

A PRELIMINARY FINDING ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS CHOICE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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Abstract

The Malaysia government has announced to make Malaysia as an education hub in Asia. The aim is to have 150,000 international students by 2015 and 200,000 by year 2020. Thus, the role of marketing which previously were non-existent in most universities, has grown drastically. In order to attract more international students to the country and achieve the nation's goal to become a regional education hub, a comprehensive marketing strategy should be considered. Therefore, it is important for Malaysian higher institutions to identify the factors that attract international students to choose Malaysia as a place to study. Thus, this study identifies the factors crucial for attracting international students to study in Malaysia by using Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) as sample. This study also aims to indentify the best approach to attract students to study at this university. Results of the study show the top five important factors are English usage, courses offered, accommodation cost, course duration and information from internet. The findings reveal that recommendations from friends and family members are the two most important approaches to attract more students to study in Malaysia, which clearly reflects the importance of word of mouth as a promotional tool. It is hoped that the finding of this study can provide some insights to higher education institutions in Malaysia and UPSI especially to understand the determinants of student choice to study in Malaysia

Keywords *international student, Malaysia, internationalization of education, higher learning*

INTRODUCTION

Universities have constantly attracted international students even back in the mid-sixteenth century (Kerr, 2011, cited in Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). The number of students studying abroad increased tremendously during the second half of twentieth century from about 150,000 students in 1955 to 2.8 billion in 2007 (UNESCO, 2009). The trend was partly due to economic, political and globalization. Most western universities responded to globalization with a range of internationalization objectives and strategies with the main objective to attract students to their countries. English speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia where English is the medium in higher education have particularly benefited from globalization. These countries hold 44% of market share of the world's international students (Lasanowski, 2009).

International students make significant contributions to the revenue of the host country. For example, international students and their dependents contributed approximately \$21.8 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2011/12 academic year (NAFSA, 2013). Besides financial benefits, international students can bring other benefits such as university status, contribute to research projects, research output and teaching, increase cultural understanding and diversity in curricular design and learning experience (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

In Malaysia, higher education institutions have experienced a massive development. In 1996, the government announced to make Malaysia as an education hub in Asia and in the same year the Private Higher Education Act was passed which allows privatization and liberalization of higher education on a bigger scale. Consequently, internationalization has become a national strategy in Malaysia's higher education. It becomes one of the seven thrusts under National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2007-2020. The aim is to have 150,000 international students by 2015 and 200,000 by year 2020. Various marketing efforts were undertaken in 2007 such as international education fair and visits especially to China and Dubai. As a result, the number of international students has increased dramatically. This is evident by the increasing number of international students studying in Malaysia. In 1995, the number of international students in Malaysia was less than 2,000. As at the beginning of 2009, there were more than 70,000 international students from more than 100 countries studying in Malaysia. Of this, about a third is from China and Indonesia and the rest mainly from Middle East and North Africa countries and Western Asia. The students pursue courses ranging from diplomas to PhDs at public universities, private higher education institutions and foreign university branch campuses. According to a report by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), currently Malaysia is ranked 11th in the world by UNESCO in terms of highest number of international students studying in the country. This shows the confidence of international students to choose Malaysia as a preferred destination. The continued growth also highlights the need to better understand this phenomenon. In line with this aspiration, all higher education institutions in Malaysia is to achieve the target by Ministry of Higher education to have 10% international students from the total number of undergraduate students in their university. Hence, to achieve this, efforts and commitment from all parties are necessary.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987, as cited in Nagaraj et al, 2008) identified three stages when students are analyzing choice to study, (a) predisposition i.e. when students decide if they wish to study on tertiary education, (b) search i.e. when students begin to investigate institutions and (c) choice i.e. when students decide on attending a particular institutions. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also suggest three stages when students want to pursue tertiary education in a foreign country. Stage one is the decision to study internationally, rather than domestically is made. Stage two is selection of a host country. This selection is influenced by host country knowledge and awareness, recommendation by family and friends, costs, physical and economic environment, geographic proximity to home country and the presence of family and friends currently residing or formally residing in host country. The final stage is where the student decides the university at which to pursue a higher education.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Higher education environments have become increasingly competitive and institutions have to compete for students. Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) found that higher education institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market. Higher education institutions must equip themselves with the necessary marketing ability and information to enable them to face the challenge in international markets. International students demand better value for their money and more selective in choosing higher education institutions. Thus, the role of marketing which previously did not exist in most universities has grown drastically. In order to attract more international students to the country and achieve the nation's goal to become a regional education hub, a comprehensive marketing strategy should be considered. Therefore, it is important for Malaysian higher institutions to identify the factors that attract international students to choose Malaysia as a place to study and understand what determines a student's university preference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been carried out to identify factors that affect students choice for studying abroad. For example, Yang (2007) investigated the factors that influence students from China to study in Australia. He used two groups of students. For the first group (those who contemplating to choose higher education in Australia), he found reputation of the university was the most important and significant factor. For the second group (those who currently studying at the University of Central Queensland), he found low education fees and low cost of living as the most significant factors. Similar finding was found by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) in their study in Australia. In that study they found students from China, Taiwan, Indonesia and India ranked reputation of the institution was ranked the highest. Mazzarol et al. (1997) earlier identified six factors that influence students' selection. First was the overall level of knowledge and awareness of the host country in students' home country. Second was the level of personal recommendations that the study destination receive from parents, relatives, friends and other gatekeepers. Third was cost which include cost of fees, living expenses, travel cost and social cost. The fourth factor was the environment followed by geography proximity and finally social links.

