



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Factors influencing international students' study destination decision abroad

Suh Li Phang

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) has become an increasingly competitive sector. The number of countries that are actively involved in international student recruitment has grown considerably. Given the growing international competition between countries for international students, it has become increasingly important to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence international students' decision on study destination. This is especially true for HE institutions in countries including Sweden that only recently have begun to engage in attracting international students.

In light of this, the focus of the thesis is twofold: 1) to investigate the factors that influence international students decision on study destination, and 2) how can the University of Gothenburg (GU) use this knowledge to re-design their marketing and recruitment strategies towards international students.

The data collection process was performed via semi-structured interviews of current or graduated master students who study or have studied in Sweden and GU staff. The findings indicate three groups of factors that influence international students' decision on study destination, which include *communication*, *location* and *social* factors. The sub-categories of these factors entail *quality of communication*, *study destination's attractiveness* and *social network*.

The data analysis demonstrates that it is important to understand the motivations and reasons international students choose certain programmes/courses at a specific university. The major contribution of this study is to highlight the significance of the category communication factors which has an important influence on international students' decision of study destination. In light of this, GU might need to consider the recommended actions and practical implications to formulate their marketing communication strategy to meet the target students more effectively.

Overall, this study contributes to improve the understanding of the various factors that underpin students' decision with regards to choosing a study destination. This knowledge is a key to formulating effective communication and recruitment strategies for HE institutes to attract international students.

Keywords: communication, international education marketing, international higher education, study destination's attractiveness

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1. Introduction

This chapter describes the background, purpose, problem formulation and research question of this study. It ends with an overview of the remaining thesis.

Transformation of the higher education industry

Over the past 30 years, the internationalisation of higher education (HE) has been a major growth industry worldwide (Bodycott, 2009). In the 1980s and 1990s, international education emerged as one of the more significant service industries (Mazzarol, 1998). According to Gomes and Murphy (2003), two important drivers are the prospects of charging higher student fees and globalisation initiatives. Three waves of globalisation were identified in the international education industry (Mazzarol, Soutar & Sim, 2003). The first wave was when students travelled to a host nation at a selected institution. This became common at the start of twentieth century and still remains common today. The second wave was when education institutions established alliances or coalitions through ‘twinning’ programmes with other institutions to have a presence in the international market. It is referred to as forward integration in the international education industry. Throughout the 1990s, this became common in Asia and students can study a foreign degree at the campus provided by the institutes in their home country. The third wave was when new branch campuses were created in foreign markets and information and communications technology (ICT) was used to deliver ‘online’ courses (Mazzarol et al., 2003).

There are various reasons that influence the demand for international education. Traditionally, it has been driven by expectations to raise the graduate’s economic and social status, especially within the HE sector (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Over the second half of the twentieth century, a lack of access to HE in many countries in Asia and Africa has been a key driver for international student flow (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In addition, the historical or colonial links between host and home countries has also played a role in determining where students travel for study (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

With a rapidly expanding HE sector, it has become increasingly important to understand how to attract international students. Research has classified the factors that encourage students to study abroad by examining ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors between their home country and host country (study destination) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), the ‘push’ factors are defined as the factors that operate within the home country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake international study while ‘pull’ factors refer to dimensions within a study destination that make it attractive to international students. Specifically, the research argues that economic and social forces within the home country ‘push’ students abroad while the students’ decision to select a study destination depend on various ‘pull’ factors. From this perspective, the

decision to study abroad is one of the most significant and expensive choices for many students and their family (Mazzarol, 1998). Thus, it is a complex decision-making process underpinning students' choice of study destination.

By the 1990s, many HE institutes in host countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US have become more market focused by adopting professional marketing strategies to recruit international students (Mazzarol et al., 2003). Many universities have used marketing theories and concepts, which have been effective in the business world in HE to gain a larger share of the international market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In many developed countries, the international trade in education services is a major source of income; it has become a multi-billion dollar business (Cheung, Yuen, Yuen & Cheng, 2011). This highlights the attractiveness and importance of international students as a potential target group, especially with the convenient of digital channels.

Today, the digital age changes customers' views of convenience, speed, information and service (Armstrong & Kotler, 2007). There is a need for marketers to combine traditional skills and practices with new competencies and practices to succeed in a digital environment (Armstrong & Kotler, 2007). These perspectives and strategies can be applied to the HE sector to achieve education marketers' primary goal which is to attract international students. Research shows that one major trend within the education industry is to focus on the application of ICT, partly due to the increased competition in HE and changes in the international student market (Mazzarol et al., 2003; Verbik & Lasanowki, 2007). This places a greater importance on using online marketing communications in the HE sector (Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003). In response to this, the major international educational providers from the UK, US and Australia (Verbik & Lasanowki, 2007) apply more proactive and creative marketing approach and techniques to attract international students (Ancheh, 2006; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). However, this requires that, education marketers need to have a clear grasp about the needs of their student markets.

Marketing communications in HE

The increase in importance of marketing communications highlights the need to consider both the ways in which HE institutes communicate through various media and the messages they want to convey. Digital channels like websites and emails are commonly used by HE institutes to communicate between students, lecturers and the university. A website is often the first port of call for prospective students and parents to gather information (Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003). In other words, the first impression is critical for them in terms of choosing a study destination. In light of this, HE institutions need to consider many aspects in designing effective messages that convey the right type of information; they need to get through digitally to students from different cultural backgrounds and languages. Therefore, there is a need to integrate a culture perspective when designing global

marketing strategies. For example, a message might convey different information to students from diverse cultures. Education marketers need to understand the influences of their strategies towards local cultures and how this benefits cross-cultural opportunities (Armstrong & Kotler, 2007). Armstrong and Kotler (2007) show the difficulties in creating a website that attracts traffic, both first time and repeat visits, as web users nowadays are quick in abandoning a website that does not meet their expectations. Research shows it is important to sharpen the messages which are targeting different group of students. For instance, research identified China and India as the main growth markets within Asia (Verbik & Lasanowki, 2007). The education marketer might need to identify the different communication methods and channels targeted towards Chinese and Indian students in relation to cultural, linguistic and non-verbal communications. In view of this, the present study can be framed as an investigation to identify factors that influence prospective students' decision-making process. Specifically, this study takes a communication perspective by examining the quality of communication that takes place via online and offline channels.

1.1 Background

Bagheri and Beheshti (2010) argue that universities have transformed from a segregated special-purpose institution into market-oriented and relationship-based entities, which emphasise consumer-centric approach. From this perspective, it is clear that Swedish HE is following this trend by becoming more consumer-centric after the introduction of tuition fees.

In June 2008, the Swedish Minister of Education Lars Leijonborg announced plans to charge tuition fees to Non-European (non-EU) university students (Landes, 2008, Jun 27). However, the proposal to introduce tuition fees for non-EU students by the Swedish government was postponed for a year (Parafianowicz, 2009, May 12). From the autumn term 2011, international students from outside Europe (EU), European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland were obliged to pay tuition fees to enter HE in Sweden as well as an application fee of 900 Swedish kronor for online registration (The Local, 2011, Feb 18).

The introduction of tuition fees for non-EU students in Sweden from the autumn term 2011 caused an instant decrease of international student applications. The newspaper, The Local, reported that there were fewer than 1300 international students registered for the 2011 autumn term compared to the previous academic year where over 16,000 applicants were registered (Guibourg, 2011, Aug 22). Further, the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services' (Verket för Högskoleservice, VHS) analysis showed that China accounted for the largest drop in numbers of students enrolling while in terms of percentages, the enrolment from some countries almost disappeared completely. The drop of applicants from Pakistan and Bangladesh was more than 90 percent while applicants from Iran, India,

and Thailand dropped by more than 80 percent (Landes, 2012, May 23). This has led to a shift in the student population in Swedish HE in terms of an increase of European student groups.

In addition, the lack of scholarships is another reason that has kept foreign students from applying to Swedish universities (The Local, 2011, Feb 18). Even though there are some scholarships available, it is still difficult for poor students from rich countries to access these (Guibourg, 2011, Aug 22). This shows that the Swedish HE also needs to re-think some practical aspects of how to attract non-EU international students. In order to successfully adopt a more consumer-centric approach, the universities need to understand student needs as well as keeping track of their competitors in the HE sector. The students' needs include different aspects such as country of origin, diverse cultural background and ways of communications are crucial aspects to consider.

1.2 The University of Gothenburg's strategies for attracting students

Even though the main purpose of this study is to understand the factors that influence international students' decision, the study also includes the existing activities carried out by the University of Gothenburg (GU) with regards to marketing and communications for prospective international applicants. This section has been divided into two parts, which are *The Central unit* and *Other departments*, including different schools, faculties, departments and programmes at GU.

1.2.1 The Central unit

The GU has a central unit, which takes care of student affairs, including student recruitment.

Approaches towards international students

The introduction of tuition fees for non-EU international students has changed the way in which the central unit works. The free tuition fee was suggested as a major factor in why non-EU international students chose Swedish HE previously. Currently, the central unit is shifting the focus to profile the university with an emphasis on relationship building with prospective students than to recruit following the introduction of tuition fee. The different communication channels to communicate with prospective students by the central unit include:

Education exhibitions and fairs

The central unit represents GU when participating in education exhibitions and fairs. Participation in education exhibitions and fairs internationally in China, India and UK, as well as locally, is important. Some departments join local education exhibitions and fairs. The main purpose is to collect contacts and establish relationships with prospective students. When they return to Sweden, they can then provide further information and answer new queries with follow up email communication. The central unit highlights the relevance of parental influence and pressure in certain cultures by targeting parents

when they visit education exhibitions and fairs in India and China. Furthermore, they have joined the Swedish Trade Council for Swedish Education Day abroad and in the process to discuss with the Swedish Trade Council so that they serve as their agent in different countries to answer students' inquiries.

Email correspondence

In order to create a good first impression and build relationships with students, the central unit responds promptly to student queries. They understand that a quick and informative response is important in separating themselves from their competitors. Prospective students 'cruise' around different websites for information. They want to build relationships with prospective universities and might send email inquiries to several different universities.

