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Abstract

Previous studies of Higher Education decision-making has focused on home-based students in English-speaking countries as opposed to international students. Hence, this study investigated Taiwanese students' use of information regarding their decision-making of business Master's degrees. Taiwanese students studying in Taiwan and Taiwanese students studying in the UK were used in this study to contrast the similarities and differences between the use of university-provided information of home-based and international students.

In the literature review, the under-informed students and the information gaps identified were presented. The study employed qualitative data collection of interviews and observations to investigate how participants used the university-provided information sources to find the information they needed in making Master's choices. Template Analysis and MAXqda were used to analyse the data.

This study found information provided by universities was less influential to both the TW and the UK group when compared to other non-marketing stimuli information sources, especially those from reference groups and current students/alumni, as information provided by universities was seen by most respondents to be less

trustworthy. Hence, university-provided information was only used by participants for the "facts" about universities, rather than to evaluate how good the universities were. When respondents of both groups wanted to know about the reputation of the courses, they preferred to ask "experienced students" who had attended that course or university, whose information was seen as more reliable and objective than other sources.

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Introduction

Previous studies of Higher Education (HE) decision-making has focused on home-based students in English-speaking countries especially in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK (i.e. Veloutsou *et al*., 2005; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Brooks, 2004; Christie *et al.,* 2004; Reay *et al.,* 2005), as opposed to international students (Hill *et al.,* 1992; O'Neill, 1995; Pimpa, 2003). Few studies have concentrated on Asian students' HE decision-making (Gray *et al*., 2003; Pimpa, 2004). More specifically, the HE decision-making of Taiwanese students has received limited attention (Weng, 2000; Chen and Zimitat, 2006).

Located in South East Asia, although comparatively not a geographically sizable country, Taiwan has been one of the main markets for international student recruitment (Maslen, 1998). In the past 25 years, the number of Taiwanese students studying overseas has increased from 3,000 to 33,000. Also, the most popular host countries for Taiwanese students to study include the USA, the UK and Australia (the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, 2007). Hence, Taiwanese students were specifically chosen in this study.

The majority of studies have focused on undergraduate, as opposed to postgraduate

students (notable exceptions are Ivy, 2008; Kallio, 1995; Webb and Allen, 1994). Most research has adopted a quantitative approach, involving large student surveys without looking into how information sources were used by prospective students.

Some previous studies (Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003) have used decision-making theories of consumer behaviour to explain students' HE choices. However, most literature on the HE decision-making process has been undertaken from an institutional marketing or recruitment perspective, focusing on students' background and institutional (i.e., high school or college) characteristics (McDonough, 1997). Less research has been carried out from the perspective of potential students' HE decision-making, especially on their information search. Although identifying applicants' demographic and academic characteristics are important, universities cannot intervene to change or affect students in these respects. Universities may nevertheless have more control on the information they provide to potential students.

As the access to accurate and timely information is critical in helping students achieve their post-secondary educational and/or career goals (Orfield and Paul, 1994), it is important to understand more about applicants' use of information. However, a gap

exists between what information and guidance students need in order to make a successful HE choice and the actual information provided to them (Ray, 1992). Therefore, this study has investigated students' use of university-provided information and the effects of that information on their HE decision-making. Three research questions were posed:

✧ How is university-provided information used by students in the HE decision-making process?

✧ How influential is university-provided information to students' HE decision-making process?

✧ What affects the influential level of university-provided information from students' perspectives?

In this study, two groups of students were selected, namely, Taiwanese students studying Master's business programmes in Taiwan (TW group) and Taiwanese students studying Master's business programmes in the United Kingdom (UK group), in order to compare the differences between their use of university-provided information.

