

# MARKETING EDUCATION INTERNATIONALLY: AN INVESTIGATION OF UNDERGRADUATES MOTIVATIONS TO STUDY ABROAD

**M Mpinganjira** (Department of Marketing Management, University of Johannesburg)

Efforts aimed at attracting more international students have become an area of both institutional and national government concern in most major hosting countries. This is due to the many benefits associated with hosting international students, resulting in stiff competition on the market. This study is aimed at understanding the factors that motivate students to undertake their undergraduate studies abroad. The findings show that there are many reasons behind the decision to study abroad. Seeking high quality education with worldwide recognition was however found to be of major importance followed by the opportunity to experience living abroad and its associated benefits. The inability of some countries to meet their local demand for educational services also forces some students to seek studies abroad. Knowledge of these factors is important for the development of effective marketing programs at both institutional and country level aimed at attracting a lot of students and avoiding retention problems.

*Key phrases: International education, undergraduates, South Africa, services, international marketing*

## INTRODUCTION

South Africa is the leading exporter of higher education services in Africa. Its share of international students has been growing over the years. In 2006, there were 53,738 students from abroad studying in the country's institutions of learning representing approximately 2 percent of all students worldwide studying abroad in that year and 86.4 percent of all students from abroad studying in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2008:118). The 2006 figures represent a jump of over 254 percent over a 10 year period from 1997 when there were a total of 15,169 international students studying in South Africa and 328 percent jump from a total of 12,557 in 1994 (IEASA 2006:31). The rate of increase was highest between 1997 and 2000 when the absolute figures jumped from around 15 thousand to just over 45 thousand students. The rate of increase has significantly declined since then although the actual numbers continue to grow.

Individually and collectively through such organisations as the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), South African institutions of higher learning are actively involved in marketing the country and its individual institutions on the international education market. The driving force behind this is the realisation by many in the sector of the benefits associated with internationalisation in general and the hosting of international students in particular. It is often argued for example that international education helps in promoting understanding of other cultures and languages, essential qualities for modern day citizens many of whom live and work in highly multicultural settings. International education also helps in the development of personal, institutional as well as national ties. These ties make it easier to do business or to form business partnerships internationally to the benefit of all involved and the nation as whole. Hosting international students is also becoming more

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popular worldwide because of its revenue generation potential. Grebennikov and Skaines (2007:98) as well as Kinnel (1989:7) noted that in many countries there has been a dramatic fall in real terms in the proportion of government funds allocated to universities over the past years. Recruitment of full fee paying international students has helped many countries and institutions expand their revenue sources. For example, according to NAFSA (2008:Internet) foreign students and their dependents' contribution to the United States economy was approximately US\$15.54 billion during the 2007-2008 academic year. IDP (2008:Internet) noted that the export of educational services was Australia's third largest export earner in 2007 with an export value of A\$12.5 billion.

Due to the many benefits associated with internationalisation of higher education and hosting of international students in particular, many countries and institutions have measures in place aimed at attracting more international students. Competition for international students worldwide has increased significantly (Ivy 2001:275; Maringe 2006:466; Russel 2005:65). As in any business, increasing levels of competition demands a thorough assessment of the needs and wants of the market so as to ensure that the services provided meet those needs.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Despite the many benefits associated with hosting international students and the resulting competition on the market, there is not much that has been written in literature on the subject based on empirical studies. The main purpose of this paper is to provide an empirical analysis of factors that motivate international students to study abroad. The specific objectives include (a) to find out the extent to which different factors influenced the decision to study abroad and (b) to highlight the implications of the findings in marketing the country and its institutions to international undergraduate students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Consumer orientation is the foundation of contemporary marketing philosophy (Lamb *et al* 2008:10). Central to consumer orientation is customer satisfaction, which is achieved when an organisation focuses on its customers' needs and wants. According to Anderson and Kotler, (2008:35) determining the needs and wants of customers is the key to achieving organisational goals. To be consumer oriented and achieve customer satisfaction requires that all activities in an organisation be integrated to satisfy the identified needs and wants.

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Although marketing principles are relevant to both profit and non-profit oriented organisations, public and well as private entities, its application in the public education sector has only been gaining more ground since the early 1990. This is because many educationalists for a long time felt uncomfortable with the application of marketing principles in the sector. Malherbe (2004:i) noted that the very mention of the word marketing makes many educationalists in South Africa uncomfortable. He attributed this to a misunderstanding of what marketing is, noting that many associate marketing with selling. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003:318) noted that changes in the higher education operating environment affecting several dimensions including supply of funding, increase or decrease in demand for their offerings as well as global challenges from competitors, have resulted in most of them recognising the importance of marketing in the sector. Smith *et al* (1995:15) identified competition as one of the major forces driving the application of marketing principles in the higher education sector.

