



20th International Scientific Conference Economics and Management - 2015 (ICEM-2015)

Internationalization of Higher Education: Analysis of Factors Influencing Foreign Students' Choice of Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Internationalization is becoming one of the main priorities of universities not only in Europe, but also worldwide. Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) include internationalization as a part of their strategies, thus contributing to the development of study programs in English, guest lecturer involvement and participation in other activities aimed at attracting foreign staff and students. Foreign students are an asset to HEIs, where they are studying. The aim of the research is to analyse and evaluate factors influencing foreign students' choice of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in order to suggest further improvements for internationalization of higher education.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Kaunas University of Technology, School of Economics and Business

Keywords: Internationalisation, Higher Education Export, Foreign Students.

Introduction

Internationalization is becoming one of the main priorities of universities not only in Europe, but also worldwide. In today's internationalized area of higher education, many authors have focused on researching Higher Education Institution (HEI) quality based on the necessity of gaining a competitive advantage (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; Athiyaman, 1997; Moogan *et al.*, 2001; Oldfield & Baron, 2000).

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Education Institution (HEI) in order to suggest further improvements for internationalization of higher education.

The paper is structured in four sections: introduction, methodology, results, conclusions and discussion.

Various clients such as students, parents, businesses, and others can be identified in the context of higher education. All of the abovementioned clients have certain expectations regarding the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs). Brochado (2009) suggests that all services provided by an HEI should be managed in order to enhance the quality expected by the client. Businesses expect graduates with a certain set of skills, knowledge and ability to successfully carry out work tasks. Parents, as the main funders of the study experience, expect certain changes in student characters, as well as an acquired ability to find a good job or set up their own businesses after graduation. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the most significant of these client types – a student, who is mainly responsible for the choice of a higher education institution, in which he/she gains his/her study experience.

Due to the ever-increasing competition amongst HEIs across the globe, HEIs have taken up managerial techniques to improve the quality of study programs and services they are providing (Telford & Masson, 2005; Yeo, 2008). Furthermore HEIs have taken up an active market approach instead of the previously used passive one (Ivy, 2008). It is now necessary to not only be aware of the product provided, but also of the influential environmental factors and associated impact on potential students (Moogan *et al.*, 2001).

Studies show that it is much more expensive to attract new students than to retain those already studying at an HEI. This means that it is essential to meet and even exceed foreign student expectations, which they have for their study experience, in order to maintain the proportion of foreign students studying at the university. The study “Service quality in higher education: The role of student expectations” conducted by Voss *et al.* (2007) also shows that in many cases, student expectations tend to be unrealistic, therefore it is up to the staff working in departments of the HEI to handle the creation of realistic expectations in advance in order to make it possible to even achieve customer satisfaction. If expectations are met and exceeded, it may lead to a positive result by increasing the number of students retained in the higher education institution, as well as ensuring the prevalence of positive feedback from existing students.

The quality is one of the main aspects taken into account by students when deciding, which HEI to choose. The quality of higher education is affected by a variety of factors, not only the content of study courses, but also faculty performance, student support services and other aspects must be acknowledged when evaluating higher education, especially the HEI quality.

In the research conducted about the evaluation of students satisfaction in the field of higher education service quality, Gbadamosi and de Jager (2013) include the following criteria to be taken into account when measuring the level of satisfaction: internationalisation; marketing & support; access & approachableness; international students & staff; academic reputation; student focused; academic quality; variety & reach; location & logistics; accommodation & scholarship; sports reputation & facilities; safety & security; and parking (de Jager & Gbadamosi, 2009).

Soutar (2002) has identified four main determinants of university preference while researching the factors of importance for high-school leavers in Australia. The aforementioned factors are: course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects, and teaching quality, which to some extent comply with a few of the criteria identified by Gbadamosi and de Jager (2013). Research conducted within this paper has been based on the previously mentioned criteria as well as on other identified factors of influence.