Both Montgomery (2002) and Avery and Hoxby (2004) examined choice among graduate business schools and found significant effects of prominence and program quality, cost, and convenience. Another study by Chen and Zimitat (2006) found Taiwanese students who intended to study in Australia and the United States pointed out that program's price, teaching methods, environment and the influence of family and friends as the most important factors. Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006) stated that the image of the institution was an important factor in attracting international students. They also highlighted other factors such as reputation, quality and expertise of the academic staff, the facilities provided by the institution and international recognition are of equal important. Similarly, Price, Matzdorf, Smith and Agahi (2003) reported that facilities provided by the institutions as the most important factor.

In Malaysia, Zainurin and Muhamad (2011) investigated factors influencing international postgraduate students to study in Malaysia. The study which was conducted at Islamic International University Malaysia (IIUM) found that programs offered were the first factor, followed by tuition fees, facilities and academic staff prominence. Another study conducted at Universiti Utara Malaysia by Chew, Ismail and Fam (2011) found excellent services, pleasant social environment, first class physical structure, economy, recognition of certificate and high quality lecturer were the factors influencing international students choice. The sample consist both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Siti Falindah, Abdul Razak and Rohaizat (2010) examined the selection criteria by international students at private higher learning in Malaysia. The results showed six factors have strong influence i.e. quality of learning environment, influencers, customer focus, cost, facilities, socialization and location.

OBJECTIVES

Generally the aim of this study is to investigate and identify the factors crucial in attracting international students to study in Malaysia by using Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) as sample. The study also aims to identify the best approach to attract students to study at this university.

METHODOLOGY

The study reported in this article was part and only the preliminary findings of the factors influencing international students studying at UPSI. Quantitative approach using questionnaire was used. The questionnaire design was based on previous studies such as Rohaizat, Zubaidah and Siti Falinda (2011), Siti Falindah, Abdul Razak and Rohaizat (2010), Soutar and Turner (2002) and Zainurin and Muhamad (2011).

The survey instrument consists of three sections. Section A contained decision factors when selecting UPSI as study destination. A 6-point Likert scale was used with 1 being extremely not important and 6 being extremely important. An open ended question is also provided with an open response to indicate other factors that may be relevant but not included in the survey instrument. Section B asked respondents to indicate the best way to attract more students to UPSI from their country. A 5-point Likert Scale were used with 1 being very poor and 5 being excellent. In section C, respondents were asked about their background such as country of origin, age, gender and types of study.

The research was carried out at UPSI. The sample for this research was international students studying in UPSI during Semester 1 2013/2014. Pilot test was conducted in the earlier semester which involved 30 international students. Actual data was collected during orientation week and on the first week of Semester 1 2013/2014. Data was analysed using SPSS version 17. Descriptive statistics were used to answer the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Since this article only reports preliminary finding, the results cannot be projected onto the population as a whole. However, the results can give some insights in increasing our understanding of factors that might influence international students to choose UPSI as study destination and the medium that best attract international students to choose UPSI.

A summary profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary Profile of Respondents

| Categories | | % |
|--------------------------|---------------|----|
| Gender | Male | 20 |
| | Female | 34 |
| Level of study | Undergraduate | 43 |
| | Postgraduate | 11 |
| Age | Below 25 | 36 |
| | 26 to 35 | 17 |
| | Above 35 | 1 |
| Country of origin | Indonesia | 8 |
| | China | 13 |
| | United States | 5 |
| | Thailand | 13 |
| | Others* | 15 |

*Others includes students from South Korea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Morocco, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Austria and Mexico

As shown in Table 1, the sample comprise of 20 males and 34 females. 60% of the respondents comprise students who are below 25 years of age. Students from China and Thailand make up a high population of the sample. With regard to levels of study, majority of the students (79%) enrolled in undergraduate program.

As mentioned in the methodology, the students were asked to indicate their levels of agreement with statements regarding the factors influencing students to study at UPSI. Mean analyses were used to identify the level of importance. Table 2 shows the 10 most important factors as indicated by the students.

