



Revising Students' Decision-making Process

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Abstract: One of the major concerns of marketing researchers is to analyze customer's decision-making process. Given the significance of "students as customers" concept in Higher Education (HE), it seems necessary to study this process. In this paper, we reviewed studies related to decision-making process of students, then, revised models that discussed this issue. We found many factors that affect this process from different points of view. This paper attempts to provide guidance for further investigation in this area.

Keywords: Decision-making process, Higher Education, International students

1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that nowadays students have numerous options for degree selection and a better chance to choose their favorite university, especially, when the discussion is about studying abroad. In this matter, it is very important to have a deep understanding of students' preferences and their decision-making process and the key step to achieving this understanding can be recognizing those factors that influence this process.

Based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) report, the population of students that went abroad to study got more than doubled from 2 million in 2000 to at least 4 million in 2012. Given the importance of this growth, there is a need to be considered from marketing perspective by universities.

Watjatrakul (2014) explained the following: "Globalization and market pressure in the education sector have propelled higher education institutions to constantly review on the need of economic accountability and performance improvement, many universities aim to increase the number of students admitted as a means of increasing their income while the admitted students are considered as customers" (p. 676). It is obvious that because of new technology and internet, students have more access to information of various programs presented by different universities around the world. Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) discussed that "...competition for qualified students has increased contemporarily with the student awareness about the programs and services offered by most universities, as result, student retention has become an area of critical concern" (p.139).

The purpose of this paper is to review recent researches related to this issue; more specifically, the study pursues these objectives: discussing the concept of "students as customers", revising existing literature related to decision-making process in higher education and evaluating models of local and international students' decision-making process.

2. Are Students Customers?

According to Lovelock (2001), "...education is classified as a service with intangible actions, directed towards the minds of people, with continuous delivery, conducted through a partnership between the service organization and its client, and although it provides high personal contact, there is low customization" (cited in Oliveira, 2009, p.5). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in applying marketing theories in higher education. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) explained that "value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts, which have been effective in the business world are now gradually being applied by many universities with a view to gaining a competitive edge and gaining a larger share of the international market" (p.317). Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) pointed out that "the higher education market is now well established as a global phenomenon, especially, in the major English-speaking nations: Canada, the USA, Australia and the UK" (cited in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010).

Angell et al (2008) highlighted that “given that higher education provision is a service, and that students are now expected to fund their own educational experience at greater expense, it would seem appropriate that UK-based universities make the paradigm shift from being product-led, i.e. relying on the product to sell, towards a more “customer-led” approach” (p.237). In addition, Eagle and Brennan (2007, p.51) argued that “there is considerable debate in literature regarding perceived positive and negative aspects of the “student as customer” concept, drawing upon both general argumentation and empirical studies”, Table 1 presents main arguments about the idea of considering student as a customer (Eagle and Brennan, 2007, p.51). Watjatrakul (2014) found an interesting point which is about “students that believe the universities’ adoption of the student-as-customer concept will lead to improvement of the universities’ service quality and the degradation of educational quality in terms of the instructors’ neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student relationship, and the ease of course achievement”(Watjatrakul 2014,p.676).