1. Methodology

The following qualitative and quantitative research methods were used: the general theoretical method to reflect the topicality and need for Latvian higher education export; the deductive method to interpret the general information, and link it to specific cases; the statistical method to group information and to analyse the different regularities; the empirical method to obtain information by conducting a survey, and induction method to interpret and generalize the survey results.

In order to discover the factors of student choice of the host country and HEIs, a research was conducted within which two questionnaires were developed. The survey involved foreign students from seven HEIs in Latvia and one Estonian university. For foreign students of the Riga Technical University, the survey consisted of 31 questions; 24 questions were asked to foreign students from other HEIs.

A total number of 350 completed questionnaires were acquired. The data obtained from the survey indicate that the largest number of respondents in Latvia is from Germany (20.8 %), Uzbekistan (10 %), Finland (5.5 %), Sweden (5.2 %), India (4.5 %) and Norway (4.5 %). Similar to Latvia, the largest number of respondents at the Tallinn University of Technology is Germans (16.4 %), followed by Nigerians (13.1 %), whereas students of American and French origin rank third (6.6 %).

The study does not analyse the foreign students' countries of origin in terms of political, economic situations, as well as other factors. Upon performing a survey of the proportion of foreign students in Latvian universities, it was found that most students acquire education in Riga, therefore HEIs of other Latvian cities have not been included in the survey.

The survey consists of three parts, the first of which includes demographics-based questions about the respondent's country of origin, the current country of studies, university, gender, academic level, type, the current study year in the chosen university, the field of studies, the tuition amount, and methods of covering the cost of studies. The second part of the survey consists of questions about factors influencing the choice of the country and university, whereas the third part – of satisfaction with the study experience. The second and third parts also include questions about observations of different factors affecting the study experience, based on the information analysed in theoretical sources, and supplemented accordingly.

2. Results

The most common way of obtaining information about the chosen HEI among foreign degree students is searching online (44.5 %) and receiving recommendations from family, relatives and friends (41.1 %). Exchange students, however, learn about study opportunities primarily from international relations officers at their respective HEIs where they are studying for a degree (66.7 %). The sources, from which students are obtaining information, point to the ways of how HEIs should be implementing their marketing activities, in which fields they should invest resources to improve their visibility as well as to attract foreign students.

The survey also shows which priority the chosen HEI and country has taken at the moment of making a decision to study abroad, as well as the criteria, on which the decision has been based, have been evaluated. It has been concluded that mostly the chosen country and the HEI rank relatively high in the students' choice, e.g. 82 % of respondents have indicated their chosen country as the only, first or second priority. A similar result has been obtained regarding the choice of HEIs, where 89 % of students who participated in the survey indicated their chosen HEI as their only, first or second priority.

The most important factors in the decision-making process are academic quality, academic reputation and international students and staff, which is considered very important for 55 %, 42 % and 40 % of respondents respectively when choosing the country and for 53 %, 44 % and 43 % of respondents when choosing a HEI (see Fig. 1.). Analysing the level of importance of the factors combining critical and very important impact levels, it was found that the cost of living also ranks high in the foreign students' choice of country factors scale. In an analysis of the level of importance of factors, by combining minor and completely irrelevant levels of importance, it was found that the proximity of the country of origin and marketing were among the least important factors influencing foreign students' choice of country.

Factors considered absolutely irrelevant in the context of choosing a country for studies have mostly been sports reputation and opportunities (30 %), location in the periphery of the EU (24 %) and an exotic location (24 %), whereas in the context of choosing an HEI, sports reputation and opportunities (26 %), parent, relative or friend suggestions (21 %) as well as the availability of parking (59 %) have been the least relevant aspects for foreign students when making a decision.

During the analysis of the previously mentioned relevant aspects for decision making regarding the HEI, it was concluded that the most important aspects, however, are not among the ones students are most satisfied with. A statistically significant amount of respondents have indicated focus on students (76 %), support (72 %) and internationalization (73 %) as important or very important, however availability of parking (74 %), sports reputation and opportunities (46 %), family, friend or relative suggestions (33 %) and marketing (31 %) are considered of low importance or completely irrelevant.

