choice of study destination and their relationship with the satisfaction of international postgraduate students from Asia. The specific objectives are:
- Identify the composite factors influencing choice of study destination
- Test the relationship of the factors with student satisfaction
- Examine from a social marketing point of view, the actions and strategies that universities should take in order to improve the levels of satisfaction among students.
Methodology

The data used in this study was derived from a mail survey conducted among international postgraduate students from China, India, Indonesia and Thailand studying at five Australian universities. The questionnaire was an adaptation of the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1994, 1991, and 1988) and was designed to measure the gap between student responses on expectations and perceptions of the university as a study destination on a seven point bi-polar scale. The responses were sought on 36 statements representing student expectations of the operations and services of the university under desired choice and their post-choice perceptions. The gap between expectations and perceptions was used as indices to measure student satisfaction in each of the items.

Students from five Victorian universities were contacted and 573 responses were received which represented a 24% response rate. Using random sampling method, the sample in the study was reduced to 371 to ensure equality of variance across all nationality groups. Exploratory factor analysis was then used to identify the important constructs, followed by structural equation modelling. The constructs identified in factor analysis were considered as factors influencing student satisfaction. These constructs formed the latent variables of the model. The relationship between these latent variables and the measurement variables was then examined by conducting a set of separate multiple regression using AMOS 5 (Holmes-Smith, Coote and Cunningham 2005; Hair et al. 1998).

Data Analysis and Results

Reliability of the independent scales was assessed and found to be very satisfactory with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient at 0.70 or above for all factors (Hair 2006; Zikmund 1998) namely, Recognition 0.89, Information and Support 0.87, and Cultural Support 0.70 and Infrastructure 0.80. The model was estimated as a structural model using AMOS 5 software. The path model’s fit indices indicate an acceptable fit of the model to the data (CMIN/DF= 3.21, DF = 95, P=.01, GFI=.90, TLI = .91, CFI = .93, RMSEA=.08) as shown in Table 1.

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* Bollen-Stine Bootstrap

While the chi-square ratio was slightly above the required level of 3, other fit statistics are sufficient basis for the model’s acceptance. The Standardised Regression Weights (SRW) and Critical ratios indicate that there are significant relationships between Total Satisfaction and the four latent variables with scores for Recognition 0.26 (3.41), Information and Support 0.21 (2.68) Infrastructure –0.26 (-2.90) and Cultural Support 0.15 (2.35). The Squared Multiple Correlations (SMC) indicate acceptable statistics with most variables showing correlations above an acceptable level of 0.30 (Holmes-Smith et al.2005) while two variables with low scores, ‘Cost of living’ (.25) and ‘Presence of own nationality’ (.24) were retained because of the exploratory nature of the study (see Table 2). All regression coefficients were significant. This is an important finding in regard to policy development in Australian universities.
The results indicate that the four factors—recognition, institutional support, infrastructure and cultural support—are important in terms of influencing the choice of study destination of the Asian international postgraduate students examined in this study. In addition, these factors seem to have a significant relationship with student satisfaction in that the access to adequate well-recognised academic programs, information and support, appropriate infrastructure, and cultural support are significant predictors of satisfaction.

### Conclusions and Implications

Social marketing theory is based on the "marketing philosophy" that people will adopt new behaviours, or ideas if they feel that something of value is exchanged between him/her and the "social marketer" (Solomon, 1989). The marketing goal is therefore achieved by meeting consumer needs and wants. Universities, as non profit organisations, endeavour to change the attitudes and behaviour of students in so far as the services provided by the institutions. Universities have a social responsibility to provide high quality education and an environment
that would support the delivery of such education. While most universities pay a lot of attention to education related services and most often seem to neglect the non educational factors that would have a major impact on students’ perceptions of university services. It is in this context that the investigation into the non educational factors in this study becomes an important contribution to the policy development of universities.

In regard to the recognition construct, most students believe Australian universities enjoy high image and prestige among Asian countries. Mullins et al. (1995); and Nesdale et al. (1995) analysed this factor in investigations of choice of study destination by international students. They reported that the attraction of a university lies with its reputation in the home country as a recognized institution. However, this study reveals while the local recognition is important, students are more attracted to the international recognition as noted by the high loadings for image and prestige internationally. It is clear that opinions of students differ as the recognition of an institution is partly based on the strength and capacity of the university to deliver what is expected. The diversity of courses, reputation of staff and the strength of the alumni population in the home country of a given university are some of the factors contributing to image and prestige of an institution. The findings are also supported by the earlier work of Mazzarol et al. (2001) and the Bureau of Industry Economics (1989) which identified these as key factors of choice. Relating to this context, universities need to build their reputation as high quality educational institutions both domestically and internationally. The continuous review of academic programs in terms of their content and quality and the international research profile of the universities is a major requirement. The success of this endeavour lies with the high motivation of the academic staff whose support becomes very critical in achieving this objective. Proper recognition of their contribution to support their intrinsic goals is a necessity.

While universities have invested heavily on student support programs—counselling, orientation programs, social activities and the provision of information about university services— the study reveals that the Asian international postgraduate students seem to display a different attitude towards these services. Firstly, they endorse that these services are very important to them and supports the earlier work of Kohut (1997). Kohut (1997) identified a number of initiatives that would allow international students to interact socially with peers as well as the society at large with a view to enrich student experience. Many international students consider interaction with students of other nationalities, including Australian, university lecturers, administrators, and the local community as part of their learning experience. Secondly, as there are relatively more mature-age students than undergraduate students, the nature of the counselling, orientation programs and other social activities and the timing are considered very important considerations by these students in view of the time constraints. It is therefore important for universities to refine these services to suit the postgraduate students with specialist staff.

A similar requirement is evident in the cultural support. By identifying the importance of this aspect, this study adds to the literature on the adjustment problems and academic stress of international students who originate from different cultures dealing with a new environment. They require adequate support to minimize the “cultural shock” (Rautopuro and Vaisanen 2001; Dunn 2001). In this context, the creation of a suitable environment whereby students are able to interact with their lecturers, friends and relatives is important. One strategy could be to seek volunteers from senior students to be hosts of the new students who enter the university. This study has identified and statistically confirmed that these factors in combination are an important source of addressing the needs of international students; we recommend that this information be used as a basis of the planning, implementing and monitoring of the marketing programs aimed at international students.
References


Zikmund, W 2003, Business Research Methods, 7 Ed, Thompson South-Western, Mason, Ohio.