Films

A set of films are created by the central unit and other departments to promote different programs as well as to introduce the alumni to the prospective students.

Online Forum

The central unit joins a forum, 'Swedenintouch' held by the Swedish Institute. 'Swedenintouch' is a forum where students/users can post different questions. The central unit can provide assistance to users who have inquiries. However, it is currently poorly maintained.

Student ambassadors

The central unit has started an international ambassador organization. They have had national student ambassadors for five years who have helped with student recruitment during education exhibitions and fairs. They are now recruiting international ambassadors.

Social Media - Facebook

The central unit maintains a Facebook page for GU. It serves as an interaction platform for graduated, current and prospective students with the university. In 2012, the central unit targets students from India, China and Europe (UK and Germany). They run a "Social Media Challenge" on Facebook that targets UK and Chinese students. Currently, they are developing a "RenRen" page, a Chinese version of Facebook.

The university website

The central unit maintains GU's website. It serves as a pool of information for both current and prospective students. They emphasize that the website is always ranked highly among students as a source of information. It is an important channel that provides information which is easily assessed.

1.2.2 Other departments

Different departments at GU in this study have different strategies towards attracting international students.

Approaches towards international students

Different departments use different online and offline communication channels to approach prospective students. The following list is the online communication channels used by the different departments and some are only applicable to certain departments.

- **Email:** To answer prospective students' inquiries.
- **Films:** To introduce current students' experiences and alumni via recorded video.
- **Google ads:** To display the university and/or the department as the top option when users search online.
- **Newsletters and online educational portals:** To connect interested students within specific fields with newsletters via cooperation with online educational portals, for instance www.allastudier.se and www.studentum.se.
- **Photo blog:** To publish current students' study experiences in the department with photos via blogs.
- **Social Media - Facebook:** To provide an interactive platform with students, especially prospective students.
- **The university website:** To serve as the main link to different departments' own website and provide information.

Different departments at GU implement different types of offline communications in recruiting Swedish students, EU students and non-EU international students. The following list is the offline communication channels used by the different departments and some are only applicable to certain departments.

- **Local education exhibitions and fairs:** To join the central unit to have face-to-face communication with prospective students.
- **Printed Materials:** To be available for the central unit during education exhibitions and fairs.
- **Current student network:** To promote the programme and the university through student exchange programmes and understand current international students better such as via annual brainstorming session.
- **Lecturers and researchers' network:** To promote the university through lecturer exchange and conferences abroad.

- **Academic collaboration:** To establish collaborations with other universities, especially outside EU. *[This is the one option where non-EU exchange students can come to Sweden without paying. They think this is a good strategy instead of spending money on online marketing.]*
- **Industrial network:** *To maintain close relationships with the industries to create chances for students' career prospect.*

1.3 Problem Discussion

The huge drop of applications from non-EU international students to Swedish universities after the introduction of tuition fees as well as the competition in the HE sector has led to a more proactive recruiting approach by Swedish universities to attract international students. Existing research shows that the US, UK and Australia are the three major English-speaking study destinations (Verbik & Lasanowki, 2007), especially in HE. Many researchers from these countries have investigated students and universities' marketing perspectives (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). There is currently a lack of research in Sweden of a similar kind, which focuses on understanding international students' needs and effective ways to communicate with international students. Hence, there is a need to investigate what factors influence international students' decisions and mobility particularly from a student perspective. Clearly, the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU international students has changed the student demographics (Carlsson, 2012, Jan 6) in Swedish universities, with less students coming from outside of Europe. In order to address this, it is crucial for the HE institutions to understand the factors that influence international students' decision of study destination. This will enable them to formulate better policy and recruitment strategies for attracting international students. There is currently little research in general about students' decisions as well as marketing strategies towards international students, especially in Sweden. This study is an attempt to fill that research gap.

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of the study is twofold: 1) to investigate the factors that influence international master students' decisions in choosing HE study destination abroad from a student perspective and 2) to obtain an understanding of the marketing strategies and changes made by the GU to address the challenges of the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU international students.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. **What are the factors that influence international students' decision in selecting higher education abroad?**
2. **How can the University of Gothenburg (GU) use this knowledge to re-design their marketing and recruitment strategies towards international students?**

As part of answering the research questions, the study also maps out the current marketing practices by GU as well as outlining practical implications to the university, focusing on digital marketing communication in HE. The expected contributions are to highlight the communication between HE institutes with prospective students and to recommend practical implications to formulate marketing communication strategy for GU.

1.5 Delimitation

This study is focused on investigating international master students in Sweden, in particular non-EU students. Student interviewees include both EU and non-EU students even though EU students are not affected by the introduction of tuition fees. In addition, there is only one bachelor programme at GU conducted in English therefore this study targets master student.

This study focuses on GU. However, there are student interviewees who are studying or have completed their studies at other universities in Sweden. The sample was chosen via the author's social and academic networks.

1.6 Overview of Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows: the second chapter reviews the current literature within HE with an emphasis on students' decision making on study destination, factors that influence students' decision, communication channels and marketing communications in HE. It ends with identifying the knowledge gap this study aims to fill. The third chapter outlines the research approach, data collection process and method of analysis for the study. It also covers trustworthiness, limitations of this study and the ethical consideration. The fourth chapter presents the results of the data analysis of the student interviews. It focuses on specifying the factors that influence international students' choices in selecting Swedish HE. In addition, it also presents the challenges faced by GU in attracting non-EU international students which complements the factors. The fifth chapter discusses the research findings in light of the literature study and suggestions for future research. In addition, it will end with practical implications to HE institutes in general, especially with GU in mind. The final chapter summarises and concludes the study.

2. Literature review

This chapter reviews the current literature within HE with an emphasis on students' choices and decision making for HE abroad, factors that influence students' decision, communication channels and marketing communications in HE. It ends by identifying the knowledge gap this study aims to fill.

2.1 Globalisation and internationalisation in HE

The number of investigations into the process that influence international student's decision for HE abroad has increased due to globalisation and a rising competition in the HE sector (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). As a result of this, marketing activities in HE have increased markedly. In other words, from being a sector where marketing was nearly non-existent, HE has transformed into a highly marketised sector (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Scott (2000) argued that globalisation and internationalisation are different and opposed. Internationalisation emphasises strategic relationships; internationalisation in HE includes recruitment of international students, staff exchanges and collaboration between universities worldwide. As for globalisation, it reflects the global competitiveness processes and intensified collaboration; globalisation in HE involves identification of national cultures, the impact of ICT towards standardisation of teaching and emergence of global research networks and culture (Scott, 2000).

The globalisation and internationalisation of HE has led to the implementation of business theory into a HE context. Chapman (1986) was amongst the first to apply consumer behaviour theory to education by suggesting that students and their parents go through a few stages and eventually select an institution or subject of study. These stages include pre-search behaviour, search behaviour, application stage, choice decision and registration. The first stage, pre-search behaviour is when students are in their early thoughts about their future. In search behaviour stage, students shortlist the potential study destination, institutes and courses. Then, they submit their applications to selected institutions in the application stage. Choice decision occurs when students accept an offer, depending on the number of offers received. Finally, during the registration stage, students reflect the right decision to register with the course, there is possibility that it is a wrong decision and turn down offer (Chapman, 1986).

2.2 Understanding international students' decision

The demand for HE abroad and competitions in HE sector makes international students' preferences an interesting subject to study. Thus, it is important for education marketers to know factors that influence the purchase intention of prospective students. Ivy (2010) summaries earlier research into three types of student choice models and the dimensions in much of the research can be categorized as either economic, sociological or information processing models. The economic models of student

choice emphasize the costs aspects in relation to their studies, including the costs of choosing to study instead of work. The sociological models of student choice cover issues such as family influences, personal motivation and ability and other influences. The information processing models of student choice combine both the economic and sociological models to determine the decision making of further study and the selection process of institutions (Ivy, 2010). Some researchers suggest that it is difficult to categorize or conceptualize students' decision making. Maringe (2006) argues that choice is not a rational process while Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) summarise that choice is an iterative, complex concept that involves three interconnected elements, which were the context, the key influencers and the choosers.

Research into education choice behaviour has focused on the stages in the decision-making process and factors that influence choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño (2006) highlight changes in students' choice behaviour, particularly the growing consumerism in HE with emphasis on HE as a preparation for future career. Maringe and Carter (2007) sum up that in general decision making could be conceptualized as a five-stage process which includes the identification of a problem which needs a solution; the search for information, an evaluation of alternatives, deciding the purchase decision and finally evaluating the purchase decision. There is also other research that indicates there is a sequential order to the way students choose to study abroad in most situations: the first is the decision to study abroad instead of studying in their home country; following this is the selection of a study destination; and finally the students select a specific institution (Chen, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Pimpa (2003) pointed out that there is no particular sequential order between Thai students' choices; however the choice of academic programme is the most important. Both of them highlighted that there were exceptions where students by-pass the process and chose an institute directly (Chen, 2007; Pimpa, 2003). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) note that Chinese, Indian, Indonesian and Taiwanese students move through three stages when selecting a study destination, which is influenced by 'push' and 'pull' factors at different stages. In stage one, students decide to study abroad with the influence of the 'push' factors within the home country. Stage two involves the selection of the study destination and students evaluate the factors which make one more attractive with 'pull' factors. Lastly, students select the institution in stage three and there is additional 'pull' factors make one institution more attractive than its competitors, such as reputation of the institution, range of courses offered and staff expertise.

2.3 Factors that influence international students' decision-making process

Studies indicate that there are a variety of factors influencing international students' decision in selecting study destination. Among them, 'push' and 'pull' factors are identified as influencing international students' decision of study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992). The table 2 which compiles all the factors identified by researchers is presented at the end of this chapter.