Literature review

The five steps of consumer decision-making processes typically include (1) need recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) choice, and (5) outcome evaluation (Engel *et al.*, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Information search, the second stage of the decision-making process, can be defined as the knowledge stored in the memory or the acquisition of information from the environment (Engel *et al*,. 1995), which means it can be either internal or external in nature. *Internal search* refers to consumers' memory scan of decision-relevant knowledge stored in the long-term memory, and it occurs prior to the external search. If this internal search provides sufficient information, consumers' external search will be very limited (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997).

In making HE choices, *external search* starts when students turn to either marketing (commercial) or non-marketing (non-commercial) information sources to obtain information they need about a university and/or course comparisons (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Moogan and Baron, 2003). Information search is not restricted to a specific point in time within a decision process. Rather, it involves every phase of the decision process (Hwang *et al*., 2002). Whenever customers feel they have insufficient information, they may extend their search and integrate new information

with retained information from previous searches. Consumers start to utilise internal memories to list alternative products once they recognise their purchase needs. If the list of alternatives from memory is not satisfactory, they start to search for information from external sources, which may include personal, marketer-oriented and neutral sources (Crotts, 1999).

The third stage of consumer decision-making, *alternative evaluation,* is where consumers evaluate available alternative choices based on the likely benefits the products or services could offer (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). The evaluation stage in the HE setting is problematic for applicants, as it is difficult for potential students to know how good a particular university course is prior to enrollment. An additional problem is that universities present themselves very positively in their promotional literature (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004), and this makes an informed, unbiased evaluation even harder for potential students.

Under-informed students

The literature reveals that potential students feel that their search for the best HE is difficult, because the volume of data they need to access is huge (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Although information volume is large, some studies demonstrate that students'

HE choices were often made in a poorly-informed situation (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; James, 2000). Non-traditional students in Australia, including those from low-SES, disabled, and rural backgrounds, tended to be poorly informed in making HE choices, in terms of their access to information related to fields of studies, courses and universities, and the quality of teaching (James, 2000). The explanation for this is that there was an information gap between the information students wanted and the information that had been provided by universities in their print communications (Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Christie *et al.,* 2004).

In the information search, the quantity of data which needs to be absorbed may lead to confusion for some students, for they find it difficult to retain and recall these facts and figures at a later date. This has been attributed to the sheer volume of information as well as the conflicting opinions from various personnel and the large number of universities available in the first instance (Moogan and Baron, 2003). In terms of the improvements of information sources, students want a single point of contact that can answer their queries immediately (Hesketh and Knight, 1999). Students want a realistic picture of what life will be like at the potential university and they would like to achieve this through meeting current students, watching videos of actual class sessions, and meeting academic and administrative staff (ibid.). However, students

still have different information needs as individuals. For example, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds want more specific information than other applicants (Connor and Dewson, 2001).

The provision of adequate information to students is important, as when students are under or misinformed, this affects not only their HE decision-making but also their academic performance after enrolment. Yorke (1999) asserts that university students need a wide variety of quality information to succeed academically, and 39% out of 4,000 students withdrawing said they had initially selected the wrong programme. It is therefore important to find out whether there are any problems regarding the university-provided information that students have received, leading them to unsuitable programmes.

The main information gaps that have been identified from previous studies rest largely on academic and practical aspects of the programme, including an indication of the required workload, the opportunity to talk with someone possessing detailed knowledge about the course (Martinez and Munday, 1998), career guidance (Hesketh and Knight, 1999), course timetables, examples of the kind of work students would be

expected to do (Martinez and Munday, 1998), financial aspects, the likely benefits for future employment (Connor and Dewson, 2001), and how well students' capabilities are suited for the course (Krampf and Heinlein, 1981).

During the search stage, university information is needed most, especially in terms of quality of the institution, campus life and the availability of subjects (Bourke, 2000; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Furthermore, in the choice stage, information on costs and institutional characteristics, including course content, location, and reputation, is most important for students (Qureshi, 1995; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Although information on financial aspects was much needed, students generally felt information regarding the costs was insufficient for them (Kern, 2000).