Table 1: Key arguments for and against the “student as customer” concept

Are Students Customers? Who Pays – and For What?	Discussed by:
Students pay an increasing proportion of their education costs; therefore, they should be treated in the same way as any other purchaser of goods or services	Bejou, 2005; Bennett, 2003 Halbesleben et al., 2003; Kanji and Tambi, 1999
Students do not pay the full cost of their education and they are not “purchasing” a qualification per se. Students do not know what combination of skills and knowledge will best equip them for the world of work; they may not appreciate the importance of a subject until they are in employment	Emery et al. , 2001; Scott, 1999; Laskey, 1998; Sirvanci, 1996; Clayson and Haley, 2005; Adkins and Radtke, 2004; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998
Academic rigour and standards adopt a consumerist perspective and expect good grades, irrespective of the amount of effort they have invested or the quality of work produced. Universities become focused on vocational training to the detriment of generic, transferable skills such as critical thinking analysis. This is coupled with reduced academic standards and rigour, together with grade inflation	Clayson and Haley, 2005; Lammers et al., 2005; Carlson and Fleisher, 2002; Clayson and Haley, 2005; Ballard, 2004; Carlson and Fleisher, 2002; Rolfe, 2002; Scott, 1999
Students seek the easiest programmes and courses with soft assessments; conversely, they may punish academically demanding staff through critical Feedback. This may have a detrimental impact on future staff promotional prospects	Clayson and Haley, 2005; Yunker and Yunker, 2003; Chonko et al., 2002
Students transfer responsibility onto education providers rather than taking responsibility for their own learning. This results in a reluctance to conduct independent study and greater demands for all material to be provided for students to learn as if education can be simply passively consumed	Clayson and Haley, 2005; Rolfe, 2002; Tam, 2002; Sharrock, 2000; Laskey, 1998
Lectures are expected to entertain rather than involving participation; literacy and note taking skills are poor and intellectual curiosity levels and interest in theory are low	Carlson and Fleisher, 2002; Rolfe, 2002

Source: Eagle and Brennan (2007, p.51)

More and more universities are adopting the “customer” metaphor and treat their students as customers (Watjatrakul, 2014, p. 677). Considering “student as customer”, one question needs to be asked: how students choose their university; and which factors influence their decision-making process as a customer; it is necessary to realize their preferences, priorities and desires. In the next part of the article, we will discuss these issues.

2.1 Student’s Decision-making Process

Burkhardt and Bennett (2015) argued the following: “Higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in an increasingly global world, they recruit and matriculate international students with the intention to promote cultural exchanges that benefit both foreign and domestic students, and the community at large, by providing opportunities for cross-cultural interaction” (p.163). Maringe and Carter (2007, p.459) mentioned that “International students’ higher education decision making is a high stakes process” and “university choice results as being very important, since its effects reflect on future carrier and life of students” (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010,p.139). Decision-making process for students is influenced by different factors. We should pay attention to student’s perspective “To determine students’ university preferences, students consider what is important for them, and then consciously or unconsciously trade-off among these attributes” (Soutar and Turner, 2002,P.40). It is noticeable that sometimes students have strong reasons for making choices. Hemsley-Brown (1999) has endorsed this view in her study in which she concluded that while pupils often give utilitarian reasons for making choices, these were usually filtered through layers of preconceptions emanating from influences in family background, culture and life history (cited in Maringe,2006,p.468).

Different levels of economic and social capital that students had access to can deeply influence students' decision-making process (Reay et al., 2005). In another point of view, Marigine (2006) considered three levels at which choice and decision-making research in HE has been showed; "First is the global level, which shows why students choose to study abroad. Second is a national level where students' choice of university is the focus. The third level which has received relatively little attention is the choice of courses of study" (Marigine, 2006, p.469). In next part of the article, we try to review different researchers related to those factors that influence decision-making process.

2.2 Reviewing previous studies:

We can evaluate the higher education market from institutions' perspective and students' viewpoint as Maringe (2006) explained: "Consumers in higher education (HE) now exist in positional market, where institutions compete for the best students while the applicants compete for the most preferred institutions" (p.469). Prior investigations have noted different factors that have impact on student's decision-making process from different points of view in various countries (Moogan et al.,2001; Mazzarol and Soutar,2002; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Cubillo et al., 2006; Chen and Zimitat,2006; Maringe,2006; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi,2010; Rudd.B et al., 2012). We will review previous researches related to students' decision-making process below;

2.2.1 Moogan et al. (2001)

Moogan et al., (2001) explained that attracting well-qualified and highly motivated prospective students is one of the major issues of marketing strategies for many institutions in the UK. Moogan et al., (2001) assessed "the importance of decision-making attributes by potential higher education students, their focus was on establishing whether the importance weighting, given by prospective students of key institutional attributes, changes over the (long) period when decisions are made" (p.184). They applied "conjoint analysis to establish candidates' utilities of identified key decision-making attributes; course content, location and reputation" (Moogan et al, 2001, p179). They explained that there are some changes in the importance of different factors from early stage to later stages. "Findings of the research indicated that in the early stages of the decision-making process, prospective students view course content as the most significant factor, but that as the consumption process nears, location becomes increasingly important. Reputation is an exchangeable element throughout and is considered less important" (Moogan et al., 2001, p179).