‘Push’ and ‘pull’ factors:

During the 1960s and 1970s, McMachon (1992) investigated the expansive phase of international education by examining the flow of students from eighteen developing countries to the world and to the US in particular which could be explained by ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. There are a variety of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors have been identified in relevant research. ‘Push’ factors subsume 1) a lack of access to local HE, 2) perceptions of better quality of overseas HE system, and 3) the availability of technology-based programs. On the other hand, ‘pull’ factors encompass: 1) the commonality of the language and opportunity to improve second language (English), 2) the geographic proximity of host country, 3) the institution’s reputation for quality, 4) the range of available programmes/courses and promotion and marketing efforts, and 5) the staffs’ qualification and credential. (Lists compiled from Bodycott, 2009; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Counsell, 2011; Cubillo et al., 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Engelke, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Maringe, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahan, 1992; Pimpa, 2003; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Soutar & Turner, 2002)

Knowledge and awareness of study destination

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) further identified six factors influencing the selection of a host country: 1) knowledge and awareness of the host country, 2) personal recommendations, 3) cost issues, 4) environment, 5) geographic proximity and 6) social links. Maringe (2006) highlights costs that include living expenses and availability of part time job for prospective students. Working part time is one of the ways for them to make their HE abroad possible (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

According to Cubillo et al. (2006), a country, a city or an institution’s image influences international students’ decision. There are several aspects that relate to living in the study destination and city such as safety, cultural activities, international experience, university environment, facilities, quality of life, visa application and immigration prospects (Bodycott, 2009; Chen, 2007; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Chung et al., 2009; Counsell, 2011; Eder et al., 2010; Lee & Morrish, 2011; Maringe & Carter, 2007). A university’s value is based on its relationship building and service delivery towards international students rather than on its facilities and student revenue (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). Student satisfaction (Price et al., 2003; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010) is highlighted as an important factor affecting their decision to choose a study destination and a specific institute. Engelke (2008) identified that there is a link between addressing student’s needs and an institution’s attractiveness. Students’ cultural needs and expectations were important to take into account. Students satisfaction towards the HE institution helped in building the institution’s reputation when they left the university and act as ambassadors (Engelke, 2008).

An institute’s image, in terms of its reputation and perceived education quality (Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Maringe, 2006; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Soutar & Turner, 2002) is likely to remain the most important factor influencing study destination choice. Mazzarol and

Soutar (2002) present that international students are more influenced by the following factors when choosing an institute: an institution's reputation for quality; its links or alliances with other institutions familiar to the students, high-quality staff, alumni base, and the number of students enrolled at the institution and students' qualifications being recognised. Maringe and Carter (2007) highlight that international recognition of UK HE is a factor that influences international students' choices to study in UK. Besides, Bodycott (2009) indicates that students consider facilities and accommodation as well as scholarships availability during their decision-making process.

Availability of course/programme

Universally, availability of a desired course is the most important for students when selecting a university (Price et al., 2003). However, the costs of going to university are the most influential when selecting between several universities that offer a similar course (Price et al., 2003). Interestingly, Maringe's (2006) findings suggest that the three top reasons international students choose courses and subjects of study are no longer related to intrinsic motives of interest and love for the subjects of study. They are no longer passive consumers in that they have changed and place more focus on HE as a career investment (Maringe, 2006). 'Value for money' is a critical issue for students when selecting HE abroad (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). Chen's (2007) analysis shows that students' motivation and characteristics are the most important factors that influence them to further HE abroad, especially to achieve personal satisfaction for future career. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) point out those students are 'buying' the benefits that a degree can provide in terms of employment, status and lifestyle. In other words, career prospect is an important factor (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Maringe, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Soutar & Turner, 2002).

Influences from students' social network

Influences and recommendations from family members, relatives, friends and professors also play an important role in a student's decision-making process for HE (Chen, 2007; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) suggested that personal recommendations or word-of-mouth referrals of former alumni are main influences. Even though the final decision to study abroad is mainly decided by students themselves, their family members, relatives and friends influence them significantly by providing information and suggestions (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Pimpa (2003) indicated that the influence of family on the Thai students differed depending on the level of education they planned to study. While the majority of the research investigated family influence from the two categories of 'recommendation' and 'financial support', Pimpa (2003) expanded this to five categories which include finance, information, expectations, competition and persuasion. Financial and expectations influences were the strongest among Thai students. Further, Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) highlighted the strong parental influence on

undergraduate students when deciding on a study destination, especially in Indonesian and Taiwanese students.

Students' motivation for HE abroad

Ivy (2010) suggests that the motivation among students to go to university vary according to their ethnic origin. For example, Asian Pakistani and African students are strongly influenced by their family in selecting HE abroad. On the other hand, Afro-Caribbean students' motivation display a stronger association with their career and Asian Indian students are more strongly associated with social aspects (Ivy, 2010). There are a few personal factors that influence students' decision, which are academic performance, ethnic group, gender, parental involvement, and financial constraints (Ivy, 2010). China's one child policy and Confucian heritage have the potential to significantly affect the HE abroad decision making of their child (Bodycott, 2009). Chinese parents ensured the best for their only child HE abroad, which would provide long-term social and economic benefits in return (Bodycott, 2009). Lee and Morrish (2011) suggest that HE marketers should target Chinese students and parents in different ways. For instance, HE institutes could highlight the institution's ability to provide the best for their children to Chinese parents while emphasize the institution's ability to assist Chinese students to gain a degree that reflects the best in them as filial children.

Attractiveness of HE abroad from a cultural perspective

Some research has adopted a cultural perspective as a way of understanding the factors that affect how universities should market themselves to students. Counsell (2011) identified it is higher quality education and a desire to improve their foreign language skills that pushes Chinese students to study abroad, and preferably to choose UK as the study destination. The reasons are that the UK degrees are seen to have greater career value than Chinese degrees and that the experiences of living and working abroad would benefit their future career. Chen and Zimitat (2006) found that the Taiwanese students' individual belief (attitude or perceptions) of the HE in the study destination influences their intention to study in Australia, while family and peers influence Taiwanese students' intentions to study in the US. They conclude that the main reasons for choosing to study in Australia and US are to improve English proficiency and skills, enhanced understanding of western culture, improve job prospects (Chen & Zimitat, 2006). On the other hand, New Zealand appeals to the Chinese students for its low corruption and high level of honesty and fairness (Chung et al., 2009). Chung et al. (2009) also suggest that the ability to integrate into the local society and live harmoniously is one other factors which influence the Chinese students' choices for study destination abroad.

2.4 Communication, culture and the Internet

HE institutes would be likely to attract more international students groups if they had a greater awareness of culture and values (Lee & Morrish, 2011). To achieve this, communication plays a

crucial role. Communication occurs when a message is sent from a sender to a recipient with a purpose, an expression and a medium in an environment (Allwood, 2002). In today's society, the Internet is an important instrument for communication following globalisation and technology advancement (Chirkova, 2011). There is an undeniably close connection between culture and communication. According to Lustig and Koester (2006), culture is a collective of interpretations that affects peoples' behaviours, which includes beliefs, values, norms and social practices. They also highlight the link between culture and communication, which contributes to understanding intercultural competence (Lustig & Koester, 2006).

When communication occurs across the Internet, cultural aspects have to be taken into account. The reason is the Internet offers alternative communication channels, besides traditional communication channels like print media, word-of-mouth and public relations which are used to recruit students (Kim, Holdsworth, Li & Fam, 2009). Further, the Internet allows marketers to customize information that targets different cultures, including both verbal and nonverbal content (Usunier & Lee, 2009). They suggest that the availability of different languages on the website increases the potential bond which symbolizes respect for culture. They also highlight the importance of email communication, a low context communication and the sender should be very conscious of the receiver's cultural background.

Edward T. Hall, a major contributor in the intercultural communication field, emphasised the role of context in communication (Usunier & Lee, 2009). He measured context from high to low. In a low-context (LC) culture, communications are direct, detailed and explicit, normally in the form of written texts. It is just the opposite in a high-context (HC) culture, where implicit information is often shared via indirect communication like symbols, picture and personal relationships. The recognition of cultures has increased due to globalisation (Würtz, 2006). Culture is placed into focus as users and potential customers come from all parts of the world.

In view of this, culturally appropriate information and advertisements in websites are critical to communicate successfully (Würtz, 2006). The Internet creates a 'space' for users to access information easier and faster wherever they are. Würtz (2006) applied Edward T. Hall's high-context and low-context cultures perspective to websites in her study to explore the McDonald's websites. She identified five different strategies by which visual communication is used to support high-context communication traits and made a summary of tendencies she found in websites of different-context cultures (Table 1).

High context cultures (HC)	Images, animations are used more HC values: family Different effects used within website Approach: exploratory Many sidebars and menus
Low context cultures (LC)	Text are used more LC value: individual, lifestyle Informative website Approach: direct Few sidebars and menus

Table 1: Implementation of Hall's dimension in web design (adapted from Würtz, 2006)

Synchronous versus asynchronous communications

The Internet provides a place for users to engage in different types of interactions (Crystal, 2001). In synchronous communication, interaction occurs in real-time between senders and receivers. For example, in synchronous communication like Skype and Yahoo Messenger, users are 'online' at the same time to exchange information using chat, call or video. As in asynchronous communication, there is a time-delay (postponed time) between information exchanges of senders and receivers where simultaneous interaction is not required. One example is an online forum, where users can post ideas and information on the 'board' which will be stored and allow users to follow the sharing and exchanging of ideas later (Crystal, 2001).

2.5 Marketing international education online

Globalisation and internationalisation are changing the way education marketers compete and meet the needs of a global economy (Engelke, 2008). According to Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003), an important principle of marketing is that all marketing activities should be consumer-centred to achieve consumer satisfaction. Marketing theories and concepts that have been effective in the business world has become gradually recognized by researchers in the field of HE marketing (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) identify the potential benefits to market HE in an international context even though current literature on HE marketing is incoherent and lacks theoretical models to reflect upon particular context of HE and the nature of their services.