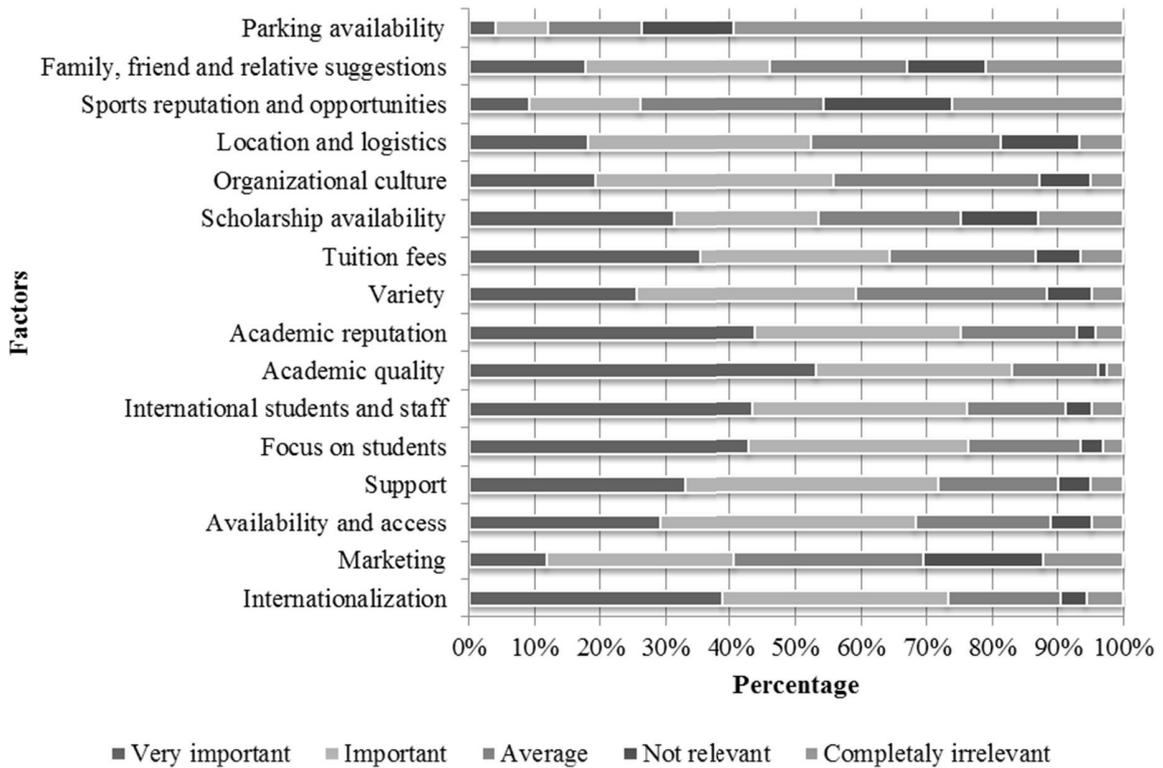


Fig. 1. Factors of importance when choosing an HEI

Some students have indicated that the choice, based on some aspects, has not paid off, and the experience gained has been disappointing. A few examples include negative experience during interactions with local students, personnel of the chosen HEI or the general population of the country, low quality of the chosen study program etc.

When asked about other aspects, which might have been of importance to foreign students when making a decision about a country or an HEI where to study, the following aspects were mentioned: interest in learning the Latvian or Russian language, discovering an unknown territory, traditions, availability and quality of a certain study program, international recognition, credit recognition, scholarship availability, low tuition fees, job opportunities after graduation, nature, the possibility of starting studies in the winter semester, admission at the HEI was on-going at the moment of making the decision to study, family, relative or friend presence in the chosen country etc.

The choice influencing factors included in the survey mostly have been rated as good and very good, providing the highest result of such responses to the aspect of internationalization (72 %), whereas parking availability (33 %) as well as sports reputation and opportunities (13 %) have mostly been considered irrelevant by foreign students.

