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A study into the factors influencing the choice-making process of Indian students when selecting an international university for graduate studies using Grounded Theory

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Abstract

Universities operate in an increasingly competitive market place facing new and complex socio-technical and economical challenges. For many universities international student recruitment is desirable and necessary for survival. Universities knowledge in this area is often an imperfect tool as the changing environment and diversity of cultures with which it must interact challenge previous assumptions and common wisdom. The overall goal of this study is to identify those factors responsible for influencing Indian students' choice of international university for graduate studies.

The results are based on a longitudinal study that was carried out using the Grounded Theory research method. This qualitative methodology provides a good framework for rigorous and relevant research of emerging phenomena in student mobility. Primary data consisted of unstructured interviews, focus groups and questionnaire surveys among participants of the sample population. The literature was used as a source of secondary data. A narrative style and thick description were used to report the research findings.

Four major influencers emerged from the analysis, which are referred to as programme content, international reputation, funding and job prospects and quality. Drawing together these findings the study examines the implications for recruiting graduate students from India and reveals that there are a number of ways in which the university can influence the choice-making process. The results clearly provide a sound basis for future study.

Background

The inability of the indigenous educational structure in most developing countries to satisfy growing demand means that students are looking towards western nations to secure places in higher education. Independent modelling (e.g. Vision 2020, 2004) suggests that by 2020, both China and India will be unable to supply the 20 and 9 million university places respectively needed for their own student populations to meet the demands of their developing economies.

The internationalisation of institutions of higher education is often borne out by the recruitment of international students – a multi-million dollar global industry with the market of educational services currently dominated by a handful of key players, namely the USA, Australia, UK and Canada. The literature abounds with references to the financial benefits of increasing international student populations (Marginson, 2002; Western, 2005) and suggests that institutions of higher education afford little regard to the importance of the international dimension in higher education.

However, despite the apparent monetary advantages, most universities do not have a robust recruitment strategy. Instead they rely on word of mouth and academic reputation (Magaya, 2004) to attract students.

The marketing of higher education has become an issue of interest for researchers who have identified relationship marketing as a key area for future focus. (Shank, 1995; Hayes, 1996). Growing competition fuelled by the entry of new providers (such as European countries and emerging Asian providers) and the recent decline experienced by the key players in applications and enrolments of international students, particularly in the field of Engineering, has sharpened the individual practices of management of student recruitment and prompted heavy investment in research and analysis of markets and forecasts.

The top knowledge exporters are now jostling for position and market share with a serious battle raging for the world's top talent. It is interesting to see that various opinions on this global movement of students emerge from different continents. Altbach (2003) maintains that the United States will remain a major beneficiary of international students after GATS, staving off competition in the education market from other countries. However according to a survey by Cohen (2005) published in the Chronicle Daily News, Australia has eclipsed the United States and Britain as the destination of choice among fee-paying foreign students.

This Research takes place against a dynamic background of growing demand for higher education places, ICT development and changes in service provision, global competition for international intellect, and, increasing emphasis by national governments on creating a knowledge-based economy.

Indian Students Studying Abroad

The Indian university student population is predicted to grow from 9.3 million students now to 11 million in 2008 according to the University Grants Commission which funds and supports central government universities in India. Combining the magnitude of this demand with the value that Indian students place on higher education, there is bound to be a steady increase in students moving abroad. Recent reports show that the number of international students from India entering the USA alone had risen by 6.9% to a total of 79,736 in the academic year 2003/04 (Open Doors, 2004) surpassing China for the third consecutive year as the leading place of origin for students in the USA (Marginson, 2004). Students from India now make up 14% of all foreign students in the United States.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the proposed research is to elucidate and document the influencers of the choice-making process that potential Indian graduate students go through once they have been offered a place in more than one graduate university.

This study examines one single population of students who included a named university in their short list of potential graduate schools abroad. The term 'Indian student' refers to students with the Indian nationality that have completed undergraduate studies in engineering sciences and are seeking or indeed participating

in postgraduate study outside India. The findings reported in this dissertation result from a study carried out from the perspective of one public research university located in Western Europe. They focus on a single population of potential graduate students and are drawn from data collected from a very small sample population relative to the whole. These findings may have limited application to other academic institutions offering graduate education. The result obtained from one ethnic group need not necessarily represent all other international students and the ensuing recommendations may thus only serve the improvement of yield for a small but growing market segment.

Research Philosophy

This research proceeds on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and that there are many truths and many meanings to one event. Qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena. They help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) argue that the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and its particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data are quantified.

Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) has its conceptual orientation in symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969). Nusbaum and Chenitz (1990) explain that

Symbolic interactionism holds that human beings are acting rather than just responding beings and that human action is purposeful and based on the meanings that the individual has for them.

Consequently, data must be collected in the natural context using a variety of methods such as interview and focus groups. Grounded Theory aims to generate theory through inductive examination of data in subject areas that may be difficult to access with traditional quantitative research methods (Rennie et al 1988).

Research Design

The research was designed in three stages as follows:

1. To determine the broader influential factors contributing to the decision-making process of Indian students for international graduate education.
2. To issue questionnaires to three independent groups of Indian students in an attempt to determine the specific factors influencing their final choice of international university.
3. To undertake a literature review and examine the emergent theory from the previous stages in the light of this literature.

With constant comparison being the heart of the process, this design focuses on the responses of a medium-sized subject population and determines the perspectives of these subjects on a number of influencers on their choice of graduate school.

Participants

The primary sample population in this study consisted of 40 students recently admitted to graduate studies, 20 students admitted in the previous year and 7 recent alumni.

Initially, the key researcher conducted informal conversations (4 in total) with subjects chosen at random by the researcher from the pool of students studying at the university. One female and three male students participated. Unstructured interviews were favoured as they permitted the interviewee to freely discuss any views that would provide the researcher with rich insights. (Malholtra et al., 1996), whilst allowing the researcher to explore in depth the general area in which he is interested.

Focus Group Interviews

Two focus groups involving current Indian graduate students were conducted. The participants were recruited by means of an open invitation extended by the researcher to the Indian students currently present at the university. The students were pursuing graduate studies in diverse fields of engineering sciences. Each group contained 5 participants. The focus groups were diverse in that some participants were in their first year of graduate study while others were in their second and final year. Some had scholarships and some were full fee paying students. Some were from wealthy family backgrounds, others not. They were all of comparable academic strength though the diversity of the sample was clear.

The researcher moderated the interviews. The participants were encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. All participants were informed in advance of the purpose of the focus group and were made aware of the researcher's intentions. All participants agreed to speak openly and truthfully and to have their comments collated by the researcher for further analysis.

The categories of variables revealed during these interviews were the main source of information from which the researcher developed his theory and provided help in forming the questions for the questionnaires used later in the study.

In Grounded Theory, data collection and analysis processes tend to be concurrent, with new analytic steps informing the process of additional data collection and new data informing the analytical processes. In keeping with Grounded Theory a variety of coding methods were used as the main data analysis tools. Rigorous steps for the interpretation and presentation of the findings were set down including memo writing, open coding, axial coding and selective coding, carried out jointly with the data collection. In this way, the researcher was able to develop a theoretical account of the general features of the topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations of data (Martin and Turner, 1986).

Stage 1

Unstructured Interviews

The key informants were Indian graduate students in the age range of 23-26 years. The researcher chose them randomly from an existing committee of international students who were at that time working on another project (student yearbook) in the university. They were representative of the major body of Indian graduate students studying at the university.

The first interview was of an orienteering nature, an elementary building block. The researcher introduced the following statement to guide the conversation: "Talk to me about the process around you deciding to study abroad and then at this university".

Open Coding

With all interviews transcribed, the researcher commenced with segmentation of the data into meaningful analytical units. In the process of open coding he examined the interview material line-by-line. The codes that were generated by this process reflected the main concepts that were conveyed. Transcripts were compared with each other to identify commonalities. The commonalities are referred to as 'categories' and are described in terms of their 'properties' - the statements made by the interviewees. For example, when asked what factors were important when short-listing an international university, the interviewees answered as follows:

"It must have a good reputation"

"It must be well known/recognised internationally"

"It must have a high ranking".

These statements were labelled with the key term 'University reputation'. The categories emergent from the interview material are: self improvement, university reputation, family/friends, information source, industry contacts/job prospects, funding, and, location. They are considered by the researchers to be focused, objective, mutually exclusive and exhaustive at this stage.

Focus Groups

The first focus group comprised five participants (three male, two female). The students were picked at random by the researcher from the population of Indian graduate students studying at the university.

The categories emergent from the individual interviews formed the basis for the questions asked by the researcher in the focus groups. Probe questions were introduced to seek agreement or disagreement with the interview material. The principle theme questions used were:

- Why study abroad?

- Once you had decided to go abroad, how did you make your country/university choice?
- Where did you accumulate your information on the suitable universities?
- What and who were the principle influencers of your choices?