Methodological issues

The majority of existing studies designed to investigate the HE decision-making process have employed either a positivist or post-positivist approach to inquiry. The resulting research has been dominated by statistical analysis and researcher-driven explanations rather than offering students' perspectives on their experiences as HE decision-makers. Also, as students' information search is a largely under-researched

phenomenon, a qualitative method is suitable to explore and explain what students'

activities and thoughts regarding their information search, and more novel

understandings and complex details can also be gained (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The research reported here is a small part of research undertaken for a PhD on

Taiwanese students' information search in the selection of a business Master's degree.

The PhD used focus groups, observations and individual interviews with students,

educational agents, alumni and university recruiting representatives. However, the

findings reported here are based on the data from individual interviews with students

and observations done within one educational agency. A total of 28 Taiwanese

students were interviewed, including 8 current and 8 potential MA business students

for the UK group and another 8 current and 4 potential MA business students for the

TW group.

In terms of the selection of the current students, two universities in Taiwan and two

universities in the UK were selected first, four volunteers were recruited from each

university. In terms of the selection of the potential students for the UK group, four

students were recruited from a HE fair in Taiwan and four were volunteers from four

IELTS schools in Taiwan, whereas another four volunteers were recruited from two

cram schools that help students to get through Master's entrance exam. In the data analysis, Template Analysis and computer software, MAXqda, were used.

As the focus of this study is to understand the subjective world of students' information search and to explore students' individual HE decision-making behaviour, no attempt is made to generalise the findings but to seek to render complex and varied accounts of the insights (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992) related to Taiwanese students' information search and its impact on the HE decision-making process.

Findings

The findings from this study suggest that the Taiwanese group and UK group differ in the way they use university-provided information and, to a less extent, its influence in the decision making process.

The Taiwanese Group

The main university-provided information used by the Taiwanese (TW) group came from the university websites and application packs sent to participants. Taiwanese university websites were mainly used by participants to gather information regarding

teaching and learning, such as teacher subject expertise, course content and application process particulars. Since entrance examinations are the means by which graduates can enter Master's programmes in Taiwan, respondents typically said that they used university websites to "*...see the previous exam questions and the numbers of applicants at that university*" (CI, 21) while other respondents confirmed that they used the university website for additional information:

> *I looked at the teachers' specialties...the amount of teachers as well. University A was one of the universities that had the most teachers in the Information Management field. The most important considerations for me were the teachers and their reputation* (YU, 39-41).

However, it was also found that university-provided information did not influence the TW group's course/university evaluations as much as their internal information, especially in the stage of alternative evaluations. This was because the TW group had rich personal experiences from choosing undergraduate courses in Taiwan, and they had many reference groups contributing to their internal information. When the TW group had clear choice criteria for university evaluations and had several university alternatives in mind (internal information), less external information was accessed, including the information provided by universities.

Many respondents of the TW group expressed the wish to study their Master's degree at a university that was 'better' than the university at which they had studied their undergraduate programme. This preliminary perception of "going to a better university for a Master's degree" affected the Master's choices of the TW group very much, and only those universities that were seen as "better" than participants' previous universities of undergraduate degrees were preferred.

> *I had talked with friends and concluded that we needed to study Master's somewhere better than University R, our current university. If not, it's better we don't study Master's degrees. If you study somewhere worse than University R, doesn't this show you didn't study hard in your undergraduate degree? That's my feeling. I think it means your life is going down rather than going up* (BO, 56-57).

Many respondents of the TW group knew several alternative universities from their internal search, and had formed a mental list of preferred university alternatives in rank order. The internal rank list stored in participants' memory affected many of their Master's choices of where to apply. For example, one participant said,

> *Everyone has a list [of universities] in their minds based on what they heard*

from others during their four years of undergraduate study... we have all had

our own impressions on universities already... (YI, 85-86).

This mind map of university ranking differs slightly according to each individual

based on what internal information sources participants had come across, but their

preliminary perceptions on universities certainly affected their Master's choices

regarding potential universities for application.