DesJardins *et al* (1999:117) noted that countries and institutions in particular have a vested interest in understanding the factors that influence students' application and enrolment decisions as these have a bearing on their ability to increase the fit between students and themselves. Different factors may drive students to seek education abroad. In his study McMahon (1992:478) found that international students' flows are negatively correlated to economic prosperity in the sending country. According to Mazarol and Soutar (2002:82) students from Africa and Asia are primarily driven abroad by access related difficulties to higher education in their home countries. Apart from supply conditions in the home country, perceptions of the quality of tertiary education system available in the home country are important in the decision to study abroad (Bourke 2000:124; Chen & Zimitat 2006:97). This is especially so when there are higher prospects of better educational facilities abroad. Javalgi *et al* (2001:575) noted that just as with physical products, country of origin impacts on the decision to internationally acquire services. This is due to the relationship that exists between of a country of origin and quality perceptions on the part of customers (Peterson & Jolibert 1995:895). Due to some inherent characteristics of services more especially the fact the services are intangible and inseparable from the providers, it is difficult for a prospective customer to evaluate the service before purchase as is often the case with physical products. Country of origin can thus offer effective differentiation opportunities to service providers including those in higher education.

Students may also go international irrespective of supply condition and quality issues at home or abroad. Bourke (2000:122) noted that students may seek international education for the sake of experiencing living in a different cultural setting than their own thereby learning about new cultures and broadening personal experiences. The

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rapid integration of the world economy through forces of globalisation has resulted among other things in many societies becoming increasingly multicultural forcing many people to work or live in communities with people from different parts of the world. As more and more organisations become multinational in their business dealings, there has also been increased demand for skilled labour that can be deployed to work outside their own countries and cultural settings. OECD (2007:303) noted that the growing internationalisation of labour markets for skilled labour witnessed in the 80's and the 90's fostered individuals' incentives to gain an international experience as part of their studies thereby helping in boosting demand for international education.

Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003:319) noted that students are not interested in the university qualification per se but the benefits it may provide in terms of status, lifestyle and employment among others. It can therefore be argued that while supply conditions in the home country may push students to go abroad, countries and institutions interested in attracting these students need to provide the pull factors that are in line with the needs and wants of these students.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and an online survey using a structured questionnaire were the main tools used to derive the data used in this study. A total of two focus group discussions were done. Each group was made up of 8 international undergraduate students and the discussions lasted for about an hour. The in-depth interviews were aimed at getting a deeper insight into issues relating to individual students on an individual basis. A total of eight undergraduate students were involved in these interviews. Non-probability cross sectional convenience sample was used in selecting the students for the focus group discussions and in-depth interview. To ensure diversity of opinions the participants chosen were mixed in terms of gender, nationality, program and year of study.

The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed on paper before being subjected to thematic analysis. Triangulation of the findings in literature, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews resulted in 14 factors identified for further testing using a structured questionnaire. A five point scale was used in the questionnaire to measure the extent to which each variable influenced the students decision to study abroad with 1 = to no extent, 2 = to a small extent, 3 = to moderate extent, 4 = to a large extent and 5 = to a very large extent. The questionnaire developed was first pretested on 16 international students before coming up with the final version. This was done to ensure that the wording used was clear and understandable.

The online study was open to students from a number of universities. This paper presents findings from undergraduates studying with University of Witwatersrand. A total of 88 usable responses were obtained. Tabachnick and Fidell (2007:13-11) as well as Hair *et al* (2006:102) noted that the minimum sample size in quantitative study is preferably five cases per variable. The sample size used in this analysis meets and actually exceeds this requirement. The sample size also compares well with past studies as found in literature. The sample consisted of 47 male students and 41 female students representing 53.4 percent and 46.6 percent respectively. Of the 88 students, 53 representing 60.2 percent indicated that South Africa was their first country of choice in the decision to study abroad while 35, representing 39.8 percent of the sample, indicated other countries as their first choice. In terms of countries of origin, 82 students representing 93.2 percent of the sample come from African countries with students from Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) making up 77.3 percent of the total sample (a total of 68). Only 6 students representing 6.8 percent of the sample indicated countries outside Africa as their places of origin.