Table 2 Mean Value of the Most Important Criteria

| Most important items | Importance |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| English usage | 4.63 |
| Courses offered | 4.54 |
| Accommodation cost | 4.52 |
| Course duration | 4.50 |
| Information from internet | 4.48 |
| University reputation | 4.46 |
| Visa | 4.44 |
| Specialization field | 4.44 |
| Internet/computer facilities | 4.33 |
| Living in different culture | 4.28 |

Note: 1- extremely not important to 6 – extremely important

The summary of the means shows that out of 33 items, students regarded a great deal of importance on all items presented in Table 2. It can be seen that from the 10 most important items, English usage, courses offered and accommodation cost were the most important criteria of choice. Siti Falindah et al. (2010) also found English usage and English language were the top two factors that influenced international students to study at private universities in Malaysia. A similar finding was also reported by Baharun (2011). The finding of the current study also supports Dahari and Abduh (2011) study which found that programs offered is on the top of international students consideration before enrolling at IIUM. Other important factor to students when considering UPSI as study destination is university reputation. This finding is consistent with Chew et al (2010) at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Daily (2010) in USA and Mazarol and Soutar (2002) in Australia.

Identifying and understanding the factors that influence student choice decision is vital for the university's marketing strategy. The current study shows that English usage is the most important factor when choosing UPSI. Thus, the university has to intensify their effort in making sure that lecturers are competent to conduct their classes in English. Not only that, support staffs should also be able to communicate in English with international students. Universities have to prepare themselves and have a good support system. Universities have to ensure English is used as a medium of instruction in the management and academic aspects involving international students and ready to handle a class of students from diversified nationalities. All communication medium including emails, signboards and announcements should be available in English.

The least important items indicated by the students are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Mean Value of the Least Important Criteria

| Least important items | Importance |
|--|-------------------|
| Recommendations by parents | 4.11 |
| Government to government collaboration | 4.11 |
| Community acceptance | 4.09 |
| Clean and tiny environment | 4.07 |
| Career advisor | 4.06 |
| Financial aid | 3.98 |
| Campus live | 3.98 |
| Entry qualifications | 3.85 |
| Recommendation by relatives | 3.83 |
| Design of the building and campus | 3.80 |

Note: 1- extremely not important to 6 – extremely important

As indicated in Table 3, the summary of the means shows that out of 33 items, students regarded all items in the above table as the 10 least important factors. However it should be highlighted that although those items were considered as least important but the mean of all the items are more than 3. This show the above items are still important to students although they are not as important as the factors shown in Table 2. Thus, the management of the university should not ignore the above factors when designing their marketing strategies.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the best approach to attract more international students from their country. The result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Mean Value of the Best Approach

| Approach | Mean |
|--|-------------|
| Recommendation from friends | 3.80 |
| Recommendation from family members | 3.72 |
| Local teacher/lecturer recommendations | 3.72 |
| Government contacts | 3.70 |
| Education exhibition | 3.59 |
| Recommendation from relatives | 3.56 |
| UPSI Alumni | 3.50 |
| Website | 3.43 |
| Consulate | 3.43 |
| Advertisement from newspapers | 3.19 |

Note: 1- very poor to 5 – excellent

As indicated in Table 4, of the 10 approaches, the students are of the opinion that recommendation from friends is the best approach, while advertisement is the least important approach. However, all the means value are more than 3 which indicate all the approaches are important. This finding is consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who found the importance of recommendations from parents, friends and relatives. What these findings highlight is word of mouth is a very important approach of promotion. Another important factor is government contact. UPSI has collaborated with governments from two countries i.e. Aceh (Indonesia) and The Peoples Republic of Namibia. As a result of the collaboration, Aceh

government has sent 29 students in the previous semester while the Ministry of Education, Namibia has agreed to send 60 students to the UPSI for a 4-year degree programme in Semester 1 2013/2014. However, at the point this data were collected the students have yet to arrived. The students are expected to arrive on the second week of the semester. The finding also highlights the importance of alumni network which is consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). Strong international alumni are valuable as a means of promoting international education. This is true in UPSI context. Through alumni network in south Thailand, 13 students enrolled at the university in Semester 1 2013/2014.

CONCLUSION

The current study investigated and identified the factors crucial in attracting international students to study in Malaysia and especially at UPSI. The findings of the study suggested the factors that UPSI should consider to attract international students to the university. The top five important factors are English usage, courses offered, accommodation cost, course duration and information from internet. In order to attract students, the university management should consider these factors, thus the appropriate marketing strategies can be undertaken. The findings of this study also revealed that recommendations from friends and family members are the two most important approaches to attract more students to study in Malaysia. This clearly reflects the importance of word of mouth as a promotional tool. Taking that into consideration, university has to ensure that the service provided and the experience that the current students go through during their stay in Malaysia is excellent, that they will spread the good experience to their friends and family members back home.

In spite of the importance of the results obtained, it is essential to highlight the limitations of this study. The samples are limited to only international students at UPSI. Therefore, this could limit the generalization of the research findings. Future research should use larger samples from other universities. While the results cannot be predicted to the entire population of international students studying in Malaysia, the information can give some insights to higher education institutions in Malaysia and especially UPSI to understand the determinants of student choice to study in Malaysia, and provide the basis for further study.

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