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Factors influencing Indian student's choice of overseas study destination

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Abstract

There has been an increase in the number of students from India studying at Australian universities in Singapore. During the same period, there has been a corresponding decrease in the number of this group of students studying in Australia. The study thus seeks to understand why the current group of Indian students studying at an Australian University in Singapore has chosen to study in Singapore rather than at a campus in Australia. The research design employed a qualitative approach using focus group interviews and an online survey. The findings include a combination of factors and considerations influencing the choice of university and overseas study destination for students from India, the role of education service agents in India in influencing the decisions of these students and the demographic characteristics of students from India in Singapore. The study highlights future recommendations for universities in attracting and catering for students from overseas countries here and insert abstract your text. Insert an abstract of 50-100 words, giving a brief account of the most relevant aspects of the paper.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of students from India studying in Singapore (Ravinder, Brenda, & Ho, 2011). During the same period, there has been a corresponding decrease in the number of Indian students studying in Australia (Anonymous, 2010; Indian student immigration down in Australia, 2011; Monash Indian students say Australia is safe, 2010; Sharp decrease in Indian students to Australia, 2010). The study thus seeks to understand why many of the current group of Indian students studying at an Australian university in Singapore has chosen to study in Singapore rather than at a campus in Australia (Geoffrey & Mazzarol, 2002; Kyna, 2008; Rahman & Singh, 2010).

Harrison, Austin and Millar (2009) argue the number of Indian students who apply for visas to study in Australia has plunged dramatically, heightening fears for the nation's \$17 billion international education industry. The latest Immigration Department data, for the period from July to October 31 2009, shows a 46 per cent drop in overseas student visa applications from India compared with the same period in 2008 (Anonymous, 2010). It is believed that the violent attacks on Indian students studying in Australia during this period may have influenced Indian students'

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decisions to seek equivalent education opportunities at alternative campuses in countries such as Singapore (Harrison, Austin & Millar, 2009). Furthermore, the attacks suffered by Indian students studying in Australia have received wide coverage in India, possibly prompting students and their agents in India to seek alternative countries (India asks students to take precautions in Australia, 2010).

However, Universities Australia chief executive, Dr Glenn Withers, said that other reasons might have also influenced Indian students' decisions to study in locations other than Australia (Harrison et al., 2009). These reasons may include the strength of the Australian dollar and a tightening of the student visa application process (Harrison et al., 2009). Although this alternative-seeking behaviour may be the result of the strengthening Australian dollar, the tightening of visa applications or the recent trouble in Australia for Indian students, it may also be the result of how education services agents in India market Australian universities, the success of the global schoolhouse project in Singapore – wherein leading institutions worldwide are invited by the Singapore government to set up a campus – or many other reasons (Healy & Birrell, 2010). Thus, this study seeks to understand why an increasing number of Indian students are choosing to study at an Australian university in Singapore rather than at a campus in Australia. This trend will most likely have important implications for universities in Australia and in Singapore which provide for, and consequently market to, Indian students (Johnson & Kumar, 2010).

The aims of the study were therefore to understand:

1. Why the current group of Indian students studying at Australian Universities in Singapore has chosen to study at an Australian campus in Singapore rather than study in Australia or elsewhere in the world;
2. Whether Indian students' choice of destinations is influenced by the marketers in India or by other factors; and
3. The demographic profiles of Indian students studying in Singapore.

2. Method

The mixed method methodology accesses a qualitative focus group of students from India studying in Australian universities in Singapore. The qualitative approach was used in order to understand the depth and richness of participants' reasons for choosing to study in Singapore. The findings from the focus group were used to develop an online survey to further examine the reasons considered by Indian students while choosing to study at an Australian university in Singapore. The survey was administered to students of Indian nationality enrolled in Australian university campuses/institutions in Singapore. Ethics approval was received through James Cook University before the project commenced.

The focus group consisted of seven students (six male, one female) from India studying at Australian universities in Singapore. The participants were drawn using purposive sampling techniques from undergraduate and postgraduate courses offered by these institutions. After giving their demographic profiles including age, gender, hometown in India, discipline of study and the level of course of study, participants were asked what factors influenced their selection of their respective study institution – in particular, the home country of the study institution – and the course of study. They were also asked to narrow down the specific reasons for their choices. The second section of the focus group session focused on the role of education agents in India and the nature of the advice the respondents sought and received from education agents. The focus group session, lasting 40 minutes, was recorded and later transcribed. The transcription was shared with researchers present at the interview session and two of the focus group participants for reliability and validation. The findings of the focus group discussion were employed to develop an online questionnaire which was used to survey a larger sample of students from India studying at Australian institutions in Singapore. The reliability and validity of the survey instrument was tested in a pilot survey of 20 students before administering the survey to the wider population.