Table 2: Relative importance of each attribute

Attributes	Stage 1 (1997)	Stage 2 (1998)
	(pre open day) (%)	(post open day) (%)
Location	28.4	44.1
Reputation	23.7	18.2
Course content	47.9	37.7

Source: Moogan et al. (2001, p.183)

2.2.2 Mazzarol and Soutar (2002)

There are different ways of making a decision to study overseas. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) believe that: "Student seeking an international education will first make a decision to go abroad, then select a country based on variety of "push-pull "factors, once the decision for a host country has been made, the decision to a particular institution will be made" (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, p.84). They suggested "push-pull" factors that have impact on students' choice of study destination. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggested that "push" factors operate within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study and "pull" factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students" (p.82). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002,p.82) "examined the factors motivating international student choice of the host country. Their research had undertaken in four countries; Taiwan, India, China and Indonesia". In their research, they discussed different factors influencing the decision to study overseas; the importance of knowledge and awareness of host, the importance of recommendations from friends and relatives, the importance of cost issues, the importance of environment, the importance of social links and geographic proximity. They came to conclude that "Students from the four countries identified at least eight factors that motivate them to study abroad and these factors appear to be important, regardless of source country involved" (p.88). In this part of article, we will review "Push" factors. Exploration of the "push" factors that influence the decision to study abroad emphasizes four issues; the first is that "majority of students saw that an overseas course was better than a local one and this was an important factor motivating their decision to study overseas" (p.84). "The next two factors were related to a student's ability to gain entry to local program, if it were difficult for them to gain entry to particular study program within their own country or the program they wished to enter was unavailable in their own country, then they would choose to study internationally" (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, p.88).

2.2.4 Chen and Zimitat (2006)

In their research, Chen and Zimitat (2006) explored the motivators for Taiwanese students that intend to study higher education in a western society. They mentioned that “as competition increases in the international marketplace, it will become increasingly important to engage in extensive consumer behaviour research in higher education” (p.97). They applied the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) presented by Ajzen and Fishbein (1975). TPB has three parts: Attitudes towards behaviour (AB), subjective norms (SN) and perceived behavioural control (PBC) (cited in Chen and Zimitat, 2006, p.93). Chen and Zimitat (2006) explained that this theory is both descriptive and predictive of behaviour. It is based on the principle that to understand an individual’s choice of behaviour, it is essential to examine their intentions related to that behaviour. Intention is understood by examining attitudes to the particular behaviour in question” (p.93). Their research was designed to explore the motivations of Taiwanese students in selecting Australian or US universities using theory of planned behaviour (TPB) as a model. They explained the following: “for Australia, the attitude or perceptions of Taiwanese students towards higher education in the destination country was of greatest importance in shaping their intentions for overseas study and the influence of family and friends was more important than consideration of resources necessary in shaping intentions to study in the USA” Chen and Zimitat (2006) emphasized that “These differences provide a basis for considering tailored marketing plans for these countries”.

Table 4: Relationship between variables in predicting selection of Australia or USA as first choice destination for higher education study

First choice country	Variable	β	t	p
Australia	Attitude toward behaviour	0.326	3.831	$p < 0.001$
	Subjective norm	0.224	2.493	$p < 0.05$
	Perceived behavioural control	0.184	2.101	$p < 0.05$
USA	Attitude toward behaviour	0.237	3.745	$p < 0.001$
	Subjective norm	0.288	4.406	$p < 0.001$
	Perceived behavioural control	0.192	3.189	$p < 0.01$

Source: Chen and Zimitat (2006, p.97)

