

Key Determinants of University Selection among International Students in Ghana

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Abstract: University education has become global and increasingly competitive. Universities all over the world are adopting business and marketing practices to attract qualified foreign students into their campuses. Prospective students consider several factors in their efforts to pick a university of choice. The purpose of the study is to identify key variables that significantly influence international students in the choice of a foreign university. The study surveyed 300 international students in Accra and confirmed six factors out of eight propositions that were explored to have significant impact on student choice of foreign university. The six factors which altogether had 25 variables included learning environment; university reputation; graduate career prospects; cultural integration; personal values; and marketing communications. The two factors that were not confirmed to have any significant impact on student choice of foreign university included social influence and host country image.

Key words: university selection; key determinants; international students; Ghana

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1. Introduction

Every year university bound graduating high school students are faced with the problem of selecting a post secondary institution. Usually, the selection process takes a number of years and might involve a consideration of a variety of factors. The decision whether or not to continue with post secondary education and the choice of an institution to attend are two critical decisions that students make at this time in their lives (Johnson & Chapman, 1979). For those students considering attending a university, the selection process probably assumes high priority and many factors affect the final decision. Graduating high school students may have only a vague notion of future educational needs and benefits (Litten et al., 1983). However, the university selection process allows students to investigate various alternatives. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) maintain that international students have become critical in choosing universities for their studies.

In recent times, higher education has taken a global dimension with students also considering foreign universities in their selection process (Whisman, 2009). The elements of globalization in higher education are widespread and multifaceted and the higher education market is now well established as a global phenomenon

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(Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In the context of increasing competition for overseas students, higher educational institutions recognize the need to market their services in a climate of international competition. Universities need to understand the key education needs of overseas students and the perceived value of core and augmented elements of their offerings if they are to develop globalized brands (Gray et al., 2003). Hence, the need to consider factors foreign students see as key to university selection has become even more critical. The value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts, which have been effective in the business world, are gradually being applied by many universities, with a view to gaining a competitive edge, and a larger share of the international students market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Substantial literature on the transfer of the practices and concepts of marketing from other sectors to higher education has been developed (Gibbs, 2002).

Research into higher education choice, or consumer behaviour in higher education markets, has principally been stimulated by an individual institution's need to anticipate the long-term implications of choice and to understand the key factors involved in student choice (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). The attempts by governments to enhance the quality of higher education through the encouragement of market forces is based on an assumption that students are, or will become, informed consumers making rational choices of higher education courses and institutions (Baldwin & James, 2000).

Universities wishing to attract overseas students to their home campuses would be expected to adopt standardized or adapted brand strategies. In the latter case, the core offerings, for example, "degrees", remain consistent across markets, but augmented components such as delivery methods, scholarships, entry requirements and cross-crediting of previous education may be adapted to the needs of various target markets (Gray et al., 2003). Those institutions with extensive experience in offering courses offshore or by distance education may also utilise adapted brand strategies or may develop globalized brands. It is unlikely they will adopt truly customized strategies for fear of inconsistent brand positioning in different markets. Universities need to understand the key education needs of overseas students and the perceived value of core and augmented elements of their offerings if they are to develop globalized brands (Gray et al., 2003).

2. Purpose of the Study

Although universities are increasingly competing for international students, not much has been written about the factors that influence the selection among international students, especially from a developing country context. The main purpose of this study is therefore to determine the critical factors that influence university selection among international students who choose to study in Ghana.

3. Higher Education in Ghana

Higher or tertiary education in Ghana including university education is governed by the National Council for Tertiary Education established by an act of parliament in 1993 (Act 454). The functions of this council among others are to recommend national standards and norms to government for consideration and to monitor the implementation of any approved national standards and norms. However, it is the National Accreditation Board, also established by an act of parliament in 1993 and amended in 2007 (Act 744) that is charged with the specific responsibility of accrediting institutions in the tertiary sector including universities, with regard to the contents and standards of their programmes. Currently, the degree awarding tertiary institutions in Ghana are 51. Out of

these, 42 are private institutions, and 9 are public institutions, according to information on The National Accreditation Board website, retrieved on March 23, 2013.