Drawing on the analysis of the focus group conversation, the online survey was constructed to understand why students from India chose an Australian university and why they chose an Australian university in Singapore. The survey consisted a total of sixteen open-ended and closed-ended questions. For question 16, respondents were asked to rate 27 items on a 7 point Likert scale in the level of importance. The questions were structured into three main

categories seeking information on respondents' demographic characteristics, reasons that affect their choice of study destination and the role of education service agents in India. The survey was administered online via SurveyMonkey for four months which is equal to the duration of a semester. The link to the online survey was mailed to Singapore based administrative staff of James Cook University, Curtin University, the University of Newcastle, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the University of Wollongong, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University and other Australian universities offering courses in Singapore. The staff at these institutions collated a list of Indian nationals studying at these institutions and sent the survey link to a pseudo-randomly selected student sample from this list. In total the survey was distributed to 600 students. The survey was sent to randomly selected Indian students on records of involved institutions. Of these students, 236 online responses were received during the four-month period, which represents a 39% response rate. An average of 150 respondents answered each question. Thus there was a 65% response rate with each question; a large number of respondents chose not to answer all questions. The data from the online survey was exported to an Excel format for analysis. The findings from the data are presented in the next section.

2.1 Limitations of recruitment

The sample represented students from universities that were convenient to contact. Thus while the study represented the views of a group of students from India studying at Australian universities in Singapore, it was not representative of all students from India enrolled in Australian institutions in Singapore. Further, 127 respondents (i.e. 54% of the responses) were from a particular institution representing a possible bias in the nature of responses. Similarly, 123 respondents (52%) were from Postgraduate (Masters level) courses. On an average 35% of students did not identify the institution of study or the level of course study. Despite these limitations, the study revealed significant findings.

3. Findings

The data from the online student survey and focus group interviews were analyzed and the findings are presented in three sections.

3.1 Student profile characteristics

The responses exhibit a good representation of the Indian student population with East India being the lowest proportion, while South Indian states representing highest percentage of respondents in line with the highest population density in south India. The proportion of male respondents is 66% while the female respondents accounted for 34% of the responses. Most of the 146 respondents (98% of the sample) were in the young adult category of 18-35 years of age. The majority of respondents were from the age group of 21-25 years which matches with large proportion of responses (60%) from students at postgraduate level, signifying the popularity of postgraduate courses offered in Singapore for young adults from India: 84% of the respondents were studying in postgraduate courses in Singapore. Given the age distribution of respondents and the preponderance of the sample studying at postgraduate level, this also signifies that Australian universities operating in Singapore were a prime target of Indian students seeking postgraduate education overseas.

The findings show that 87% of Indian students studying at an Australian university in Singapore chose business-related courses as their preferred program. Information technology was the second choice but at a much lower proportion of 11%. Tourism, hospitality, mass communication, and education were some of the other disciplines chosen by students to study in Singapore.

3.2 Factors and considerations of students from India while deciding on a foreign study destination

The main reason for Indian students to study overseas was to gain an international experience by interacting with students from other nationalities, countries and cultures. The prospect of getting employment in Singapore after

completing their study in Singapore or by studying an Australian course also featured as an important reason for students to study in Singapore. The findings from the survey (refer to Table 1) confirm that quality of education still features high on students' choice and Australian universities are by implication considered as high-quality institutions. Thus 49.6% of students have chosen Australian institutions for quality reasons. An interesting finding from the focus group and table 1 is that students from India recognize Australian courses and delivery methods to be more effective as compared to the pedagogy followed in Indian institutions. The courses in Australian institutions in Singapore were considered to instill skills that graduates could use in a work environment. Thus institutions of higher learning should aim at providing higher levels of experiential learning opportunities to students in order to attract Indian students to their campuses in Australia and in Singapore (Bradley, 2000; DAFT, 2010; Ujitani & Volet, 2008).