2.2.5 Maringe (2006)

The main purpose of Maringe’s research is about discovering important factors which students consider in their decision making related to choice of university and courses of study. She used survey questionnaire based on a 10 point Likert scale to identify factors of student’s choice. The sample of study included 387 students which voluntarily contributed in this research. Margine (2006) explained that “Following Ivy (2002), sixth form students were asked to rank on a 1-10 scale the importance of 30 factors to their decision making in choosing a university. The thirty factors were classified into 7 categories and mean scores and standard deviations for each category were computed” (p.474). Margine (2006) concluded that there are 3 factors that seemed to have a major impact on students’ choice of university: programme, price, place and prominence (see table 5).

Table 5: Mean scores for university choice factors

Factors and key constituent elements	Mean	SD
Programme (field of study, courses, majors, course structure and degree organisation)	7.8	0.93
Price (fees, flexibility in payment, effort needed to qualify, opportunities sacrificed, distance from home, transport and living costs, opportunities for part time work)	7.5	0.92
Promotion (advertising in local and national press, publicity about academic research, publicity about teaching excellence, electronic media and marketing communications)	4.8	0.96
People (gender composition, tutors credentials, alumni and personal contacts, graduate profiles)	4.5	0.91
Prospectus (the university prospectus, programme booklets)	4.6	0.94
Prominence (institutional reputation, staff reputation, press reviews by national news papers, institutional websites, league tables)	6.1	0.91
Place (campus accommodation, degree credits, facilities, racial diversity, residential requirements, class sizes)	6.2	0.93

Source: Maringe (2006, p.475)

Margine (2006) explained the following more specifically:

“Among elements included in programme factors, field of study and details, of course, information appear to exert the greatest influence on university choice. Price elements which had the greatest impact on university choice included considerations students give to regional economic job market issues such as availability of part-time work and general costs of living. Issues of institutional prominence maintain fairly a high profile in students’ decision-making. Of critical importance is the overall reputation of the institution and staff credentials. Students, however, seem to be less influenced by press reviews and institutional website information in the university choice decisions” (p.474).

Maringe (2006, p.466) concluded with two main issues: “First is that students seem to be adopting a consumerist approach to their HE decision making. The importance attached to labour market motives in terms of employment and career prospects significantly outweigh those related to pursuing HE based on subject interest and a love for the subject. Second is that as a result of this, students consider programme and price related issues more important than other elements of universities marketing mix”.

2.2.6 Maringe and Carter (2007)

Maringe and Carter (2007) discovered those factors that influence decision-making and experience of African students in UK higher education. Their sample of research included 28 students from two Africa universities. Maringe and Carter (2007, p. 459) used focus groups; “students were asked to reflect on the reasons why they decided to leave their home countries to study in England and to indicate other countries they had actively considered in this process. They got result that “the most significant push factors were economic and political factors. There was also lack of local capacity reason within countries of origin” (p.465).

The majority who spoke of economic factors referred to prevailing levels of economic stagnation or decline in their home countries. Further, they discussed why the UK is a pleasant destination for going on study and several pull factors were identified by respondents during the focus group discussions. They figured out four major reasons; “First and foremost, students believe strongly that the UK HE qualification enjoys international recognition and acquiring it will be a lifetime investment and opportunity” (Maringe and Carter, 2007, p. 466); other reasons and priorities are given in table 6.

Table 6: Key pull factors drawing African students to UK HE

Pull factors	Frequency (per cent)	Rank order
International recognition of British HE qualifications	23 (100)	1
International quality of British HE	11 (49)	6
Safe learning environment	7 (30)	7
Opportunities for part time work	12 (50)	4
Excellent teaching and learning environments	15 (65)	3
Opportunities for post qualification progression	9 (39)	5
Straight forward and easy application process	19 (82)	2

Source: Maringe and Carter (2007, p.466)

Maringe and Carter (2007) explained their research findings as following:

“A six element model of decision-making was developed from the data which identifies a range of push and pull factors operating within constraints of fears and anxieties about studying in UK HE. The data suggest that African students come to study in England on the promise of getting a truly international HE experience” (Maringe and Carter, 2007, P. 459).