Three waves of globalisation that are described in the previous chapter indicate a change in international education industry. The innovation and improvement of technology has a profound impact in educational marketing (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Applying ICT in HE (Mazzarol et al., 2003; Verbik & Lasanowki, 2007) allow education marketer to place greater importance on marketing communications (Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003). Living in these information-intensive industries, the

Internet plays a very important role, including in the HE sector. It allows marketers to customize information that target different cultures, including both verbal and nonverbal content (Usunier & Lee, 2009). Nowadays, Australian institutions have matured in their educational promotion with incorporating technologies like the Internet into their international marketing strategies in attracting students from abroad. ICT becomes an option for education marketers because it is viewed as a lower cost strategy and risk to new markets. However, it may be as costly as other forms of delivery as well as the limitations of the range of global markets penetration (Mazzarol et al., 2003).

Website and email correspondence provides institutes opportunities to market themselves (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) and communicate with prospective students worldwide without meeting in person. On the other hand, prospective students use the same technologies in their decision making process (Gomes & Murphy, 2003). In order to achieve that, education marketers need to have a clear grasp about the needs of their student markets. Thus, relationship marketing is important for universities to succeed (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003) in building relationships with prospective students in the competitive HE sector. Australia, the UK and Singapore consider websites to be an important tool to promote their HE globally (Cheung et al., 2011). Many education exporters have their own agencies to assist them in promoting their HE (Pimpa, 2003; Maringe & Carter, 2007). For instance, they have their own respective agencies, Australian Education International, the British Council and the Singapore Tourism Board (Cheung et al., 2011). They work in many ways to promote their countries' HE internationally, among them are establishing government relations on education issues with others governments, carrying out research on the markets, promotional activities via website, events and exhibitions and protecting international students' tuition fees (Cheung et al., 2011).

Recently, the invention of social media, for instance Facebook and Twitter, provides education marketers another channel to market and communicate with prospective students. Research (Aghaee, 2010; Wankel, 2009) explored the use of social media to support educational learning in HE. Nowadays, students are referred to as digital natives, who are comfortable with computer-based collaborations because they have been involved with computers and online virtual worlds when they were young (Wankel, 2009). However, Aghaee (2010) indicates that social media is less frequently used for academic purposes, though a majority of the students are frequent social media users. The use of social media provides education marketers the flexibility to have possible interaction without concern for time and venue, also with lower cost (Aghaee, 2010). Interestingly, limitations and negative aspects of using social media in academia are highlighted which are the loss of non-verbal communication like body language, technical problems like power failure and internet connections which will postpone the interactions and the downside of relying on social media, like less creative thinkers (Aghaee, 2010).

2.6 Summary of the key factors affecting students' decision in HE

The following table presents the key factors related to students' choices in HE as identified by researchers. These factors are presented in alphabetical order while the researchers appear chronologically.

Factors identified from findings	Researchers	Country in which research was conducted
A lack of access to higher education locally	McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009	The US Australia The UK Hong Kong
Career prospects	Soutar & Turner, 2002; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Maringe, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010	Australia Australia The UK The UK The US
Collaboration with agencies	Cheung, Yuen, Yuen & Cheng, 2011	Hong Kong
Cost issues	Pimpa, 2003; Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010	Australia The UK The UK The UK Hong Kong The US Italy
Culture	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Chung, Holdsworth, Li & Fam, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Lee & Morrish, 2011	Australia Canada Hong Kong New Zealand The UK New Zealand
Environment	Chen, 2007; Chung, Holdsworth, Li & Fam, 2009	Canada New Zealand
Influences and recommendations from family, friends and professors	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2002; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Lee & Morrish, 2011	Australia Australia Australia Canada The UK Hong Kong The US New Zealand
Immigration prospects	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Bodycott, 2009	Australia Hong Kong

Factors identified from findings	Researchers	Country in which research was conducted
Institutes' facilities	Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Bodycott, 2009	The UK Hong Kong
International experience	Bodycott, 2009	Hong Kong
Perceptions of better quality of overseas HE system	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Counsell, 2011	Australia Australia The UK
Promotion and marketing efforts	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002	Australia
Quality of life	Bodycott, 2009	Hong Kong
Safety	Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009	Australia The UK Canada Hong Kong
Staffs' qualification and credential	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Maringe, 2006	Australia Australia The UK
Student satisfaction	Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010	The UK Italy
The commonality of the language and opportunity to learn second language (English)	Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Engelke, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010 Counsell, 2011	Australia Sweden Hong Kong The US The UK
The geographic proximity of host country	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010	Australia The UK Hong Kong The US
The institution's reputation for quality	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Maringe, 2006; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010	Australia Australia Spain The UK The UK Hong Kong The US Italy
The range of available programmes/courses	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010	Australia Australia The UK The US Italy

Factors identified from findings	Researchers	Country in which research was conducted
University environment	Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009	The UK The UK Hong Kong
Visa application	Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010	Spain The UK The US

Table 2: Summary of the key factors affecting student's decision in HE identified in the literature.

2.7 The Knowledge Gap

There is limited research conducted to investigate Sweden as a study destination for international students compared to the main education exporters such as Australia, the UK and US. In addition, most research has adopted a quantitative research approach focused on surveys. This limits the ability to get a full picture of student mobility and what communication strategies are most effective to attract international students. This study adds to the limited research in Sweden by using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews, which allows a deeper exploration of the topic from a student perspective. Thus, this study aims specifically at unpacking the factors that influence international students' choices of study destination.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research approach, research process and method of analysis for the study. It also covers trustworthiness, limitations of this study and the ethical consideration.

3.1 Research approach

Due to the nature of the study, a qualitative research approach was chosen. This method allows researchers to have a deeper understanding of the research area by taking into account the perspective of the study population and the context in which they live (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). In addition, a qualitative research method is the most suitable to answer the questions of ‘why’ and ‘how’ (Hennink et al., 2011).

3.2 Research setting

The University of Gothenburg (GU) is one of the major universities in northern Europe with approximately 38,000 students and 5,900 employees, of which 2,700 are teachers and doctoral students and 490 are professors. GU has eight faculties and around 40 departments which cover most scientific disciplines, from medicine and biotechnology to marine biology and opinion formation. (Information retrieved from GU’s website, www.gu.se.)

3.3 Research process

3.3.1 Data collection

Before the data collection was conducted, the author searched for literature in the field of HE via libraries and online databases. The majority of the early literature search was done via Gothenburg University database (GUNDA), Emerald, Elsevier, Google Scholar and ScienceDirect.

3.3.1.1 Interviews

The data collection was conducted in two phases:

1. Interviews with current or graduated international master students in Sweden to gather information about the factors that influence their decision.
2. Interviews with GU staff to gather information about GU’s current practices towards international students.

In view of this, two sets of semi-structured interview guides were created to conduct the present study. Semi-structured interviews are typically used to seek information from people about a specific issue or topic on individual and personal experiences (Hennink et al., 2011). For this study, a semi-structured interview was an appropriate method because it allowed the author to modify and guide the

conversations towards the appropriate topics and issues. The author also had the ability to maintain the flow of interviews by adjusting the pace which suited both the interviewer and interviewees. Thus, interviewees had greater freedom to express and discuss their ideas and thoughts compared to other research method like questionnaires. This research method allowed the author to have direct interaction with interviewees, develop deeper personal relationships and obtain a more in-depth understanding.

3.3.1.2 Sample size

This study comprised eight interviews with current and graduated international master students and eight with GU staff. Research suggested that sample size is influenced by many considerations, among them time and cost (Bryman, 2008). While time was a factor, the sample size was also limited by the availability of interviewees and was not pre-decided in the research approach. The interviewees were recruited through the author’s university and personal networks and were therefore a result of convenience sampling. Interview invitations were sent via email to international master students and GU staff. There were 27 invitations sent to both students and GU staff. However, only sixteen replied and agreed to participate in this study.

Recruitment for students’ interviewees

There were eight candidates who replied and agreed to participate in the interviews. The student interviewees included 2 Chinese, 2 Iranian, 1 British, 1 Malaysian, 1 Pakistani and 1 Serbian.

The educational backgrounds of the student interviewees are displayed as following (Table 3):

Student Interviewees	University	Master Program	Comments
S1	Jönköping University	Information Technology Management	*Currently studying Master in Communication at University of Gothenburg
S2	University of Gothenburg	Innovation in Industry Management	
S3	University of Gothenburg	Software Engineering and Management	
S4	University of Gothenburg	Master in Communication	* Starting a second Master in Psychology at Lund University autumn 2012
S5	University of Gothenburg	Software Engineering and Management	
S6	Chalmers University of Technology	Electrical Engineering	

Student Interviewees	University	Master Program	Comments
S7	KTH Royal Institute of Technology	Aerospace Engineering	A joint Erasmus Mundus program of Sweden, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Greece, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and Belgium, University of Liège
S8	University of Gothenburg	Social Work in Human Right	

Table 3: Student respondents' information

Recruitment for university staff interviewees

In recruiting GU staff interviewees, the author first contacted the Information Officer and web master from the Department of Applied Information Technology. From this first contact, potential interview candidates that are involved in communication and marketing at GU were identified. Of these candidates, 7 replied and agreed to participate in this study. Among them were 1 information officer (Student affairs) at central unit, 1 Communications Director, 1 Director of Studies, 2 Public Relations Officers, 1 International Coordinator, 1 Information Officer and webmaster, and 1 Program Director. The departments involved were the Department of Applied Information Technology, HDK – School of Design and Crafts, IT Faculty, the School of Business, Economics and Law, the School of Global Studies and The Sahlgrenska Academy.

3.4 Method of analysis

The method of analysis in this study applied the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is an iterative process that entailed data collection, data coding in looking for patterns and categorising data into themes and sub-themes. Recorded interviews were transcribed after they were completed simultaneously with the ongoing data collection process. This allowed the author to further explore new issues in subsequent interviews. Once all interviews had been transcribed, the author began to develop codes. A code is an issue, topic or idea that is discussed by interviewees and can be identified through reading the data (Hennink et al., 2011). The author familiarised herself with the data by repeatedly reading the data and identified codes. Coding allowed the author to identify and label repeated issues and patterns that appeared and to then categorise them into different themes. Thereafter, themes were refined in details and arranged according to hierarchy, main and sub themes. Finally, the author reported the defined main and sub themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The same steps applied to analyse the GU staff interview transcripts. Citations from student interviewees were named as Student 1 (S1), Student 2 (S2)...Student 8 (S8).