4. Factors Influencing University Selection: A Brief Review

Several factors have been discussed in the literature as influencing student selection of universities, especially foreign universities for further studies. From the reading of the literature, eight of such factors have been identified and discussed in this section of the study. One key factor influencing foreign university selection is the learning environment. The university learning environment has been argued as one of the critical factors students consider in selecting a university to attend (Ojogwu & Alutu, 2009; Lizzio et al., 2002). Wierstra et al. (2003) noted that the learning preferences of students are partly related to their learning orientations at the home university. Ojogwu and Alutu (2009) in their study of the university environment in Nigeria found that due to the poor learning environments most Nigerian students were studying outside Nigeria, especially in Ghana. Lizzio et al. (2002) have also found that students' perceptions of their current learning environment were a stronger predictor of learning outcomes at university than prior achievement at school and hence ultimately influenced the university selection attitudes.

Reputation is considered a critical factor of choice for students (Mazzarol et al., 2001; Arambewela & Hall, 2009). Fernandez et al. (2010) in her study of student university choice in Malaysia found that the reputation of the university has a huge influence on students' selection of a particular university as reputation also robs on other factors such as employability and social networks. According to Arambewela and Hall (2009), some universities built up reputation for certain academic disciplines and this impact on their image and prestige. Many university applicants could be said to be under-informed on key issues as sometimes impressions they form of their preferred universities are limited to campus buildings and environs (Yamamoto, 2006; James et al., 1999).

Besides the two factors discussed above, graduate career prospects is also a significant factor in student university choice. Yamamoto (2006) argues that one of the key determinants of student evaluation is the graduate career prospects after school. Students consider what their career prospects would be when they attend one university or the other. Scholarios et al. (2003), maintained that graduate career expectations drive university selection because of how employers perceive the quality of students produced by a university. This variable has not been found to differ across gender, age or subject studied (Forster, 2000).

Host country image has been seen in academic literature to affect decisions of foreigners attempting to engage in any form of activity in the host country from leisure to investment decisions (Parameswaran, 2002). Peng et al. (2000) argues that the country image is assumed to be the first source that consumers consider in product evaluation since the attitude of consumers towards the products or services are related to their stereotypes about the country of origin (Cubillo et al., 2006). Consequently, students consider the image of the country in which the university in question is located in selecting their universities of choice. Earlier attempts to introduce the country image effect on the international students' choice model were made by Lawley (1998), Peng et al. (2000), and Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2002). Findings from these studies indicate that the country image seems to play an important role in the selection of students for international education (Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). Thus, prospective students tend to first choose the country before the institution.

Some researchers have noted the key role of cultural integration in university selection, arguing that it is critical if international students will feel comfortable in a selected university. Ward and Kennedy (1993) maintain

that cultural distance, language ability, cultural separation and mood disturbance impacted cultural adjustments among students. It has also been argued that the extent to which international students are integrated into new environments affects their wellbeing. For instance, Arambewela and Hall (2009) argue that many Asian international students for example go through stress and adjustment difficulties during the initial period of their enrolment at a university.

Personal values have been identified as one of the major determinants of university selection (Kropp et al., 2005; Long & Schiffman, 2000) and have been shown to be relevant in understanding and effectively predicting behaviour across different contexts (Maio & Olson, 1995), and could therefore be employed in educational marketing. In fact, Desiderato et al. (2002) reported that the values students hold about college significantly impact how they approach their educational experience, and that academic values influence students' selection of universities. Values as an underlying influence appears consistent to theoretical arguments suggesting that, "values have a causal influence on subsequent behaviours" (Homer & Kahle, 1988).

Nigel et al. (2011) contend that students select universities whose characteristics correlate with relative social advantage. This suggests that students select universities based on their perception of whether or not their various reference groups, which include friends, family and social class will approve. The authors contend that the university attended serves in some cases as an aspirational group that the student may be aspiring to be in.