The same approach was adopted for the second focus group meeting. This, again consisting of five participants (all male), was conducted in the same location under the same conditions with the same facilities. The researcher responded to the research situation and was in there trying to find out what was really going on. In the first focus group, the discussion quickly zoomed in on the search for funding and the link between receiving some kind of funding and the prestige (explained in parental pride) attached to being awarded a scholarship

Both focus group transcripts were open coded and both sessions resulted in the emergence of similar categories, below, which showed strong agreement with the categories emergent from the interviews: Motivation, family/friends, Internet, university reputation, educational programme, funding, and, language

Axial Coding

After collecting and coding this data from stage 1 of the research project, the researcher proceeded to summarise and organise the data. The researcher compared the categories and their properties from the interviews and the focus groups i.e. she conceptualised interpretations of how the 'categories' interact with each other. It was noted that sometimes, similar segments of data were coded with more than one code. It was notable that many sub-categories could easily have been placed under 'Family/friends' and this latter category played a definite and important role in influencing and advising students on their choice for study abroad. Similarly it was seen that 'self improvement' was linked to 'motivation' and that 'university reputation' was linked to reputation and to 'industry contacts/job prospects'. Funding study abroad was also a central key theme apparent in all forms of data collection to date. Intervening conditions were culture, economic status, career and prestige.

The data obtained from both the interviews and focus groups was classified into the three broad sub-categories of: university reputation, family/friends, and, funding.

Emerging Theory - Interim Analysis

Interim analysis at this stage led to the emerging theory that in Indian culture, the family plays a very important role in the many stages of the entire process of a student's decision-making process in seeking out, choosing and indeed enrolling at a university abroad. Prestige and honour are crucial factors and a university's reputation/ranking are important, as they are perceived to be related to the students' eventual success in the job market. Universities in the USA take preference over other world universities.

In addition, the average Indian student is sensitive to the cost of international graduate education and the perceived benefits it brings in terms of future career opportunities.

However, the desire to receiving a scholarship is not always linked to financial hardship but quite often to family honour. Furthermore, the fit between the student's desires and the actual degree programme is becoming an issue.

Stage 1 of the research had now been completed.

Selective Coding

The inductive analysis techniques used up until now resulted in the emergence of a core category or central phenomenon, namely 'study abroad' (Table 1).

Core Category	Sub-Categories	Variables
Study Abroad	Funding	Scholarships
	Family/Friends	Honour/Prestige
		Culture
	University Reputation	Location
		Career Prospects
		Programme Content

Table 1: Categories Emergent from Interview Material

The Indian students in their quest to study abroad seem to be very susceptible to a number of different influences from many angles in his /her quest to find the most suitable university abroad for graduate studies. The final analysis will be based around this central category. The objective being to identify those influential factors on a student's choice for study abroad over which a university may possibly exercise some form of control. The question yet to be answered is "what factors influence the student (after gaining admission to more than one university) to choose a particular university?"

Stage 2

An e-mail questionnaire survey was conducted to test whether a broader population (of increased diversity) would substantiate the emerging theory or indeed throw up new information, and to further unravel the core category of 'study abroad'. Three categories of participants were approached.

- Category 1 - Admitted but not yet enrolled students with the Indian nationality

- Category 2 – Current graduate students with the Indian nationality
- Category 3 – Alumni with the Indian nationality.

The results may be summarised as follows:

Highly Influential	Moderately Influential	Less Influential
Programme Content	Job Prospects on Graduation	Helpfulness of Administrative Staff
University's International Reputation	Low Tuition Fees	Family/Friends Already Studying at University
Availability of Scholarships	Assistance in Obtaining Visa	Provision of Accommodation
Quality of Scientific Staff	Easy Application Procedure	Feedback from Alumni

Table 2 Relative Importance of Influencers on Students' Choice-Making Process

The research was focused on directly eliciting the views of those who have experienced the phenomena of seeking appropriate graduate education abroad. The use of unstructured interviews enabled the researcher to gain a graphic picture of the interviewees' opinions on the phenomena and the use of qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to capture the richness of emergent themes rather than reducing the responses to quantitative categories and wasting the opportunity provided by details of the transcribed interview data (Smith 2001).

The focus groups allow the development of the themes and group dynamics played an important role in promoting the openness with which individual students were prepared to discuss issues such as personal wealth, familial influences etc. The structured questionnaires suited the intended participants who were geographically distanced from the researcher and needed more concise instruction and structure in order to participate in a worthwhile fashion. The inductive nature of the method assumes an openness and flexibility of approach, which is advantageous since it allows the researcher to follow the leads gained from the data (Charmaz, 2001).