Academic quality has been rated as very good by 59 % of all respondents, whereas 32 % have rated it at an average level. 9 % of the respondents believe the academic quality is bad, very bad or irrelevant. The results point to the need of improving the academic quality in order to achieve the goal of academic excellence, which has been set as on the aims in HEI visions.

Academic reputation has been rated similarly, resulting in indications of 57 % – good and very good, 34 % – average and 9 % – bad, very bad or irrelevant. The evaluation of international student and staff evaluation has been more positive, with 67 % of all respondents rating this aspect as good or very good, 24 % – average and 9 % – bad, very bad or irrelevant.

Faculty performance is often considered to be one of the most important elements pointing to the quality of higher education. 54 % of all respondents have evaluated it as good or very good, however around one third (30 %) believe that the lecturer performance is average. Positively, only 16 % of all survey participants have rated the lecturer performance as bad or very bad.

Good or very good lecturer performance has been indicated mostly by foreign students of social sciences (77 %) and humanities (73 %), whereas the lowest positive rating has been indicated by medical students (24 %). They have mostly (45 %) rated the lecturer performance as average. Over 60 % of the foreign students studying engineering sciences, economics, management, business administration, international relations or logistics, computer science and information technology have evaluated lecturer performance as good or very good, indicating a statistically significant level of satisfaction within this aspect.

The highest percentage of positive feedback can be witnessed from students studying in the field of economics, management, business administration, international relations or logistics, natural sciences and humanities.

Conclusions and discussion

The environment for foreign student recruitment in Latvia is favourable, since local students happily communicate and form friendly relationships with foreigners and discrimination can be witnessed relatively rarely. Both the Annual Report issued by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Latvia in 2013 and the research conducted by the authors of this paper indicate that the highest representation of foreign students in Latvia is from Germany and Uzbekistan.

Marketing activities online ensure a great number of degree-seeking foreign students in the researched HEIs, and international student coordinators at HEIs, where these students are studying for obtaining a degree, are the main sources of information for exchange students. When choosing an HEI for their studies, foreign students acknowledge the following factors as the most important ones: academic quality, reputation and international students and staff. Factors such as parking availability, sports reputation and opportunities, location in the periphery of the EU and exotic location are mostly considered to be of low importance or completely irrelevant.

Foreign student satisfaction with the gained study experience does not meet the expectations. Participants of the survey are mostly satisfied with the internationalization of their chosen HEI and dissatisfied with scholarship availability. Most respondents are willing to suggest studies at their chosen HEI to others as well.

Both theoretical sources and research conducted within this paper demonstrate that foreigners are willing to study in integrated groups with local students, not separately from them. Theoretical research and the survey conducted by the authors of this paper indicate that both foreign and local students find the quality of education to be higher when lectures are held for both groups together, however results of the survey also indicate that currently most lectures for locals and foreigners are held separately.

Certain national laws and regulations are necessary to introduce changes to the delivery of education in foreign languages in state institutions, in order to provide equal opportunities for both local and foreign students. These changes would also provide opportunities for public universities to compete with private HEIs in Latvia, which are currently already offering paid courses in foreign languages for both domestic students and foreigners. By offering study programs in foreign languages state universities could contribute to the integration of foreign students and reduce emigration of local students.

HEIs which concentrate on attracting foreign students from the countries of the region of East Asia should thoroughly evaluate the opportunities and the necessity of developing and offering study programs in Russian, while other HEIs where most of the foreign students are from Germany should assess opportunities and the necessity of developing and offering study programs in German.

HEIs which offer study programs in Latvian and English with identical content should combine them and provide a set of tuition free study places for local and foreign students. This would improve students' international competitiveness as well as help universities economize resources.

Since higher education internationalization and export capacity building are among the four main lines of action for the purpose of improving international competitiveness of the higher education of a country, the results obtained can be used in higher education export development by introducing the necessary changes in the identified areas.

Research on factors influencing foreign students' choice of HEI provides several recommendations at an institutional and governmental level in order to develop an internationalization strategy. This could not only benefit HEIs, but also provide a certain contribution to government revenue through tourism activities, taxes paid, as well as development of local businesses.

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