The 6 steps of thematic analysis adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006) were summarised as below:

1. Familiarise with data by reading repeatedly
2. Identified codes / patterns
3. Collapsed and merged codes
4. Categorised codes into themes (main and sub)
5. Refining and defining themes
6. Reporting the analysis

3.5 Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the validity of the data, data preparation and code development, which form the foundation for subsequent data analysis, were important (Hennink et al., 2011). To assure the trustworthiness of this study the following measures were taken:

- Piloting the interview guide to refine the questions and to ensure that the questions were sufficient
- Applying an established model for analysing the interview data and to ensure that the resulting themes were grounded in data

3.6 Limitations

The initial plan of this study was to combine an electronic questionnaire for international master students with in-depth interviews with GU staff. Unfortunately, due to technical problems the survey had to be discontinued. Therefore, interviews with current and graduated international master students were conducted to obtain a new set of data. The author faced some difficulties in receiving replies from the interviewees via follow-up email questions. The interviews were conducted in English even though it was the second or third language for the author and the majority of the interviewees in this study.

3.7 Ethical consideration

The general ethical principle with interviewees is to impose no harm (Qu & Dumay, 2011). To ensure this, this author informed the students and GU staff interviewees about the purpose and research area of this study and obtained consent before they agreed to participate in the interviews. Before each interview was conducted, the author asked for permission to audio record the whole interview. In order to protect personal information of the interviewees, they remained anonymous throughout the whole research from data collection to data analysis. Their identifications were hidden in the transcriptions.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the result of the data analysis of the student interviews. It focuses on specifying the factors that influence international students' decisions in selecting Swedish HE. In addition, it also presents the challenges faced by GU in attracting non-EU international students from the GU staff interviews which complements the factors.

Three groups of factors have been identified to influence international students' decision on study destination. These include *communication*, *location* and *social* factors. *Communication factors* relate to perceived quality of communication between the respondents and the university as well as channels of communication; *location factors* relate to a study destination's attractiveness which includes an institutional image, a desired programme/course, language, international environment and costs; and *social factors* relate to social network of the respondents. Even though these factors are categorised into three main categories, there are interrelated and overlapping in many ways.

4.1 Communication factors: Quality of communication

The category communication factors highlight the communications between the respondents and their universities before and/or after their arrival at the university. Specifically, the data analysis shows that quality of communication is one important factor that influences respondents' decision of study destination. The interview data reveal that online channels play an important role in the communications between students and the university before and after their arrival at the university. Another aspect of communications is related to online and offline communication channels which is explained as below:

Online communication channels

In order to study at a Swedish university, students need to submit their applications online via www.studera.nu, which is now www.universityadmissions.se. Before the application process, the respondents use online search engines to gather information. Google was the first channel used by the majority of the respondents. After using search engine, the university website is, for most, the first way of connecting with the university. There are a variety of different opinions about online communication; however, some generalisations can be made. The respondents commented that a university that provides sufficient information about interesting programmes attracts their attentions. This directly influences their decision for HE abroad.

S1 expressed the importance of relevant and interesting web-content:

"...I love the program, because the description about the program was so interesting to me, it is like something a mixture of business and IT which I was so interested in both."

While it is clear that the content of the website is important, the respondents highlighted that a university website should remain 'simple yet attractive' with pictures and videos displaying current or graduated students' experiences of the university. They also suggest that a clear navigation within the website is important, especially to facilitate information searching. This suggests that design consideration of a website, for example functionality and aesthetics, matters. Interestingly, the respondents point to the website content, especially information about an interesting programme that attracts them are more important than the design of the website. This indicates that the website design is important for how it is being perceived, but it does not seem to influence the actual choice of study destination.

Another method of online communication is via email correspondence. The majority of the respondents express the importance of an email response from the university which in turn influence their decision. The reason being this is their first impression towards the university to some of them. They communicated with the university via email before they came to Sweden, either before they applied for the program and/or after they received offers from the university. The pre-connection via email with staff, for instance the programme coordinator, provides the respondents with a feeling of security and certainty. In addition, how promptly the university responds to student inquiries via email appears to influence students attitudes towards the university. This can be said to influence their decision in selecting their HE abroad. Some of them experience a quick reply within a day while some of them experience a slower reply which could be as long as a week.

S1 described how email response from the university influenced her decision:

"He was so kind and so helpful and we started to have some correspondences like I wrote to him and he just replied immediately with a lot of information. You know the way he replied me back and the way he showed his willingness, it was so good to me that eventually I applied for this program..."

This signifies that the email response may influence the respondents' decision to provide security for students especially when they were still in their home country. Some respondents added that if they receive no email reply from the university that they sent their inquiries, they would not doubt the education quality of the university. However, their doubts about the administrative capabilities of the university would increase.

S6 answered the influence of email reply:

"...but if they don't answer, I would definitely have some doubt and probably would not make the choice, there is possible I will give it 50-50%."

This suggests that email correspondence between prospective students and the university is an important factor that influences their decision to select a particular programme at a university.

Offline communication channels

The overall data analysis shows that few respondents have offline communication with the university before they arrive. The offline communication usually takes place once the students have arrived. One type of offline communication is face-to-face interaction, which occurs when students visit the university or when students visit education fairs and exhibitions in their home country. The few respondents who contacted the university before their arrival reported their communication experiences as ranging from pleasant to unpleasant. The respondents who visited education fairs and exhibitions in their home country suggested that an opportunity to meet with the representative from prospective university in person before they made their decision provides them with good information. This influences them during their decision-making process.

S6 detailed his face-to-face meeting with representative of prospective university at education fairs in his home country:

“At the fairs, I talked with the representative from the university and they gave me brochures, information for the programme and a lot of good information.”

Another type of offline communication channel is phone conversation with the university. The respondents who had phone conversations with the university or visited the university experienced a language barrier. Specifically, there was a perception that the staff ‘disliked speaking in English’.

S4 expressed his frustration about the poor information provided via phone conversation:

“So we phoned up one person who been told the person you need to speak to, they then told you ‘oh no, it is not me, you need to speak to someone else.’, then you ended up four people down the lines and you still aren't any where, because nobody seems to know what is going on.”

Even though the unpleasant experience led to frustration for the respondents, they suggest that it has no huge influence regarding their decision of their HE. While it is clear that the majority of the communication nowadays among individuals has gone ‘online’, the respondents still value offline communication channels like education fairs and exhibitions.

4.2 Location factors: Study destination’s attractiveness

The category location factors relates to actual and useful information that the respondents gathered about Sweden and Swedish HE which influence their decision of study destination. The data analysis shows that a study destination’s attractiveness is an important factor that influences respondents’ decision of HE abroad. Attractiveness of a study destination is about the information and knowledge about a study destination that prospective students obtain and are aware of. There is a variety of attractiveness that attracts the respondents to choose Swedish HE. Thus, it is broken down into six categories which entail Sweden as a study destination, an institutional image, a desired programme/course, language, international environment and costs.

Sweden as a study destination

Many respondents describe Sweden as an attractive country because it has a good reputation in terms of being a safe and open society where English is widely spoken. In addition, they point out that the political climate, freedom of expression; low unemployment rate and many renowned international companies like Volvo and SKF are other factors that play a role in selecting Sweden as their HE study destination.

S3 detailed the reasons why he chose Sweden:

“...in Europe there are a few countries I would like to live, one of them being Sweden...because I really like the kind of attitude, the way they work, the way they think, the way they behave, the way they country organize, the way the economic works, they are just different than all the southern countries...”

Another dimension of attractiveness is the city itself. Most of the respondents expressed their preference to live in a bigger city when selecting their HE abroad. They agree that the size of the city and general facilities available in the city are important factors for them, such as accommodation and transportation system.

S2 pointed out the size of the city matters:

“...of course because of the city. Gothenburg is the second largest city in Sweden. I would rather to stay in a big city rather than the small town...”

According to the respondents, social life in Sweden is another attractiveness that they consider in addition to their student life. They indicate that the importance of maintaining a balance between student and social life is important. For examples, they are interested to know about activities organized by student union and events that happening in the city throughout the year.

An institutional image

The data analysis shows that institutional image has a direct impact on the respondents' decision in selecting HE abroad. The ranking and accreditation, reputation and employment opportunities are important criteria to form a good institutional image. The respondents show that a university's accreditation and ranking is perceived as an important factor which influences their choices in selecting HE abroad.

S1 explained the factor which influences her choices:

“The ranking of university is always important, of course and it is especially important for me how international and globalised the university is...”

Another important institutional image is the specialisation reputation of a university. The respondents suggest that a university's specialization in particular research areas motivates them to apply at a specific HE institute. This suggests that the reputation of an institute influences students' choices to

an extent. Besides, the respondents highlight that a future career opportunity is another important factor which influences their decision in selecting HE abroad.

S4 described his opinion about HE abroad:

“For me this is credentials in getting a qualification but also an alternative of a different career path, I am changing career to pursue a career in academia.”

Some respondents indicated that the importance of the connection between a university and industry is one important factor for their decision. Factors such as inviting guest lecturers or industry professionals to deliver lectures might provide the students opportunities to build relationship with industry and improve their chances of employment after graduation.

S5 detailed how the employment opportunities influence her choices to study in Sweden:

“...I did some research it is not that difficult to find a job here especially for my subject.”

This suggests that an institutional reputation and employment opportunities after graduation are important factors that influences international students in selecting a programme, university and country.

A desired programme/course

The majority of the respondents highlight that a programme/course which interest them is one important factor that influence their decision. Their interest towards the programme/course that they select and the learning outcome of the program influence their decision making process.

S6 showed how he decided his selection:

“I think the most important thing will be the program itself, and how good it is, how good it is organized, how good are the courses, what is the learning outcomes after the program, how good are the job prospect after the program...”

To clarify, providing sufficient content about a programme or course as well as to have a clear study outcome of the programme is important in order to attract students' attentions. Thus, an interesting programme that prospective students desire that suit them is an important factor that affect their selection for HE abroad.