Although the internal information affected the TW group more than the

university-provided information, it was still found that when respondents have more

understanding about what is going on at the university under consideration, they have

better impressions toward that university when seeing their website. This in turn

influenced enrolment choices.

> *Well, when I saw posters or online information about them [University B], I*
>
> *would then realise how they are teaching their students at the moment. For*
>
> *example, they use English to teach students. I would understand them*
>
> *[University B] more on how they teach students. But for other public*
>
> *universities, because they do not give such kind of information in their website, I*
>
> *don't understand how they teach their students* (CE, 44-50).

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Furthermore, as cram schools are often attended by many prospective students to assist their preparations for their Master's entrance exams, some Taiwanese universities arranged presentations at some cram schools to promote their Master's courses. A few respondents talked to current students from those courses in a more formal setting. Respondents might be attracted by the Master's courses of some universities if the presentations run by universities showed the benefits of attending that course. One respondent was attracted to a university after the presentation, because they offer "*students exchange programmes with overseas universities, and...their graduates...all have very good jobs*" (JI, 83). However, the influences from those presentations might be weak if respondents already had preliminary perceptions on that university.

> *I've been to Soochow University myself, so when they are saying how good they are in the presentations, I knew what it's like [sounds skeptical]. Their campus is very small. But if I hadn't gone to that university, and they said how good they are, I would be attracted more* (JI, 43-44).

Although respondents talked to current students at the cram school university presentations, their preliminary perceptions on Taiwanese universities still exerted

stronger impacts on their university evaluations, and many of the questions they asked

current students were about exam preparation, rather than their evaluation of courses.

For example, one respondent said, "*... Even though I asked some senior students*

questions [in those presentations], I also asked things regarding exam preparations,

and not much about their universities" (HU, 58-59).

Another type of information that was used by participants included university

application packs. However, when the TW group had rich internal information, only a

few respondents said that university application packs were essential as an

information source. For example, one respondent said, "*I didn't feel I needed much*

information when deciding where to take Master's exams. I didn't use other

information really, except the exam application forms" (HS, 77). Meanwhile another

respondent said,

> *Much information was more noise than information. I don't want to be affected*
>
> *by them at all. I only need the [university] application packs and what I had in*
>
> *mind to decide where to apply* (CI, 98-101).

Although application packs are seen as marketing-stimuli information sources in this

study, they actually had very limited influences on the consideration sets of the TW

group. Since entrance examinations are the means by which graduates can enter Master's programmes in Taiwan, the application packs that Taiwanese universities offer are very basic in terms of the provided information. Unlike the prospectuses provided by British universities, the application packs from Taiwanese universities simply include the application form and the exam subjects required to be taken by applicants, which should be considered as "requirements" rather than "promotional information" from universities. Overall, the information provided by Taiwanese universities had limited influences on the HE decision-making process of the TW group. Except the strong influences from rich internal information, another explanation on such a phenomenon was because the TW group's trust level on the university-provided information was lower than that of other information sources, such as the information from reference groups and current students/alumni.

Many interviewees of the TW group did not have positive perceptions of the information provided by Taiwanese universities as they felt these institutions only promote themselves, and this does not help them in the evaluation of alternatives. Information provided by universities was seen as less reliable information source, as official information provided by universities tended only to present details of the brighter sides of the university. For example, one respondent said, "*I don't trust*

university marketing, because I feel they are all false" (CI, 61). When using

information provided by Taiwanese universities, respondents indicated less trust than

information provided by other non-marketing stimuli sources, as they felt "*...the

information from their [universities] websites only told me good things about

themselves. I don't believe that very much*" (JI, 87).

The UK Group

The majority of the UK group used British university prospectuses, which gave

respondents information about living and tuition costs, and the campus environment.

The UK group cared more about campus life than the TW group as they were less

familiar with the living conditions in the UK than they would be with the conditions

in Taiwan.