Promotion has been cited in the literature as having an impact on student choice of university selection. Increasing competition for students has led universities to employ marketing communication tools in addition to conventional ones for promotion (James et al., 1999). University marketing communication efforts include public relations, advertisements, fairs, sponsorships and other tools such as e-mail and telephone (Yamamoto, 2006; Gilley, 1989). Personal presentation and face to face interactions with potential students in their home countries are also employed to market universities.

5. Methodology

5.1 Sample Selection and Data Collection

The study adopted a quantitative approach and used exploratory factor analysis to analyze the collected data. Questionnaires were designed and used to collect primary data in a survey from 300 international students in four major universities in Ghana. The status of students as international or local was established by asking them of their nationalities and usual place of residence. Students who were not Ghanaians and whose usual place of residence was not in Ghana were considered to be international student. Respondents who were established as international students and willing to participate in the survey were interviewed. The questionnaire elicited from the respondents their reasons for choosing to study in universities in Ghana. The questionnaires were directly administered by research assistants who were briefed before they started the data collection exercise.

5.2 Data Analyses

In order to validate the scale used for the study, a factor analysis (using principal component analysis) was conducted and the Cronbach's alpha was used to check for internal consistency among the resulting variables. The Eigen values specified for the factor analysis was for all values greater than 1 (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). This resulted in nine factors which explained 70% of the variance (see Table 1 below). The factors resulting from the factor analysis were rotated for factor loadings using the Varimax rotated loadings which Hair et al. (2006) reckon is more useful than the direct component factor loadings. Prior to conducting the factor analysis a

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) was conducted to establish the proportion of variance in the variables that might be caused by underlying factors; for a sample to be considered adequate it had to have a KMO MSA greater than 0.6 (Hair et al., 2006). The sample was found adequate for exploration as it recorded a KMO MSA of 0.728. Again for a variable to pass into the final revised structure it should have a communality greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2006), a minimum factor loading threshold of 0.4 (Hair et al., 2006), an item-total-correlation greater than 0.3 (Blankson & Stokes, 2002) while the variables that make up a factor must have a reliability (Cronbach Alpha) greater than 0.6 (Nunnally, 1967). All these variables must be met for a variable/factor to be sustained in the final revised structure.

Table 1 Principal Factor Analysis of University Selection Factors

Component	Communality	Factor	Eigen Value	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	0.739	1	8.519	24.340	24.340
2	0.778	2	3.889	11.113	35.453
3	0.691	3	2.888	8.253	43.706
4	0.796	4	2.442	6.977	50.682
5	0.673	5	1.694	4.840	55.522
6	0.641	6	1.494	4.268	59.790
7	0.663	7	1.307	3.735	63.525
8	0.749	8	1.193	3.409	66.934
9	0.655	9	1.076	3.073	70.007
10	0.716				
11	0.690				
12	0.626				
13	0.537				
14	0.771				
15	0.745				
16	0.624				
17	0.787				
18	0.804				
19	0.585				
20	0.648				
21	0.746				
22	0.624				
23	0.676				
24	0.677				
25	0.718				
26	0.758				
27	0.822				
28	0.798				
29	0.651				
30	0.685				
31	0.537				
32	0.640				
33	0.800				
34	0.729				
35	0.727				