Language

Many respondents agree that the teaching language at a university is a crucial factor affecting their decision in selecting programme and study destination.

S4 explained the importance of language which influences his decision:

“...I think a critical factor would be the fact that it is actually delivered in English...”

International master students choose to come to Sweden to study master program in English. However, there are language barriers in and out of school. The fact that English is only really spoken

on campus inconveniences international students, especially when they first arrive in the country. Thus, students find themselves having to learn Swedish to be able to move about in society more effectively. Respondents explained that learning a new language like Swedish is a disadvantage for them.

S3 expressed his frustration towards the Swedish language:

“...there is only one disadvantage coming to Sweden that is the language, I need to learn another language which is not something I like to do...”

This suggests that the teaching language as well as the language spoken outside of the university plays a role when considering study destination choices.

International environment

According to the respondents, an international study environment is important for them in selecting their HE abroad. The GU presents itself as an international university that welcomes students from a variety of diverse cultures and creates an image of an international study environment. Some respondents suggest that the internationalisation of a university can be perceived via its website, for instance, the availability of different languages for users and images of students from worldwide. The majority of the respondents show appreciation for the opportunity to experience new cultures and chances to move to a new country. They are excited to meet classmates from different countries and experience a diverse background in an international environment.

S2 expressed her excitement about fellow classmates:

“...how my fellow students are, I would very much like to have very diversity background of my fellow students. For example, they are from different countries; they are from different background that can create an environment that I can exchange a lot of different ideas.”

The majority of the respondents comment that cultural issues are not important factors when considering their study destination abroad. However, their excitement that they express in experiencing a new culture or an international environment seem to suggest that cultural perspectives may be considered indirectly and influence them during their selection process.

Costs

All respondents are not affected by the introduction of tuition fees in Swedish HE and there is only one respondent in this study who is sponsored by scholarship provider. The majority of the respondents agree that the free tuition fee was one of the main reasons they chose to further studies in Swedish universities.

S8 explained the free tuition fee which influences her choices:

“...I searched and understood that in that year study in Sweden was cheap, I mean was free and I have some cousins here...All the factors are connected to each other.”

This is clear that cost is a direct factor that influences the respondents' decisions to study abroad with a selected HE institute. Besides tuition fees, living expenses are another type of cost that the respondents consider. The respondents suggest lower living expenses is one factor that influences their decision of HE study destination.

S2 detailed her reason to choose Sweden as a study destination:

"I chose Sweden because the living expenses in Sweden are lower compared to Norway."

On the other hand, a few respondents explain that free tuition fee is an added benefit for them in selecting HE abroad. It is more important that the programme is interesting than it is free. There are other ways to overcome this like scholarships.

S6 explained the reason he chose Sweden:

"...one of the factors that could be is that education is free here but I mean this is not the main factors, is one of the added factors you can say because I have got an admission in another program, Erasmus program that would also been free, but I decided to study here. In fact that would give me scholarship..."

In other words, costs which include tuition fees and living expenses are important factors that influence international students' decision to study abroad. The availability of scholarships and financial aids allows students to have a broader range of choices and reduces the impact of cost has on their decision.

4.3 Social factors: Social network

The category social factors influence students as subjective information (opinions) that student receive through their social networks. The data analysis indicates that a student's social network influences his or her decision in selecting HE abroad. A student's network consists of his or her connections with people around him or her, for examples, social network like family, friends, and academic network like former professors and staff from prospective HE institutes. This section is divided into family and friends, former professors and student testimonials.

Family and friends

The majority of the respondents have social ties, either family, relatives or friends in Sweden which seem to affect their decision of study destination. The information and recommendations that come from respondents' family and friends are perceived as 'trustworthy' and thus have a strong influence on perceptions.

S6 shared his experience about people that influence his decision:

"...my friends who already studying here they provided information and feedback about the study standard here and how good it is..."

Even though all respondents emphasise that their decision to choose their HE abroad was entirely their own, feedback or discussion with their family and friends indirectly influence their perceptions about a programme, a university or a country. Some respondents suggest their social network influences the speed in which they made their decision to study abroad, rather than impacting on their choice of study destination or programme.

Former professors

A few respondents highlight that recommendations from their former bachelor programme professors may sway their decision as to where to further their study. These recommendations seem to trigger curiosity in some students to search for more information about the recommended programme or university abroad. In other words, what a professor says is seen to be credible and thus becomes trustworthy information.

S8 shared his professor's recommendation:

"...I was told by my professor about the KTH Sweden [university in Stockholm] is among the best technical university about the aerospace engineering study. Actually before I found this master program, I already know KTH Sweden from my professor."

This indicates the information that the respondents gathered from their former professors seems to influence their decision indirectly. A student's awareness and knowledge about a study destination in advance seem to determine their choices of programme and study destination.

Student testimonials

Student testimonials about current students who are studying in a programme via the university website have a certain impact to the respondents. Most of them refer to the idea that experiences and views from current students provide a better and more objective idea about student life in the programme, university and country. This information seems to be especially trustworthy if they come from the same cultural background and home country.

S1 volunteered to share her own personal experiences with prospective students:

"When somebody from my country applies for this university and sees a person from his or her country is talking something about the university that will be attractive for that person."

Even though the majority of respondents comment that culture is not a factor that influences their HE abroad, this seems to suggest that some cultural aspects are being taken into consideration indirectly or in other words, implicitly.

4.4 Overview of factors

Figure 1 provides an overview of the three main factors and their sub-categories. From this illustration it is clear that the factors at all levels are very much interlinked.

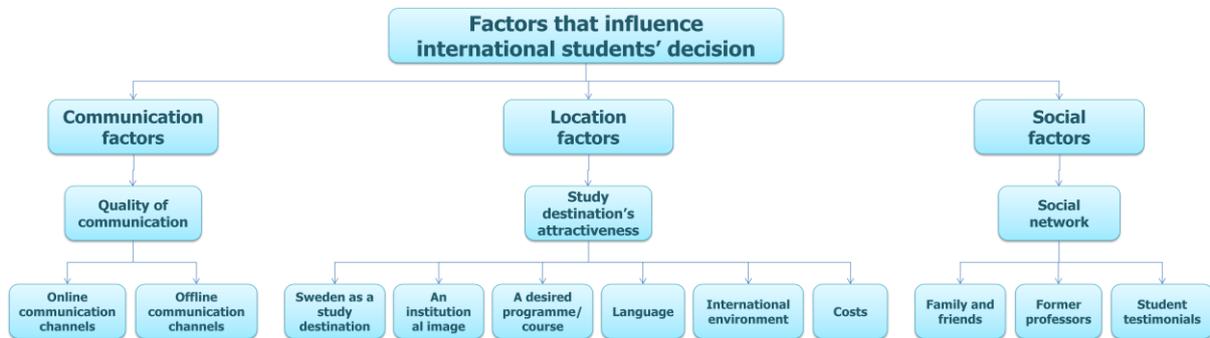


Figure 1: Overview of the factors and sub-factors that influence international students' decision on study destination.

4.5 Findings from GU staff interviews

Sweden is an attractive study destination for international students worldwide. According to respondents, Swedish HE has a good reputation for its quality education, study environment and experiences, besides the free tuition fee earlier. Different departments have various good qualities in promoting their HE towards international students; among them are the Swedish design, Scandinavian way of business and successful field of research. Some departments expressed the importance of maintaining the programs' quality for students to have good experiences. Following the introduction of tuition fees, the University of Gothenburg is at the start of changing the way they work with international marketing to recruit international students. There are various challenges faced by the central unit and other different departments to implement strategies.

Challenges faced by the central unit

The decentralisation of the university is a challenge for the central unit. There are different departments that carried out different strategies and activities to attract international students. Sometimes, the central unit was not aware of the current activities or strategies. Difficulties arise in coordinating them as the central unit has no power over others.

A mix of online and offline communications is a preferred strategy by the central unit. However, they face technical limitations in improving the website, despite many good ideas. They hope to have interaction functions on the university website like chat forum, frequently asked questions and a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system which provides easier staff-student communication. In addition, it is difficult to create a website that appeals to different nationalities and culture.

With a limited budget, the central unit faces difficulties marketing the university because it provides a wide range of programmes. One possible solution is to target specific student groups in order to address the problem of promoting the university as a whole and budget wise.

Challenges faced by different departments

Different departments have increased their awareness about the importance of internationalisation as well as a need to market the university and their programmes more widely following the introduction of tuition fees. This is the first time they work to attract international students (EU and non-EU students). When there was no tuition fee, this effort was unnecessary. They suggest that the university needs to take a bold step to inform prospective students about the positive information of the country, city and the university.

The financial and human resources are also challenges to overcome by different departments. There are departments with only one international master program; therefore they are careful in spending for marketing. There are difficulties to provide services which take care of students' welfare like accommodation for international students in comparing with other competitors, though it is a widely known issue. They suggest the need for younger employees who are bold and born with technology at the university to follow competitors' strategies and attract international students actively. Some departments commented that the university website is user unfriendly, especially to the first timer. There are several steps before reaching the information that the user desires. Text overload is another concern to avoid dullness. They also think the English version of the university website is currently poorly maintained and it is important to have an attractive English website which is easy to navigate with authentic images to present the university as an international environment.

Another challenge is to provide more scholarships for non-EU international students. The obvious drop of non-EU applications changes the student population; instead there are more European students as it is still free for them. Different departments rely on the university to provide more financial and scholarships services to non-EU international students. However, they show uncertainty in directing their effort to attract either non-EU international students or non-paying EU students which may be more rewarding.

In addition, different departments face cultural issues in recruiting international students. The first important step for them is to learn and understand students from different cultures in order to compete with strong competitors like Australia, UK and US.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, the research findings are discussed in light of the literature review and suggestions for future research. It will end with practical implications to Swedish HE institutes in general, especially with GU in mind.

International HE institutes across the globe are currently experiencing increased competitions to attract international students. There is clearly a need for more explicit knowledge about what underpins students' decision of study destination. While there are many factors that influence international students' decision, this study indicates it is possible to delineate three interrelated categories of factors including communication, location and social factors. The implications of these are discussed in light of the current literature.