Stage 3

Emergent Theory and the Literature

When graduate students are offered a place in more than one international university, they are confronted with making a choice as to which university they will actually attend. The decision-making process experienced by students is influenced by psychological, social and economic factors as well as normative referents. It is therefore not surprising that earlier researchers in this area tended to have

backgrounds in either psychology, sociology or economics. Hence, somewhat different perspectives and conceptual foundations for the study of university choice behaviour have been offered. For example, Psychologists emphasise the psychological environment or climate of an institution, its impact on students and student –institution fit (Astin, 1965). Sociologists view the formation of higher education aspirations as part of a general attainment process. Economists view decisions to enrol in higher education as a form of investment-like decision-making behaviour (Jackson, 1978).

Earlier studies on choice of education by specific groups of Asian international students (Park and Lessig, 1977; Lawley, 1993; Andressen, 1994) confirm that social reference groups could influence education choice. These observations have been synthesised and corroborated in a more recent study by Pimpa (2003) who examined the nature and extent of the involvement or influence of normative referents on students' choice of international education. Further research by Pimpa (2004) classified the choices of international education into the decision to study abroad, choice of country, city, academic programme and of university.

The emerging theory in this study, that culture and family play a crucial role in the many stages of the decision making process, reinforces these earlier findings. Sociological influences, the innate desire for self- improvement, are apparent in the very first interview when the interviewee says: “In India, education is something which traditionally receives a lot of importance. I think it has to do with the outdated idea of seeing it as much as a required stepping stone to a secure professional career” Likewise, economic influences are manifested in the Indian students' desire to gain a good education, which is regarded as the passport to a good job and future economic prosperity. This sentiment is reflected in statements made by the participants, such as: “I always wanted to improve myself academically and further study will equip me with the skills I need for my future”.

The Push-Pull' Model of International Education Flows

Understanding the drivers for study abroad draws on a combination of the practices of marketing research and the study of consumer behaviour. The linkage of these two functional areas within marketing informs managerial decision-making towards the development of marketing strategies to improve the university's Yield with respect to this particular student population. Research performed by the AIEF (1997), Lawley (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar (1998) showed that interpersonal influence and recommendations from families are important factors in influencing a student's choice of international education. Further research by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) reached consensus on the principal factors motivating international students choice of the host country and went on to describe a 'push-pull' model as an explanation for the global pattern of international student flows.

The 'push' factors (initiate a student's decision to undertake international study) operate within the source country and range from historical or colonial links between host and home countries, commonality of language, geographic proximity of the host country, perceptions of quality of the tertiary education available in the home country, the wealth of the home country population, degree of involvement of the developing country in the world economy, and the GNP growth rate. Culture and social

background are intimately bound up in the decision-making process and operate together with economic and social forces in the host country on the 'push' side.

The 'pull' factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students. They are related to external factors such as monetary issues and perceptions of the student of a particular institution, programme content and family and friends. In general, some of these factors are inherent in the source country, some in the host country and others in the students themselves. Other explanatory factors in the 'pull' model varied from country to country but include institutions reputation for quality, market profile, alliances, degree of innovation, promotion and marketing efforts. (Lee and Tan, 1984; Mazzarol, 1998; AEI-International Education Network, 2003; Lindgren - Gatfield and Hyde, 2005). These studies also reflect the complexity and interactivity of factors in students' decision making about country, institution and programme of study.

Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Foreign University

Building on Mazzarol and Soutar's 'push-pull' model, further research by Pimpa (2004) classified choices of international education into: the decision to study abroad, the choice of country, the choice of city, the choice of academic programme, the choice of university. The predominant influencing factors noted are peers with experience in the country, the perceived quality of the education provider/ education agents and the quality and availability of student facilities. Spaulding and Olswang (2005) show that after a student gains admission to a university, the cost of attendance moves from having an indirect influence on the process to a direct concern. Whilst concluding that award modification can positively affect student enrolment decisions, the role of financial aid in the enrolment decision is often difficult to isolated from other factors. The emergent theory from this study supports and is supported by these findings.

Conclusions and Discussion

The Grounded Theory analysis of the qualitative data collected and analysed in this study resulted in the following key findings:

Indian students' choice for study abroad is driven by: the desire for self-improvement, the desire to increase personal opportunities in the job market, the desire to keep with family tradition, and, culture and normative referents. The major influencers of Indian students seeking graduate study abroad are: family and friends, academic staff in home university. Indian students apply to approximately four international universities, but have an inherent preference for the USA. The second choice seems to fall on European universities. The major sources of information were found to be: the Internet (search engines and the university website), relatives and friends (some of whom are enrolled at the university) and alumni.