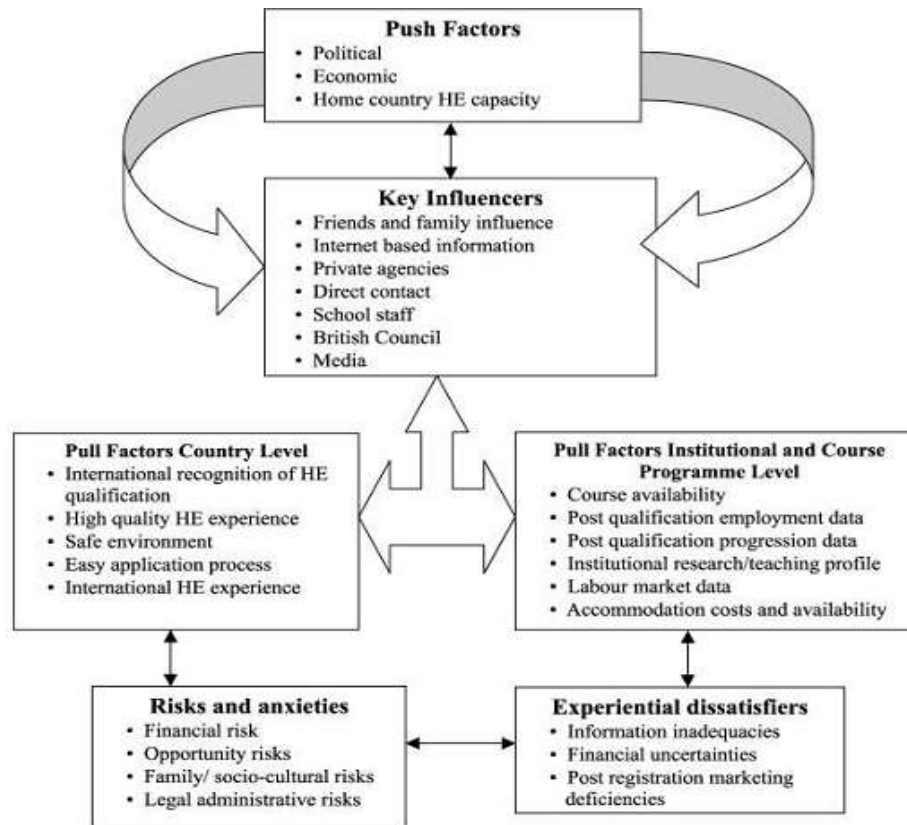


Figure 2: A model for African students' overseas study decision-making
Source: Maringe and Carter (2007, p.471)

2.2.7 Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010)

Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010, p151) indicated that “student expectations are a complex variable ranging from social to functional, from structural to behavioural aspects”. In their research, they tried to “investigate the components of the university value that affects students’ choice and measure students’ perceptions of value that are influenced by differences in costs (monetary and non-monetary, students’ attitudes and socio-demographic features)” (p.139). For measuring students’ beliefs and perceptions about the offer and service attributes of the university, Petruzzellis and Romanazzi developed a questionnaire. They used different statistical tests ANOVA and a PLS regression to explore the effects of various value dimensions as perceived by students (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010, p.139).

They explained that their “questionnaire was administered by trained voluntary students, over a two month period, to a sample of 1200 students at the University of Bari, which is one of the biggest campuses in Italy” (p.147). Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) found out that: “Attempting to increase their level of satisfaction, their efforts will be more effective if focussed on demonstrating the way that the service provided has helped their customers to achieve their objectives, highlighting the strategic importance of the social value”.

Petruzzellis and Romanazzi(2010) explained the following:

“In particular, the university choice depends on two different categories of elements: the university related factors and the student related ones. However, the two overlapping areas of education reflects on such a classification, they mentioned that In fact, these two categories are reciprocally interrelated and the weight of each on the value formation depends on the dynamics of the relationship between university and its students” (p.152). Finally, they concluded “although universities could improve student retention by attempting to increase their level of satisfaction, their efforts will be more effective if focussed on demonstrating the way that the service provided has helped their customers to achieve their objectives, highlighting the strategic importance of the social value” (p.139).