Table 1: Reasons to study outside of India

Why did you decide to study outside of India?		
Answer Options	Response %	Count
Quality of education	49.6	70
International experience	69.5	98
Int'l Exposure in field of study	34.8	49
Different cultural experience	43.3	61
Living in another country	41.8	59
Employment Opportunities	52.5	74
Applied teaching approach	13.5	19
Other		8
Number of respondents		141

Table 2: Choice of Study Destination

Why did you choose to come to Singapore rather than Australia?		
Answer Options	Response %	Count
Familiarity with own culture	24.5	35
Singapore is close to India	57.3	82
Similar climate to India	13.3	19
Relatives/friends in Singapore	20.3	29
Lower cost of living in Singapore	28.7	41
Better job prospects	24.5	35
Favorable Government policies	12.6	18
Safety and Security	71.3	102
Other		11
Number of respondents		143

Table 2 shows that the most important decision factor in choosing Singapore over Australia is the perception of safety and security. The survey results show that 71.3% of the students felt safer in Singapore. The locational advantage of Singapore was evident as 57.3% of the respondents choose to study in Singapore due to its proximity to India. This finding is in line with Singapore's ambition to become an educational hub in south-east Asia by attracting international students within the region. The presence of a large Indian community in Singapore was also a consideration for 24.5% of students. Foreign students in Singapore are able to relate to cultural similarity in

Singapore and several students indicated the presence of relatives and family friends in Singapore. Lower cost of living in Singapore compared to Australia was the third most popular reason for Indian students choosing Singapore as a study destination.

Table 3: Reasons to select an Australian institution in Singapore

Why did you select an Australian university in Singapore for your study?		
Answer Options	Response %	Count
Personal preference for an Australian University	35.3	47
Employers prefer an Australian University	8.3	11
Easier to secure Australian Permanent Residency (PR) with an Australian degree	9.8	13
Expertise and specialization in area of study interest	19.5	26
Integrity of an Australian university	11.3	15
Advanced standing in course/ Recognition of prior study/experience	11.3	15
Acceptance of transfer students	9.0	12
Relevance of principles taught in Australian university courses to Indian Industries	6.8	9
Australian university fast-tracks courses e.g.; 3 semesters per year instead of 2 semesters per year	54.9	73
Availability of course of interest	42.9	57
Other		10
Number of respondents		133

According to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) (2011), developing Singapore into an educational hub is a strategic priority of the Singapore government. Strategies such as the Global Schoolhouse Project, the government's encouragement to foreign universities to set up private education institutes in collaboration with local organizations, and the government's thrust towards renewing institutes of higher education and establishing new institutions has resulted in more than 100 foreign institutions offering their courses in Singapore (STB, 2011). These initiatives have resulted in institutions from countries within the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and North America to begin operations in Singapore. Thus, Australian universities in Singapore have to compete with other institutions from all over the world. It is imperative for institutions to have in-depth understandings of the expectations from students and employers to remain competitive. As India is an important exporter of students to Singapore these institutions must have a good appreciation of expectations and needs of students from India (DFAT, 2010). The survey results (refer Table 3) indicate that the spread of courses offered by Australian universities is very much in line with the expectations of students from India. Moreover, the Australian education system and Australian institutions are considered as 'institutions of repute' and are ranked higher than institutions from other regions (DFAT, 2010). This element of integrity was recognized by a small portion of respondents. In contrast, the fast tracking approach adopted by most Australian institutions in Singapore (e.g. the trimesters system compared with the traditional semester system) has ranked highest as a factor in Indian students' selection of an Australian university in Singapore (54.9%).

When asked if there were any compelling reasons as to why they did not choose Australia as a study destinations, 74% (144) of the respondents were unable to highlight a strong reason for their decision. The other 26% of the respondents attributed their decision not to study in Australia to specific reasons which mainly included safety and security and rising cost of study. Further analysis of the open ended responses shows that 42% of respondents were concerned about their safety and security while in Australia and thus decided against choosing Australia as their study destination while 30% of respondents highlighted the rising cost of living/cost of study as a decisive factor.

One survey question focused on various reasons which influenced students' choice of study destination. Student considerations including international exposure, cross-cultural experience, and teaching and learning approach were rated as most important. These considerations were closely followed by availability of desired course, cost of education, cost of living, reputation of the institution, and the duration of the course. Other important considerations were safety and security, employment opportunities and government support for foreign talent and entrepreneurship. The role of education services agents and presence of local guardianship in the form of a relative or family friend

were not considered important. The attention and importance given to climatic conditions in the destination emerged as a surprising element.

3.3 Role of Education Services Agents

The second part of the survey focused on the role of agents in providing education services and assistance to students in India. The findings from the survey highlight that 73% of the respondents sought the assistance of an education agent in India to help with their decision-making process in choosing an institute to study as well as a destination. The finding highlights the role of organisations in India that provide services in counseling, advising and guidance to students. A further analysis of the *reasons to seek help from education services in India* (Table 4) shows that students approached these agents to gain information about the course structure, fee structure, student facilities and the courses offered by universities in Singapore. Students asked the agents to comment on popular study destinations abroad and the reasons for those countries to be popular destinations or otherwise. Students also contacted the agents to assist with the admission process and the related documentation. Despite agents not being considered an important influence, the agents played a role in the decision-making process of Indian students aspiring to study abroad, with 26% of students having relied on the agent's advice in selecting the course, the university and the destination to study overseas (Research Snapshot, 2009).