In this digital age, the Internet has becoming an increasingly important tool for communication. This study highlighted that the category communication factors influence students' decision of study destination to a great extent and Google is an important search engine among the respondents. This may relate to the fact that early research was conducted during the period where the Internet was not as common and important as today. This study also supports previous research which shows that nearly half the students locate an institution's website by search engines (Gomes & Murphy, 2003). In light of this, HE institutions would benefit from making their websites available in major search engines to attract international students.

The category communication factors show that the interaction between students and the university seem to have an important effect on students' perception on whether a study destination is worth applying to. While this has been less emphasized in early research, it may relate to the fact that students expect more from university website than before. Email correspondence for information and high expectation on the level of information on websites may explain the results found in this study. It is clear that the respondents value the pre-connection with their HE institutes and the email responses they received. This suggests that the HE institutes need to prioritize in providing a prompt, polite and personal email reply which matches Gomes and Murphy's (2003) suggestions. Interestingly, the respondents commented that if they receive no reply from the university that they sent their inquiries, they would not doubt the education quality of the university; instead they have doubts about the administrative capabilities of the university. This may suggest that the email correspondence represent the university's 'image' indirectly which may influence students' decision to apply.

In considering the importance of web content, HE institutes should be aware that the content they think might be important to students might differ from what students think is important to them. The content displayed on a university website should satisfy prospective students with the information they desire. The respondents highlight that the importance of sufficient and updated content available

on the website especially information about programmes, institute, city, country and financial aids. However, this contradicts with Petruzzellis and Romanazzi's (2010) study that traditional university promotional tools such as the website and other written material are insignificant in students' choice and decision making. Does this show that the education marketers need to re-consider the channels used in marketing international HE? It is perhaps important for education marketers to understand their international student market which is growing and developing from time to time, including both the importance of the availability and accuracy of information.

This study suggests that web content especially information about an interesting programme is more important compared to web design of a university's website. Some respondents highlighted that a university website should remain 'simple yet attractive' with pictures and videos. Interestingly, this is unparallel with the central unit's idea that it is important to have an attractive website that grabs attention as they suggest that prospective students 'cruise' around various websites. In addition, it is interesting to find that both the students and GU staff respondents express the same idea which is a need for interactive channels, especially synchronous communication channels. Facebook, Skype and Instant message are recommended, so that students can interact with the university in real time. The suggestion of Facebook confirms early research that shows that Facebook is the current choice of networking platform for prospective students and HE institutes (Wankel, 2009). Some respondents recommend that Facebook is a good channel for prospective students because prospective students have no access to the university's portal or account. Facebook perhaps could function as a platform for prospective students and HE institutes to communicate effectively.

Education marketers might need to engage themselves more actively with social media because research shows that the majority of students are frequent social media users; social media is less frequently used for academic purposes (Aghaee, 2010). Early research interestingly pointed out the limitations and negative aspects of using social media in academia; for examples, the loss of non-verbal communication like body language; technical problems like power failure and internet connections which will postpone the interactions; and the downside of relying on social media, like less creative thinkers (Aghaee, 2010). HE institutes perhaps should not neglect the importance of offline communication. Despite the fact that the majority of communication is 'online' nowadays, the respondents who had offline communication with prospective HE institute appreciated the opportunity to meet before they made their decisions.

In considering the fact that to attract international students, a well-established English website is important. According to some of the respondents, the English website of the university is difficult for the first timer user to navigate and poorly maintained at the moment. The availability of different languages on the university website should be taken into account to cater for international students' needs if the study destination's national language is not English. In light of this, HE institutions perhaps could pay more attention to develop a website which allows effective communication on the

global student market (Chirkova, 2011). The use of asynchronous communications like online alumni community (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) provides a good cyber space venue for past and prospective students to share experiences and provide recommendations. HE institutes could create a 'frequently asked questions' page on their website which would benefit both prospective students and university staff as information is easier to deal with; students could more easily search for information while university staff could handle a broader range of questions more efficiently.

The category location factors appear to have an important impact on students' decision of study destination. The respondents show different opinions about Sweden as an attractive study destination, among them are the country itself, the lifestyle and institution's ranking. This may relate to the fact that knowledge and awareness of study destination influence international students' decision of study destination to certain extent. HE management also need to maintain and improve the quality of their HE to be placed highly in the HE industry. The idea of 'value for money' (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010) in early research indicates the importance of quality HE and institutional image which entails an institute's ranking and employment opportunities after graduation in attracting international students.

In order to attract international students, HE institutes could provide a better care and service quality in terms of information and facilities (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010) to increase international students' satisfaction and loyalty. Maringe (2006) suggests the three top reasons students choose courses and subjects of study are no longer related to interest and love for the subjects of study. However, this study indicates that the respondents' interest to a specific programme/course is an important factor that influences their decision which is contradicts with Maringe's. HE institutes perhaps need to understand the interest of their student market in order to market their programmes/courses more effectively.

Early research (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Counsell, 2011) suggest that one main reason for choosing to study in Australia, the UK and US is to improve English proficiency and skills. This study shows that the respondents find themselves experiencing a language barrier at the university and having to learn Swedish to be able to move about in society more effectively. This may indicate that disadvantages of learning new language is an influencing factor that international students consider when deciding to apply for their HE abroad.

In relations to the factors that influencing students' decision of study destination, the data analysis shows evidence which is supported by early research that costs is another important and practical factor especially following the introduction of tuition fees in Swedish HE. It is an essential factor, even though in this study all respondents are excluded from the fees, it remains an important influencing factor because there are other costs such as living expenses that they considered. While it is not surprise that costs is an important factor, HE management could focus on providing more

financial aids and scholarships (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Bodycott, 2009) to assist prospective students to be able to have options to further study abroad. Interestingly, few respondents highlight that free tuition fees is an additional bonus; the quality of the HE is more important. This is surprising because these respondents place the highest concerns to the programme they are interested and indicates that there are others solutions to overcome concerns with regards to other factors such as costs.

The category social factors are surprising because the respondents place less priority to these aspects in this study. All respondents claimed that they made their final decision independently for HE abroad, this is quite different from what early research suggests about family and friends influences. Parental role (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) and pressure are highlighted as influencing the decision making of their children HE abroad, especially the Chinese parents (Lee & Morrish, 2011) and Indian parents. It is also interesting to find that the central unit's plan to target parents during the education fairs and exhibitions abroad like China and India results in focusing on both students and parents as target audiences. Perhaps this is a good strategy for the central unit to overcome financial, technical and human resources limitations by focusing on selected target group.

Recently, more research has highlighted culture issues in HE sector (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Chung et al., 2009; Counsell, 2011; Lee & Morrish, 2011). This is interesting because among the important factors that influence the respondents' decisions, the majority of them indicate that culture issues are unimportant factors to consider when selecting their HE study destination. However, this study suggests that, in fact, they consider culture issues indirectly or even implicitly. For instance, the teaching language used in the study destination, images of different international students on the university website and information about social activities besides student life are among the factors they considered in selecting HE abroad. These indicate a concern for culture among international students and this is when appropriate and effective communications come into play.

When communicating via the Internet, culture should be emphasised because users and prospective students come from worldwide. It is difficult to create a website design which appeals to all cultures compare from a technical perspective because it is not about direct translation of different languages (Chirkova, 2011). Perhaps HE institutes could design a portion of their website to target international students (Gomes & Murphy, 2003), for instance, a portion called 'for prospective students'. Education marketers might consider early research findings (Würtz, 2006) by considering high-context and low-context cultures in designing their institute's website.

The data analysis argues that there are several groups of factors that influence international students' decision of study destination abroad. It is important to understand the motivations and reasons international students choose certain programmes/courses at a specific university. This is central to

how universities position themselves in the HE sector. This study shows that Sweden is an attractive study destination for international students worldwide. Following the introduction of tuition fee, GU is at the start of changing the way they work with international marketing to recruit international students. Academic collaboration is suggested as an effective way to attract international students to come to Sweden as an exchange student without paying, despite the fact of challenges which include decentralisation, limited financial and human resources.

5.1 Practical implications for Swedish HE institutions

The implication for Swedish HE institutes is that education marketers need to consider factors that are known to influence international students' decision-making. This is new for Swedish HE because for the first time they have to market their education to attract international students, in particular non-EU students following the introduction of tuition fees. One important step is to craft a common marketing communication strategy to create an awareness of institutions and programmes internationally. At the same time, Swedish HE institutes could focus on investing in research and ensuring the quality of education (Chen, 2007). HE institutes might consider devoting more efforts and resources to the internationalisation of HE (Chen, 2007). Another option is to collaborate with host countries to attract prospective students (Lee & Morrish, 2011), for instance, collaborations with agencies and embassies of respective host countries.

HE institutes could pay more attention to students' email inquiries with relationship-building in mind; this increases students' satisfaction as well as provides quality service. Training employees to provide standard email response time and format for email inquiries from students (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) is one option. Among all communication channels used by HE institutes to communicate with prospective students, online channels in real time, in particular, Instant Chat, Facebook and Skype could be focused on. Even though interaction online has been emphasized in this study, offline communication should not be disregarded in attracting prospective students. A strong alumnus could be a valuable source of referral for HE institutes with consideration family and friends' recommendation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Swedish HE institutes could deliberate thoroughly about the availability and accuracy of information on their website (Soo & Elliott, 2010), especially those information that prospective students desire along with concerns for web design and functionality focus on easy for navigation. There is also a need to develop and maintain websites in English to target international students. In addition, more effort could be placed on increasing students' satisfaction (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010) by taking care of their welfare, such as scholarships and accommodation supports.

HE institutes could provide training to programme coordinators and students counsellors with cultural sensitivities highlighted. For example, training with student groups that represent different culture is

an option to understand students' and their parents' motivation and concerns when selecting HE abroad. Swedish HE could consider impact of parental influence towards international students from different cultures in designing their marketing communication strategies.