2.2.8 Rudd.B et al. (2012)

Based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) report in (2012), UK was in a second place between Top 10 destination countries and China (694,400 students studying abroad) was in the first place between top 10 countries concerning origin of mobile students. Rudd.B et al., (2012, P.129) argued that: “Chinese students are the largest group of international students in the UK”. They explored factors which influence Chinese students’ decision-making to study in UK Business School. “Based on the Cubillo et al. (2006) model, the authors developed a series of questions and used

them as the foundation for the interview. To determine the sample of the student population to be interviewed, a non-probability convenience sampling method was used” (Rudd.B et al., 2012, p.133).

Rudd.B et al. (2012, p.129): “An integrated model reflecting influences on decision making was developed from the analysed data that are contextualised for this particular market segment. The data suggest that Chinese students are influenced by the UK’s academic reputation, the desire to experience Western culture, the facilities at the institution, the image and reputation of the school, and external factors related to the destination city. As Rudd.B et al. (2012, p.137) mentioned “Figure 3 is contextualised for a particular market segment – Chinese students and could be explored more in relation to other target markets”.

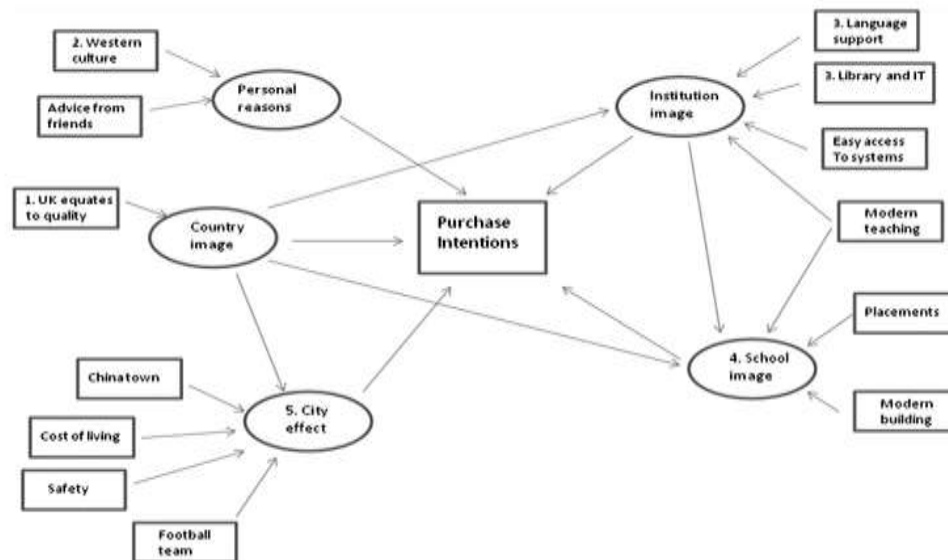


Figure 3: A contextual model of Chinese students' decision- making influences on international higher education choice.

Source: Rudd.B et al. (2012)

3. Conclusion

The current study showed there are many factors that influence students' decision- making process in choosing an institution/university for studying locally or internationally. By applying marketing strategies in higher education and by considering “students as customers” theory in this competitive market, it is necessary for universities/institutions to consider their prospective students' priorities, preferences and set their marketing strategies. They have to base their services on importance of those factors that have impact on student's decision-making process. As Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) mentioned “competition for qualified students has increased contemporarily with the student awareness about the programs and services offered by most universities, as result, student retention has become an area of critical concern” (p.139). In this paper, we tried to review different studies that discussed those factors that influence student's decision-making process. Further research might explore student's decision-making process based on specific variable such as nationality, degree level, destination country, country of origin, and classify them into different categories. In addition, further research might discuss the relationship between different factors which impact student's decision-making process and develop appropriate models.

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