Table 4: Information given by education services agents

What types of information did the agent give you?		
Answer Options	Response %	Count
Duration of the program	81.3	87
Employment opportunities	31.8	34
Processing of application	73.8	79
Visa requirements	85.0	91
Course/subjects	55.1	59
About the university	67.3	72
Application process	65.4	70
Course entry requirements	62.6	67
Boarding and lodging	30.8	33
Cost of study/ Cost of living	73.8	79
Reputation of the institution	39.3	42
Student experience in the institutions	22.4	24
Other		3
Number of respondents		107

4. Discussion

While the survey results and the focus group interviews confirm the findings in the current literature regarding reasons for the decline in Indian students choosing Australia as the study destination, they also reveal additional considerations that play a decisive role in their choice of study destination. DFAT (2010), Geoffrey & Mazzarol (2002) and Khawaja & Stallman (2011) argue there are several reasons for decline in choice of Australia as a study destination, such as tightening of the student visa application process, a stronger Australian dollar, the rising cost of living, distance from home city, employment opportunities, and perceived safety and security in Australia. The survey results confirm that safety and security of students while in Australia has emerged as one of the most important concerns followed by cost of education, employment opportunities and relative proximity to home country. Singapore's climate being similar to the climate found in cities in western and southern India has emerged as an interesting consideration in the rising preference of Singapore for the study destination as compared to Australian cities.

The other key factor that has emerged is the role of Indian agents. As per the survey results three quarters of prospective students approach these agents for advice and information and 26.2% of the respondents said that the agents played a considerable role in influencing the choice of institution and the study destination. The survey

results also revealed that students are now independent and do not consider having family or close friends as an important factor when moving overseas for higher education. The preliminary findings from the survey highlight the need to work closely with the education agent in India. It also highlights the fact that prospective students do not have enough information about Australian universities, their campuses in Australia and in Singapore, the courses offered and other related information. Universities vying to attract Indian students to their courses must pay more attention to the needs of prospective students in India and endeavor to provide information through online sources, social media, and physical offices to enable these students to make an informed decision.

It was further revealed that much of the information provided by the education agents was factual in nature and is easily available on their websites, brochures and help lines. The data from the focus group interview points towards the need to devise mechanisms to enable ready dissemination of factual information such as the application process, programme details, university ranking, Visa application and requirements, information about boarding and lodging, average cost of living and so forth.

Similar to previous findings (Ujitani & Volet, 2008; Lee et al., 2004) the survey results highlight the need for Australian universities to provide experiential learning opportunities for students in order to better prepare them for work in the industry and enable them to interact with future employers (Research Snapshot, 2009). Incorporating *work-integrated learning* such as internships, placements, collaborative projects, industry briefs and so forth in curriculum design trains the students in higher order skills to apply their learning in the work environment and to interact with people within the industry. This strategy is supported by previous findings (Bradley, 2000; Trice, 2003). Institutions should also reconsider their strategies for dealing with the education service agents in India. As these agents are able to influence the prospective students' decision process, the universities should provide these agents with the relevant information and support mechanisms in order to build relationships with them and encourage them to recommend their institutions to enquiring students and parents.

A further analysis of the respondents' profile reveals that the majority of students from India target Australian institutions or postgraduate courses at the Masters level. These students are within the age group of 18 to 25 years and are much younger in comparison to their Australian counterparts pursuing courses at the same level. There is a tendency in students from South India to choose Singapore as their study destination due to its proximity to India and tropical climate. This provides an opportunity to Australian institutions within the tropics to reach out to students from South India (DFAT, 2010; Trice, 2003).

5. Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to understand the considerations of students from India who choose overseas study destinations and to compare Singapore and Australia as study destinations. Additionally, the study documents the students' selection of Australian institutions and their preference for Singapore as a study destination. It also demonstrates the role and importance of education service agents in influencing prospective students' decision making processes. The findings have not only added to a better understanding of Indian students and their preferred study destination, but they also provide a platform for Australian tertiary education providers and government agencies and policy makers to develop strategies to attract international students from India. The results from the study should be used to further research the role of education service agents and strategies to provide information to prospective students in India to make an informed decision regarding overseas study destinations.

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