Version 15 of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used in the analysis. Mean values, factor analysis and independent sample t-tests were the main statistical tools used in the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Reasons for Studying Abroad – Rank Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Seeking qualification with worldwide recognition	88	4.23	1.069
The want to broaden personal experience.	88	3.83	1.167
High quality of education abroad.	88	3.77	1.229
Studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects.	88	3.75	1.215
The want to have new experiences.	88	3.65	1.241
The want to be independent.	88	3.16	1.421
Higher status associated with studying in economically more powerful countries abroad.	88	3.09	1.319
The want to experience living in a more developed country than in the home country.	88	2.97	1.504
The want to learn about new cultures.	88	2.91	1.435
Unavailability of course at home.	88	2.86	1.641
The want to live in a foreign country.	88	2.72	1.446
The want to practice/improve foreign language skills.	88	2.56	1.437
Highly competitive entry requirements in home country.	88	2.06	1.393
Inability to get a place in a course you wanted to study at home.	88	1.97	1.466
Valid N (listwise)	88		

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Table 1 presents results of the extent to which each of the factors influenced the decision to study abroad. All the 14 factors were found to have had some influence on the decision to study abroad as all had mean values of 1.5 or greater. Seeking qualifications with worldwide recognition was found to be most important factor influencing the decision to study abroad. This variable had the highest mean value of 4.23 and was the only variable with a mean value of greater than 4. All other factors except for two, namely highly competitive entry requirements in home country and inability to get a place in a course one wanted to study at home had a moderate to large influence on the students' decision to study abroad.

In looking at the results, it is important to bear in mind the context of the study. The sample consisted of students studying with the University of Witwatersrand, one of the premier universities in Africa and the world according to World University ranking (IEASA 2009:Internet; Webometrics 2009:Internet). As a premier university their entry requirements are expected to be more stringent than of others who are not well ranked universities. It would thus be expected that students gaining entry into such an institution should be in a position to easily meet the entry requirements into most of their home institutions.

After looking at the mean values of each variable separately, exploratory factors analysis was conducted for data reduction purposes before conducting more analysis on the data especially in relation to analysis of possible group differences. The factor analysis helped identify any underlying dimensions that were present in the original set of variables. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy as well as Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was used to test the adequacy of the sample for factor analysis. The results showed a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.8 and a Bartlett's Test of Sphericity significant at 0.000 level of significance. According to George and Mallery (2007:256) 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.

Table 2: Factor Analysis – Rotated Component Matrix (a)

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
The want to have new experiences.	.868			
The want to broaden personal experience.	.855			
The want to learn about new cultures.	.805			
The want to live in a foreign country.	.754			
The want to be independent.	.696			
The want to practice/improve foreign language skills.	.620			
The want to experience living in a more developed country than in the home country.				
Seeking qualification with worldwide recognition		.859		
High quality of education abroad.		.767		
Studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects.		.706		
Higher status associated with studying in economically more powerful countries abroad.		.618		
Highly competitive entry requirements in home country.			.824	
Inability to get a place in a course you wanted to study at home.			.673	
Unavailability of course at home.				.888

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

A. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

The results of the factor analysis showed that the original variables could be reduced to four underlying components with 13 out of the 14 loading on these four dimensions. Only components with Eigen values of at least 1 were chosen and loadings of at least 0.5 were included in determining the make-up of each component. Together the four components explained 67 percent of the variance. After the factor analysis new variables using the components were computed for each case using the summated average of the items loading on each component. The first component according to Table 2 consisted of variables more closely associated with the experiences related to living abroad. This factor was named 'experience related reasons'. The second component consisted of variables closely related with the studies pursued or the benefits of pursuing such studies. This factor was name 'career related reasons'. The third component was made of variables related to entry problems in the home institutions and was thus named 'entry problems'. The last component was made up of a single variable to do with unavailability of course in home institutions. It thus retained that name 'course unavailability'.

A rank order analysis using mean values of the factors was conducted. The results according to Table 3 shows that students were mainly influenced by career oriented

reasons in their decision to study abroad. This factor had a mean value of 3.71 and was followed by experience oriented reasons with a mean value of 3.14. Entry problems had the least mean value of the four dimensions.

Table 3: Rank Order – Factors

Factors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Career Oriented Reasons	88	3.71	0.930
Experience Oriented Reasons	88	3.14	1.067
Course Unavailability	88	2.86	1.641
Entry Problems	88	2.01	1.147

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	
	Gender	Lower					Upper	
Experience orientation	Male	2.96	-1.70	86	.092	-.384	-.832	.065
	Female	3.34						
Career orientation	Male	3.79	0.83	86	.409	.165	-.231	.561
	Female	3.62						
Entry problems	Male	1.99	-0.19	86	.849	-.047	-.537	.443
	Female	2.04						
Course unavailable	Male	2.85	-0.08	86	.939	-.027	-.728	.674
	Female	2.88						
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Country choice</b>								
Experience orientation	S. Africa	3.19	0.56	86	.574	.132	-.332	.595
	Other	3.06						
Career orientation	S. Africa	3.80	1.14	86	.258	.231	-.172	.632
	Other	3.57						
Entry problems	S. Africa	1.95	-0.59	86	.559	-.147	-.646	.351
	Other	2.10						
Course unavailable	S. Africa	2.72	-1.03	86	.305	-.369	-1.079	.342
	Other	3.09						