> *When using the prospectuses, most of the time I look at the photos to find out*
>
> *about the universities. Like University D has no big campus, so their prospectus*
>
> *didn't show campus photos. They presented only the photos of the town. When*
>
> *seeing that, I would know University D has no campus. They [prospectuses]*
>
> *would also have photos for the computer rooms and library, so I could also get*
>
> *some feeling from those* (AM, 64).

From the information provided by British universities, several respondents of the UK group wanted to see campus photos. This supports the findings of Tumblin (2002) and James *et al.*, (1999) whereby students' choices are often made on general impressions of campus buildings, because when respondents see campus photos, general impressions were made about that university, and that image affects their Master's choices.

It is also interesting to see that when campus photos were not shown, respondents interpret this as "that university doesn't have a wonderful campus" rather than "nice photos of campus of that university were not included in prospectuses". Such a view might also indicate that the UK group did not trust the information provided by British universities, as the UK group's trust level on information from current students/alumni and educational agents were higher than that toward British universities.

> *…I only used their [universities] information about the curriculum and tuition fees. Fixed facts. I think universities still might give me brighter images about themselves, so I prefer to ask experienced students* (JO, 111-113).

> *I think their [universities] information was okay. Just like marketing your*

products to customers, universities need to package themselves to attract

customers, but we need to be aware whether they have over packaged

themselves...I would look at some facts that they cannot lie about, like Internet

access, the facilities, the library etc. I did pre-sessional courses first, so if I

came and found they were lying, I could transfer to another Master's course

later (TO, 68-70).

I only trust certain information like [details about] tuition and accommodation,

but not the living cost. The [estimated] living cost that University D provided

[on the website] was far from the truth, it was much more expensive than that!

[sounds annoyed] They did this probably because they really want to attract

students to study here (AM, 76).

Harker *et al.*, (2001) suggest that where a prospectus seems colourful and interesting,

it is more likely that students will pick it up and read it, this is also evidenced in this

study. When photos and/or the presentation of prospectuses attract respondents'

attention, their impression of that university improves, and the possibility in selecting

that university increases. Furthermore, some respondents used the prospectus to get to

know about the courses, including the course length and curriculum.

I saw the prospectuses from seven potential universities...I wanted to know more about course design, like what the core or optional modules are...I would try to compare the differences between the modules of each university. I wanted to have more choices on the optional modules. I wanted to have more modules related to marketing, which is more related to my [previous] work [experience] (JU, 74).

I just see whether the names of the module look good [from the prospectuses] [laughing]. I want a course to be practical, because I've been doing marketing [in my job] for four years, so I would like to get something useful out of study abroad (WN, 11-14).

The quality and presentation of prospectus also affected participants' perceptions of the universities. For example, one respondent said,

[I used prospectuses] to see how beautiful the pictures [of universities] are and how high-quality the print is [big laughter]. It's an image [of university]. If I want to learn marketing [course] in that university, I want to know whether that university does good marketing for themselves (BI, 64).

In addition to the prospectuses, the majority of respondents used university websites to learn about the courses and the university environment. In terms of course information, respondents had information from university websites about their curriculum, teachers' backgrounds, and the length of the course.

From the university websites, respondents also wanted to know about university and campus environments (general appearance) and facilities, (particularly the library), and the city/town environment.

> *I want to see the campus environment, but it's strange that not many university websites have many photos on campus. I want to know the size of the campus, how it looks etc. Also the city environment, the convenience of living, and how far it is from London [are additional considerations]* (LE, 34).

In addition, the promotional video clips within the university websites were used. Engel *et al*., (1995) suggests that information can be either in a verbal or visual form, and when the information is given visually, it can be through actual product/service demonstration. In the case of getting information via visual means, some respondents used video clips to "observe" the universities themselves.