Table 2 Varimax Rotated Factor Loadings for University Selection

Factor (and Variable)	No. of Variables	Factor Loading	Item-Total Correlation (ITC)	Cronbach Alpha
Learning Environment				
The university has excellent teaching staff	7	0.696	0.412	0.710
The university provides resources for research		0.617	0.502	
The university provides student support services		0.691	0.540	
The tuition fees are reasonable		0.720	0.243	
The physical facilities at the university are excellent		0.752	0.478	
The course structure is very flexible		0.694	0.481	
There is safety within the university premises		0.512	0.323	
Reputation				
The university is a reputable brand	5	0.647	0.692	0.827
The university has achieved several laurels		0.635	0.624	
The university has a high standard of education		0.580	0.678	
The university offers high quality courses		0.530	0.632	
The university has been around for a long time		0.642	0.502	
Graduate Career Prospects				
Graduates expect high income jobs when they graduate	4	0.623	0.544	0.814
Employers hold graduates from the university in high regard		0.871	0.717	
Graduates from the university have high employment prospects		0.807	0.733	
The certificate awarded by the university is recognized internationally		0.713	0.576	
Host Country Image				
There is safety in the host country	5	0.844	0.394	0.565
There is political stability in the host country		0.735	0.417	
The citizens of the host country are hospitable		0.726	0.322	
The country has a nice ecological environment		0.599	0.276	
The host country has a low cost of living		0.763	0.264	
Cultural Integration				
The university provides avenues for religious practices	3	0.375	0.313	0.666
The university values cultural diversity		0.671	0.609	
The university has a multicultural environment		0.744	0.543	
Personal Values				
The education provided by the university are in line with our social values	4	0.703	0.631	0.872
The education provided by the university are in line with my religious conviction		0.815	0.745	
The education provided by the university are consistent with my personal values		0.782	0.862	
The education provided by the university are consistent with my life goals		0.620	0.677	
Social Influence				
My family influenced my choice of university	3	0.423	0.218	0.511
My friends influenced my choice of university		0.660	0.424	
My social class influence my choice of university		0.579	0.370	
Marketing Communications				
My decision was influenced by the university's advertisement	4	0.628	0.398	0.758
The universities website influenced me to apply		0.866	0.677	
The universities educational agent convinced me to apply		0.804	0.611	
The university's outreach programme influenced my decision		0.663	0.565	

6. Findings and Discussions

The study interviewed 300 international university students of which 43.6% were male and 56.4%, female. 88% of the respondents were less than 25 years of age. Majority of the students were undergraduate students representing 77% of respondents. Most of the students, 35%, are medicine/biological science students; 24% were studying business/economics; 7.3% studying engineering/computing; 32.7% studying social studies and 1% studying the fine arts. Majority of the students were Nigerians, 58.3%. 23% of the respondents were from the United States, 9.7% from the Ivory Coast. There were also respondents from Australia, Burkina Faso, England, Gambia, India, Liberia, Norway and Togo.

The study proposed eight main factors of university selection among foreign university students. These were the learning environment, university reputation, graduate career prospects, host country image, cultural integration, personal values, social influence and marketing communications. These factors were rotated using the varimax rotated factor loadings in SPSS 18 (see Table 2 above). Seven variables were rotated for the learning environment factor and it recorded an alpha of 0.710. All the variables met the conditions necessary to pass into the final revised structure with the exception of 'reasonable tuition fees' which had an ITC of 0.243 less than the 0.3 required (Blankson & Stokes, 2002). Learning environment has long been seen as a factor influencing university selection (Lizzio et al., 2002). It has been seen to affect foreign students' university selection based on their home country learning orientations (Ojugwu & Alutu, 2009).

All the five variables for university reputation met the conditions necessary to pass into the final structure with an alpha value of 0.827. University reputation impacts on social networks, career prospects and potential for employment of graduates. University reputation has also been seen to be a major determinant of university selection (Fernandez, 2010). Graduate career prospects was the next factors rotated and all the four factors met the factor loading and ITC conditions set to pass into the final revised structure with an alpha value of 0.814. Graduate career prospects, is another major determinant of students selection of university, confirming the findings of Yamamoto (2006) as a major reason why students select a particular university. Forster (2000) argues that graduate career prospect is a major determinant of university selection because of how employers view the quality of graduates of the university.

Cultural integration was explored and it recorded an alpha value of 0.666; and of the three variables 'avenues for religious practices' was dropped as it failed to meet the factor loading threshold of 0.4 required (Hair et al., 2006). Cultural integration is a key determinant as students usually seek to avoid countries where cultural shocks are high due to psychic distance (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). The four variables for personal values recorded an alpha value of 0.872 and all the variables met the conditions necessary to pass into the final revised structure. Personal values affect university selection among foreign students coming to Ghana as it was seen to affect the way the student approached the whole educational experience (Kropp et al., 2005).

All the four variables for marketing communications of the university passed into the final revised structure. It recorded an alpha value of 0.758. University marketing communications was seen to affect foreign students selection of a university as promotion of the university image has been seen to affect how prospective students perceive the university and its ability to influence their future success (Gilley, 1989; Yamamoto, 2006). Gilley (1989) for example, reported how marketing communication tools such as radio, television and newspaper can be used to attract publicity for the university.