A further analysis on the rank order of the mean values for different groups of students based on gender and country of first choice showed that although the actual mean values were different, students in both groups were influenced by the different factors in exactly the same order (refer table 4). Career oriented reasons were the most important factor of the four with entry related problems being the least important.

An independent sample t-test was conducted in order to find out if there were any significant differences in the mean values of the factors for the different groups of students. Table 4 presents the results of the analysis. The results show that there were no significant differences between male and female students in the extent to



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which they were influenced by each factor as well as between those students who indicated South Africa as their country of first choice in their decision to study abroad and those that did not.

## IMPLICATIONS

The results of this analysis have wider implications to those interested in marketing their countries and institutions to international students. From the analysis it is clear that students are influenced by a wide range of factors in their decision to study abroad. Career oriented reasons were however found to be the most important of all. As noted by Mazzarol (1998:163) the decision to study abroad is one of the significant and most expensive initiatives that students may ever undertake. Students have thus a vested interest to make sure that the product they are going for is of the highest quality possible and will be beneficial to them career wise. Ensuring that high quality standards are maintained in a country's institutions of higher learning is thus a very important way in which a country's offer in general as well as that of individual institutions can withstand competition. This means that institutions of higher learning need to critically look at what constitutes high quality in the provision of education services. As noted by Lamb *et al* (2008:207) as well as Anderson and Kotler (2008:194), in developing a product or service offer, marketers need to bear in mind the different levels that may be offered to the market starting with the core benefit or service. High quality standards need thus to be ensured in all the different levels of the product/service offer. In most institutions of higher learning this will include ensuring high quality standards in such areas as teaching and research, available facilities such as computer labs, library services and sports facilities as well as student support services on offer.

From the analysis of the results it is also clear that students are also interested in the experience associated with living abroad. They see that studying abroad provides opportunities for one to learn about other cultures and broaden their personal experiences. It is thus important for countries and institutions to ensure that international students are well taken care of so as to ensure that they enjoy their stay. It is also important to ensure that adequate opportunities are given for them to learn as much about the country and its people as possible apart from the formal studies they are enrolled in. Students who have had a good experience living in a country are likely to talk well of it to others once they leave. Such students can thus be a powerful marketing tool for a country and its institutions.

While the experience component may be looked upon in isolation to mean that students want to have a good time during their studies in a foreign country, this factor

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is also in way closely associated with the career orientation. Forces of globalisation have resulted in many people finding themselves living or working in highly multicultural societies. Study abroad programs help people develop important traits and skills that can prepare one for international business or workforce. This benefit is not only to the international students, but also for the locals who in their interactions with their international counterparts also get to develop similar traits and skills. It is thus important for institutions to find ways of encouraging more interaction between the locals and international students both in study related activities and outside the classrooms.

Apart from career oriented and experience oriented reasons, supply related problems in the home country such as highly competitive entry requirements as well as unavailability of courses may force students to seek education services abroad. There is not much that marketers can do with regards to supply conditions in the home countries of international students. However the existence of such conditions in many countries especially those in Africa, means that the market for international students is far from being fully exploited. The ability to exploit the market will however depend on what the individual countries and institutions can do to attract the students.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study was aimed at understanding the factors that motivate undergraduate students to undertake their studies abroad. The findings show that there are many factors that influence the decision to study abroad. However, the most important of these is the fact that students are looking for places that will offer international recognised high quality education. Students are also looking for opportunities to expand their experiences through living and studying internationally in environments and cultural situations that may be different from where they come from. The ability of home countries to supply students with higher education services is also a factor that is important in the decision to go abroad. Capacity problems in terms of a country's ability to meet demand for higher education services leaves those looking for these services with no option but to explore getting the services from other countries with the ability to meet the demand.

For countries as well as institutions interested in marketing their higher education services across borders, the knowledge of these factors is critical. This is because the development of effective marketing strategies cannot take place without first identifying the needs and wants of the market. Identifying the critical factors that students are looking for in their pursuit of international education will help them come

up with better programs and provide information that will be relevant in the decision making process in favour of their countries and institutions. Recruitment efforts are thus likely to be more effective and possible retention problems minimised.

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