> *When [current] students are talking [in the video clips], I would see how good*

their English is and how organised they are in their talks. In the university

websites, much information [from there] is similar between different universities,

but from the video clips, you could see their differences. How much did students

learn [from their study] and what are their lives like there? Videos can show this

(BI, 68).

Apart from prospectuses and websites, representatives of British universities, whom the UK group met at either HE fairs or in agents' offices, were also used by some interviewees. The UK group asked representatives questions about studying or living at that university, e.g. the curriculum, living environment or the ratio of students to lecturers. However, some questions like teaching course quality or career development of alumni were not raised with university representatives. A possible explanation of this relates to interviewees' lack of trust toward representatives, current students who were not paid by British universities could be seen as people who could offer fair and independent views.

It is possible that university representatives responsible for recruitment, might be affected by their role when providing prospective students information regarding their universities, as they want to attract prospective students to their courses/universities.

In observations conducted within one agency, two representatives from two British universities were in the agent's office talking to potential students. My observations [of the university representatives] were that they tried to be very friendly to the students, speaking English slowly and if students asked any questions, they tried their best to help, including showing them the prospectuses and explaining the situations in class (Agency G student observation, 61-62).

However, the information from university representatives could also be ambiguous, When discussing the location of University X, Student C said "*Birmingham is very near to London*", Representative E was a bit hesitant and then said "*yes, it's not far from London*".

I felt there might be some misunderstandings within student C's mind, because for a Taiwanese, a two hour journey is enough to travel half way across Taiwan. Student C might not know very much about where Birmingham is situated in the UK, so she described such a distance as "near" to London. However, although hesitant, representative E did not try to clarify and explain how far the distance really is. A possibility can be he does not want student C to lose interest in University X. Hence, although this might be a potential chance to reveal more reality of the UK situation to

student C, no action was taken by that university representative to correct her. On the other hand, it can also be said that using interpersonal information sources might raise potential problems to prospective students, as each individual might have bias or even personal interests when providing them information, which might also affect the accuracy of information provided to prospective students.

Discussion and implications of findings

Although previous studies suggest that there is a gap between the information students want and that provided by universities in their print communications (Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Christie *et al.,* 2004), such a gap was not found in this study. Participants of this study were generally happy with the information provided by universities.

Previous studies have however differed on whether or not the information provided by universities is influential in the HE decision making process. For example, James *et al.*, (1999) and Brennan (2001) suggested university-provided information sources were less influential than other types of sources, while Veloutsou *et al.*, (2005) and Moogan and Baron (2003) found they influenced prospective students' decision-making to some extent. This study found information provided by

universities was less influential to both the TW and the UK group when compared to other non-marketing stimuli information sources, especially those from reference groups and current students/alumni, as information provided by universities was seen by most respondents to be less trustworthy. Hence, university-provided information was only used by participants for the "facts" about universities, rather than to evaluate how good the universities were. When respondents of both groups wanted to know about the reputation of the courses, they preferred to ask "experienced students" who had attended that course or university, whose information was seen as more reliable and objective than other sources.

As both groups did not trust the information provided by universities, it is important for universities to try to provide more "trustworthy" information. Since participants of this study tended to feel universities only provided "positive" information about themselves, universities could look to provide information that potential students could evaluate themselves. For example, some respondents mentioned seeing video clips of teaching sessions or of campus environments on university websites, which could be perceived as a more reliable source from students' perspectives. In this way, prospective students could evaluate the visual information they see rather than just read the information written and presented by the universities.

Moreover, since the comments from experienced students on courses/universities were more trusted and preferred by potential students, universities should film short interviews/video clips with current students. These students could then offer comments on their learning experiences, which might help increase the perceived reliability of university-provided information from potential students' perspectives. Furthermore, university websites could include a discussion board for current and potential students to use, as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) is one of the most popular mediums used by Taiwanese participants to contact current students/alumni. Staff could also be employed to answer questions from current and prospective students' enquires to provide a more "personalised" service rather than "one for all" information.

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