

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT'S DECISION IN CHOOSING STUDY DESTINATION ABROAD**

**Herlina Jupiter<sup>1\*</sup>, Irma Wani Othman<sup>2</sup>, Norazah Mohd. Suki<sup>3</sup>,  
Muhammad Safuan Yusoff<sup>4</sup>, Hasbullah Awang<sup>5</sup>, Rudie Adie Razak<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>1\*</sup>, <sup>3</sup>, <sup>4</sup>, <sup>5</sup> & <sup>6</sup> *Labuan Faculty of International Finance, Universiti Malaysia Sabah,*  
<sup>2</sup>, *Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Institutions of Higher Education is an important sector that contribute in a country development highly and competitively. International students are seen as one of the sources of income and main criteria in order to achieve the vision and mission to be at international level universities. Correspondingly, understanding the factors that influence students' decision in choosing study destination abroad is viewed as an important aspect in the process of internationalization status recognition. This concept paper search on the factors influencing the decision of students to study abroad where university is able to use the knowledge in planning the marketing strategy as well as to increase the enrollment of international students. The discussion also shows the importance of understanding the motivation and the cause of international students choosing the program and the university course of their choice. Furthermore, convergence is also given to the relevant and significant factor in influencing those students' decision to choose study destination abroad. From this perspective, some suggestions and implications in formulating the marketing communication strategy towards the target group of international students is considered as one of the actions to be taken by university in order to increase the intake of international student. Generally, this concept paper contribute in enhancing the understandings of various factors identified in previous studies and the connection with the preferred study destination. This knowledge is very useful in formulating the effective communication and planning the recruitment of international students' strategy.

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**Keywords:** Communication, marketing, international higher education, destination attraction

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\* Corresponding author: Herlina Jupiter *Labuan Faculty of International Finance, Universiti Malaysia Sabah.* E-mail: herina.jupiter@gmail.com

## Introduction

Empowering global education is seen as a trend in many developing countries. The borderless education not only show the tendency of students in pursuing higher education abroad for the purpose of obtaining a better quality education, but it is also become a main source that generate revenue for university. The same trends also showed the tendency of students to study abroad increased inconsistently and seasonal due to the influence of internal factors and external factors of a country.

Taking Malaysia as an example of a developing country to promote the internationalization of the country's educational institutions, Table 1 shows the trend of international students enrolled in public universities in Malaysia.

**Table 1: International student enrollment at public universities in Malaysia (2009-2014)**

Year	Total
2009	22,456
2010	24,214
2011	25,855
2012	26,232
2013	28,826
2014	27,042
<b>Total</b>	<b>154,625</b>

Source: [http://www.mohe.gov.my/web\\_statistik/](http://www.mohe.gov.my/web_statistik/)  
accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2017

Statistics show an increase number of international students to Malaysia from the year 2009 until year 2013. Since year 2009 until year 2013, the number of international students increased consistently. However, between the year 2013 and year 2014 there was a decline in international student enrollment from 28,826 students to 27,042 students. The decrease of 1,784 students give a general indication of the interest transition for international in choosing their study destination abroad. Consequently, competition in the education industry is seen to become more challenging, thus the country and higher education institutions need to have a good strategy in attracting international students to come to the country.

In order for the university to develop strategies and marketing campaigns in attracting more international students to pursue study outside of their country, it is a must to understand the reasons behind students' decision in choosing study destinations overseas, the factors affecting their decision, sources of information that can be considered by the student when making the decision to study abroad. This concept paper is able to answer questions applied for higher education institutions in order to develop effective strategies to be a world-class higher education institution. In general, it aims to meet the objectives which are to know the motives of students studying abroad, to identify factors that influence the decision to go abroad and to

discuss how higher education institutions marketing plan and organize an international student recruitment strategy.

### **Research Significant**

This study contributes to a variety of factors that influence the selection of countries and higher education institutions for international students. Exploration of this study are expected to develop an understanding of the theoretical aspects of study abroad destination selection and practically implementing the understanding not only at the university level but also the higher education sector in general.

### **Research Scope**

The discussion in this concept paper is expected to benefit higher education institutions in the era of globalization, where understandings were used to suggest useful marketing strategy and recruitment to attract students who intend to study at the international level.