5.2 Recommended actions for GU

The data analysis of this study provides recommendation from students and GU staff respondents with regards to GU include the need to adapt their marketing communications and recruitment strategies following the introduction of tuition fees.

Recommendations from students

The recommendations gathered from the respondents' suggestions are mainly focused on quality of both online and offline communication. In particular, interactive channels like instant chat, social media like Facebook and Skype are highlighted as important channels for prospective students to connect to HE institutes. The instant chat service with certain available hours weekly would be good, especially before the application datelines. Instant chat service with graduated students or alumni is suggested to provide more objective answers for prospective students.

They highlight that the importance of updated information on the university website. The out-of-date information creates anxiety for students upon arrival in Sweden for the registration. The university may need to consider providing a reliable contact sheet with clear responsibility on the main webpage to avoid communications frustration, either via online (email) or offline communication (phone). This benefits both current and prospective students to contact the right person with the right contact, instead only the central administration contact is provided. There are a few respondents who volunteer to share their experiences and tacit knowledge via recorded video clips to prospective students.

The respondents suggest that the university could provide a university email account which represents their names because that motivates them to use it. In addition, the university should be aware about the different types of online channels used in communicating with current students. They show concerns for overloaded channels which create miscommunications among students and the university.

Despite most of the communication is 'online', the respondents suggest offline communication channels like education fairs and exhibitions, seminars held at embassies in different countries still play an important role for many prospective students.

Recommendations from GU staff

The university could design a common communication strategy to recruit international students in order to overcome the decentralisation of the university. Close cooperation between the central unit and other departments is important to tackle this issue. The first step for the university to improve their communication with prospective students is to provide faster response speed and better services

which cater to international students' welfare like scholarships and accommodation supports. The university has to overcome the technical limitation in designing the website to address the concern to provide a more interactive website. In addition, an English website is important when targeting international students.

GU staff might need to place more focus on online communication channels to promote the university and programmes because the majority of the student respondents used Google for information search. Online communication channels with the interaction functions suggested are instant chat, most frequently asked questions and service for material ordering. Despite the importance of online communication channels, offline communication channels should not be neglected, for instance, by sending professors and ambassadors abroad to promote the university and programmes. Concurrently, the university needs to maintain and create more partnerships with universities worldwide in order to attract more international students. Hence, there is a need to maintain a programmes' quality in order to provide good education as well as more financial aids towards non-EU international students.

Flexibility in modifying programmes based upon students' feedback from time to time is crucial because students' perspectives are important to take into consideration in order to provide better quality education. The GU provides a wide range of studies; with limited budget it is extremely difficult to promote all ranges to the whole international HE market group. Therefore, targeting a specific student group is an option as well as starting relationship-building. At the same time, there is a need for personnel and staff with the right knowledge and work actively to attract international students, especially via online communications channels. In order to be competitive in the HE market, the university should keep up with their competitors in terms of new marketing activities. Understanding students' needs from diverse cultures and country of origin is one important step for the university to take in order to compete with competitors like Australia, UK and US which has been working longer and harder in attracting international students.

5.3 Suggestions for future research

This study identified factors that influence international students' decision of study destination which aims to provide the university some practical implications to direct their marketing and recruitment strategies in attracting international students. There is limited understanding in this area, therefore this study is conducted to fill the gap. Here are some suggestions for future research.

Future research could replicate this study in different HE institutes for a longer period, as HE institutes change their marketing strategies and student groups change as well. In addition, consideration for a more random sample might provide better observation of changes through a longer period to achieve consistency and draw conclusions. Further, investigating factors of a selected student group provides more in-depth insight and meaningful result rather than superficial study

which focus on the overall picture. Besides, focus could be placed on surveying the factors that the present study identified to establish whether there is a correlation between the factors as well as whether the links are statistically significant. This could be conducted with the initial plan of this study by using electronic survey for students.

More research needs to be conducted in order to evaluate websites to measure their usability, functionality and design for students because websites are an important channel that students use to search for information. Concurrently, HE institutes could address cultural issues which are highlighted in early research. For instance, from a demographic perspective to show how students search for information online and response to an institution's email reply. The availability of electronic surveys in different languages might tackle the common language issues raised.

A comparison of online customer services provided by different HE institutes in different countries like Asia, Europe, and America could be conducted to address the similarities and differences. This might provide an insight for the HE institutions to cater to the students' needs and satisfaction with better matched marketing strategy. Future research could investigate the influence of celebrities in HE abroad, for instance role models in students' home countries, politicians, and artists in the entertainment business

Future research could address the similarities and differences between prospective students (purchase intentions) and international students (purchase decisions). This study interviewed students which were not affected by the fees; future research could investigate international students who have to pay.

5.4 Study Limitations

While contributing valuable information and insights to the area of international student mobility, this study has a number of limitations. The sample size is small and the application of convenient sampling was limiting, hence the findings may not be generalised to other universities in Sweden and beyond. Further, only current GU staff was invited to take part this study in 2012. If this study is repeated in the future, it might provide different information and perspectives because the interviewed GU staff might leave their current positions and GU might found better strategies and change their current one towards international students over the time.

Even though this study is limited to small numbers of staff, different roles at GU, it provides positive and broader perspectives. Unfortunately, this might be the limitation for this study as well because no generalization could be applied to any specific departments. There were student interviewees who were self-sponsored and sponsored by scholarships which might provide different factors that influenced their decision in selecting HE abroad. Further, there were student interviewees who had or would be joining a second Swedish university for second master and their perspectives had changed.

6. Conclusions

The competitiveness in the international HE sector is notable; and affects the Swedish HE, particularly following the introduction of tuition fees. This study set out to explore factors that influence international master students' decision of study destination abroad drawing from students' perspectives. The findings indicate three groups of factors that influence international students' decision on study destination, which include *communication*, *location* and *social* factors. The sub-categories of these factors entail *quality of communication*, *study destination's attractiveness* and *social network*. The data analysis demonstrates that it is important to understand the motivations and reasons international students choose certain programmes/courses at a specific university. The major contribution of this study is to highlight the significance of the category communication factors which has an important influence on international students' decision of study destination. In light of this, GU might need to consider the recommended actions and practical implications to formulate their marketing communication strategy to meet the target students more effectively. Overall, this study contributes to improve the understanding of the various factors that underpin students' decision with regards to choosing study destination. This knowledge is a key to formulating effective communication and recruitment strategies for HE institutes to attract international students.

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Appendix

1.1 Semi-structured interview questions – students

Introduction

This research is conducted to obtain an understanding of the factors that influence international students' decision for higher education abroad.

Opening questions

1. Please tell me about yourself.

[Probing Question] Where are you from?

[Probing Question] Which university you are studying?

[Probing Question] What program?

Experiences with current university

1. Please describe the process of choosing your current university.

[Probing Question] How did you discover your university?

[Probing Question] Via the Internet or print?

2. Why did you choose your current program and country?

[Probing Question] Which factors that influence?

3. Did you communicate with your current university before you applied? (or after you received the offer from the university)

[Probing Question] What communication channels did you use?

[Probing Question] Did the university reply your inquiry?

[Probing Question] How long did the university take to reply your email enquiry?

[Probing Question] Did you use other channels?

4. Before you arrived to the university, describe your experiences with the online communication with your current universities?

[Probing Question] To what extent were you satisfied?

5. After you arrived at the university, describe your experiences of online communication with the university?

[Probing Question] To what extent were you satisfied?

6. After you arrived at the university, describe your experiences of offline (face-to-face) communication with the university?

[Probing Question] To what extent were you satisfied?

Students' perceptions upon importance factors

1. In your opinion, how does the email response influence your decision to enrol with the university?

2. In your opinion, how did you perceive the posted information on the (your) university's website?

[Probing Question] Was it sufficient?

3. What are the most important factors for you in selecting overseas higher education?

4. What is the key factor for your decision of overseas higher education?

[Probing Question] If it would be a person, who would that be?

Suggestions to the university

1. What types of information do you think are important to be available on the university's website for prospective students?

2. What are your suggestions for how the university can improve its online communication to prospective students?

[Probing Question] Design of the website?

[Probing Question] Interaction?

3. Would you recommend or promote your university to your friends, family or anyone?

[Probing Question] What method of communication would you use?

1.2 Semi-structured interview questions – for GU staffs

Introduction

This research is conducted to obtain an understanding of the online marketing communication for master programmes at University of Gothenburg in attracting international students.

Opening questions

1. Can you describe your role in the department?

[Probing Question] How long have you been working at GU?

Current online marketing campaigns

1. What are the current online marketing campaigns / activities that your department are working with in attracting prospective international students?

[Probing Question] Are there any differences between attracting international students for bachelor and master programmes?

[Probing Question] Are there any differences between different master programmes?

2. What channels do you use to communicate?

3. Can you give me an example of recent online marketing campaigns to prospective students? (If not what other type of marketing has been used?)

4. Besides online marketing, is there any other ways of marketing your department done in attracting new students?

[Probing Question] Can you please provide me with some examples?

5. How do you communicate with prospective international students?

6. What are the main differences between the marketing strategies for home students, students comes from within Europe and international students (Non-EU)?

7. What do you think are the most important factors in attracting international students to study at University of Gothenburg through online marketing communication?

[Probing Question] Does the design and attractiveness of the website important?

[Probing Question] What kind of information do you think is important to be available for students?

Online marketing communication

1. From your perspective: How has the introduction of tuition fees influenced the way you work?

2. How has the introduction of tuition fees for international students outside Europe (Non-EU), influenced the way you promote master programmes?

3. If there is a change, what is it? How does it work?

4. How long will the online marketing campaigns takes?

[Probing Question] How often do you change or modify in implementing your strategies?

5. What kind of marketing strategies do you suggest is effective, especially in online channel?

Cultural dimension

1. Do you consider cultural issues in your online communication to international students? (for instance, slogans, language, photos, design of the website, colour)

[Probing Question] How do you think that cultural issues should be taken care in your department?

[Probing Question] What are your department's strategies in tackling cultural issue?

Future challenges

1. Given the current situation with tuition fees for international students, what challenges do you face in term of marketing? (online marketing)