With a vast range of potential graduate universities available on a global scale, the data gathering sought to identify those factors important to Indian students when selecting a number of core universities to apply to. These were found to be: the university offers the right academic programme, reputation and ranking, tuition fees/cost of living, recommendation of staff in the "home" university and a safe

location. When the final decision has to be made and one particular university chosen, the top five influencers of choice are: the university offers the right programme content, the university's international reputation, the availability of funding (scholarships), quality of staff, and, job prospects on graduation.

Comparison of the Results with the Literature

The researchers have arrived at the theory that Indian students behave like consumers and "shop around" for the best possible future study to suit personal needs. In doing so, they are heavily influenced by family and culture with prestige and honour being other important issues. Tradition leads them to automatically seek admittance to US universities but there is a slow awakening to the fact that European universities may be a very good, affordable alternative.

The data accumulated is now considered in the context of the conceptual framework that contemporary students are indeed academic shoppers or consumers of educational services (Riesman, 1980), and that as shoppers do, students seek out the best deal for themselves. The need for pre-sales consultation and discussion between service provider and the potential client is deeply felt. Choosing the right graduate school can be termed a high-involvement purchase but with the additional features of intangibility and heterogeneity such that the dynamics of this involvement takes on a different dimension and intensity (Umashankar, 2001). It can thus be argued that the consumer (the potential student) has a greater risk perception while buying services than buying products (Murray and Schlacter, 1990). Research has indicated that a decrease in the amount and/or quality of information available to the consumer usually results in a commensurate increase in perceived risk (Cox 1967; Spence, 1970). It is logical to assume that the amount of pre-purchase information or support required by the consumer when considering the purchase of education services is great and that this research is dealing with a high-risk service where the emotional involvement is also high.

The issues generated from this research are that family and friends play an important role in influencing and guiding the Indian students' quest for the right university for study abroad. These students seek out a number of high-ranking universities in a select number of locations and then narrow down the search process to those universities offering the right academic programme and funding combination. They are investing in their future and they find it is important to look ahead after graduation and take potential job opportunities into account.

As such, these students may be seen as academic shoppers who are carefully seeking out the best buy of academic studies. They expect choice and value and immediate attention and are no different in their behaviour than consumers of other more tangible products.

Umashankar (2001) studied the university choice issue from the perspective of the service deliverer. When examining the service encounters experienced by students during the choice-making phase of international university he concludes that universities must consider their programmes of higher education as services that require to be marketed as per the tenets of service marketing. Issues such as brand choice behaviour, consumer preference, moments of truth and purchasing decisions then become highly relevant. He reinforces the importance of managing 'points'.

“Points of marketing” and “points of communication”, where the most valuable and crucial advertisement for the institution is word of mouth. This latter point has long been identified as one of the key drivers of consumer expectations in services along with other variables such as past experience, personal needs and external communications.

The findings from this study parallel Umashankar’s (2001) observations in that it is evident that Indian students, when short listing a number of universities to which to apply, are influenced in the first instance by word of mouth from family, friends and respected academics.

Moving on to the crucial decision making stage, where the student has been offered a place in a shortlist of universities all fulfilling the student or consumers requirements, one university will stick out as being the ‘best deal’. The most important factors influencing the decision is that the university offers the right programme and has a good reputation in the students’ perceptions. Now the issue of price (Level of tuition fees, cost of living) becomes a dominant factor as well as perceived value (quality of scientific staff/resultant education/final degree leading to future employment). These findings tie in with those of Spauldings and Olswang (2005) who determined that once a student was admitted to a university, the cost of attendance becomes a direct concern. Evidently, receiving a scholarship (in any form) is considered an honour and contributes to the student’s and his family’s credibility and standing in the home community.

Reviewing the literature has lead the researchers to conclude that in spite of the abundance of literature available on international students’ experiences post arrival in the host country, very little is documented on the pre-arrival period for this group. Also, the majority of literature emerges from and addresses the situation in the main English speaking education exporters with the student body under study coming predominantly from South East Asia.

The findings presented in this study contribute to and may well be instrumental in forming the foundation for a body of literature examining these phenomena from the European perspective. Furthermore, this thesis contributes to a growing body of corroborating evidence for a particular model – the ‘Push – Pull’ model, and the theory that students are consumers of academic services and thus should be treated as academic shoppers.

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