The "host country image" and "social influence" did not meet the alpha value of 0.6 required and hence was

dropped from the final revised structure. Host country image had an alpha value of 0.565 and social influence had an alpha value of 0.511. Host country image was not seen to affect university selection. This contradicts the findings of Peng et al. (2000). The authors considered the host country image as the first source of evaluation among students seeking a new university. Social influence was also not seen to affect university selection. This finding also contradicts Nigel et al. (2011) when they argued that social reference groups affect the kind of university a prospective student will select.

Table 3 Final Revised Structure of University Selection Variables

Factor (and Variable)	No. of Variables	Factor Loading	Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach Alpha
Learning Environment				
The university has excellent teaching staff	6	0.696	0.412	0.728
The university provides resources for research		0.617	0.502	
The university provides student support services		0.691	0.540	
The physical facilities at the university are excellent		0.752	0.478	
The course structure is very flexible		0.694	0.481	
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Graduate Career Prospects				
Graduates expect high income jobs when they graduate	4	0.623	0.544	0.814
Employers hold graduates from the university in high regard		0.871	0.717	
Graduates from the university have high employment prospects		0.807	0.733	
The certificate awarded by the university is recognized internationally		0.713	0.576	
Cultural Integration				
The university values cultural diversity	2	0.671	0.658	0.794
The university has a multicultural environment		0.744	0.658	
Personal Values				
The education provided by the university are in line with our social values	4	0.703	0.631	0.872
The education provided by the university are in line with my religious conviction		0.815	0.745	
The education provided by the university are consistent with my personal values		0.782	0.862	
The education provided by the university are consistent with my life goals		0.620	0.677	
Marketing Communications				
My decision was influenced by the university's advertisement	4	0.628	0.398	0.758
The universities website influenced me to apply		0.866	0.677	
The universities educational agent convinced me to apply		0.804	0.611	
The university's outreach programme influenced my decision		0.663	0.565	

7. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

This study was designed to determine the critical factors that underpinned international student selection of

particular universities for their studies. Consequently, the study proposed and confirmed six out of eight factors that influenced international students' selection of foreign universities. The six factors had a total of 25 variables which were confirmed as impacting on international students' choice for the destination of their university education. These factors are: the learning environment; university reputation; career prospects; cultural integration; personal values; and marketing communication. See Table 1 below for the full list of the 25 variables that constitute the 6 factors. The "Image of the host country" and "social influence" was not seen to have significant impact on student university selection, and was therefore dropped from the final revised structure.

These findings have serious implications for the management of universities in Ghana that plan to attract foreign students. Universities need to appreciate that selling their institutions to potential foreign students against a backdrop of "social influence" and especially, the positive image of the country would not enhance their potential of attracting foreign students. Universities might make a better impact on the international student market if they develop their systems, environs and promotional campaign messages around the six thematic areas confirmed in this study. In adopting these factors for the promotion of their universities, university management must carefully consider the various variables that make-up each factor, and factor them in their strategies and promotional campaign.

8. Future Research

Image of the host country is emphasized by Peng et al. (2000) as a critical factor in student selection of foreign universities, but was not confirmed by this study. It would be relevant for future research to determine the underlying reason(s) for this finding. For instance, did the research context, being a developing country, impact on the responses of the sample, considering anecdotal evidence that, developing countries are not exactly glamorous places, such that a factor as "host country image" has little relevance for students seeking such universities? Also, is it the case that because over 60% of the respondents came from the West Africa sub-region, their perceptions were influenced as their home countries bear close resemblance to the context of the study? Some researchers such as Nigel et al. (2011) described social influences as a relevant variable that affect university education, though this was not confirmed in this study. It would be interesting for future research to determine whether the home country of students impacts on their consideration of social influences as a key factor for selecting a foreign university.

In the interpretation of the results, it should be noted however that the sampling was not done with a probability technique, and so the study sample is not necessarily representative of the foreign university student population in Ghana.

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