### **Literature Review**

Previous studies about an international education generally use two approaches in research. The first approach is to examine the macro elements that affect the student's refusal to leave his home country to continue their studies. While, the second approach is to identify the reason of the selection at the individual level by assessing students' perception of their decision to continue their studies abroad (Bodycott, 2009). Studies at the individual level focuses on the factors that influence the decision-making student. The researchers Shank, Quintal and Taylor (2005), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Pimpa, (2003) found that the influence of the family is the dominant factor in determining the results of further studies abroad. The views of family members can lead to many kinds of influence on the behavior of an individual (Pimpa, 2003) and the encouragement from a family in a home country become an important factor to be considered while making decision (Muhammad Safuan, Y., Irma Wani, O., Rudy, A.R., & Norazah, M.S, 2016). Suggestions and views from family and closest individual of students's life is said to affect the choice of host country for the students to pursue higher education. (Bourke, 2000).

Friends and acquaintances idol (mentor) is also said to be a major influence student selection (Cubillo, Sánchez and Cervino, 2006). Prior research has consistently discussed the importance of student's contact and peers view while making decision to choose the host institution for their studies (Collins, 2000). A study conducted by Shank, Quintal and Taylor (2005), showed 37 percent of international undergraduate students have chosen their parents and friends as the main source of their information in the decision-making process for pursuing studey overseas.

There are multiple justifications for these selections, including the possibility of the students had friends who were studying at institutions that they want to go and also the personal experiences of their friends and family while studying at the institution. The influence of family and friends have an affinity with communication by word of mouth where it is defined as an objective support, authenticity believed and do not have any commercial interests. These sources are seen as individuals level of trust with the intention of giving a non-profit information.

Meanwhile, the financial position of students are also classified specifically as the high influencer in selection of the host country and university (Shank et al., 2005). Parafianowicz, (2009) has indicated that the financial consideration is one of the main criteria for selecting a study destination. While researchers like Guibourg, (2011) positioning the element of education financing cost to attend courses at the university as one of the top ten major factor in choosing the location of the university / institution. However, recent research suggests the cost of living is a major consideration (Bourke, 2000; Cubillo, Sánchez and Cervino, 2006) when making decision in choosing the study destinations abroad. Past researchers suggested that economy becomes the driving factor caused by the higher currency of the host country than the country of origin (Rudy, A.R., Irma Wani, O., Muhammad Safuan, Y., & Norazah, M.S, 2016).Therefore, the economic stability of the country destination become one of the main consideration that affect the decision to study abroad (Muhammad Safuan, Y., Irma Wani, O., Norazah, M.S., Rudie, A.R, 2015). In general, this scenario occurs due to the students'education cost that was settled by their families. Different situation occur when students receive funding from the government or they receive a financial assistance in the form of scholarships or tuition fee waiver.

It is well known that, on the basis of an effective marketing strategy is the selection of channels and forms of communication in getting the attention of the target group. International students have access to a variety of resources to help them make decisions. This includes internet, printed materials, verbal suggestion, education agencies and government resources. However, it is undeniable that there are still some students who have limited knowledge in choosing courses that they want to follow and comprehensively follow the career prospects within a specific program (Ringe 2006). More surprisingly, there is very little knowledge about the quality of education offered by various universities abroad. Hence it is very critical need in order to provide information to students who intend to make a wise decision before they going abroad to study (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2000; Groms and Murphy, 2003). Most scholars focus on the Internet as a primary source of information and suggested that e-business strategy can improve trust relationship and to bridge cultural barriers and geographical distance between the host country and the home country of the student (Wurtz, 2006; Usunier and Lee, 2009). While other researchers propose a more holistic approach to target the tangle of students such as school, university, alumni and others (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007).

The table below presents the main factors associated with the students'decision in studying abroad.

**Table 2: Major factors identified in the literature that influence the decision of selection for the students to study abroad**

<b>Factors Identified in Prior Studies</b>	<b>Researchers</b>
Lack of information and access to higher education institutions	McMohan, 1992; Mazzarol dan Soutar, 2002; Maringe dan Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009
Career prospect	Soutar dan Turner, 2002; Chen dan Zimitat, 2006; Maringe, 2006; Maringe dan Carter, 2007; Eder, Smith dan Pitts, 2010.
Collaboration between agencies	Cheung, Yuen, Yuen dan Cheng, 2011
School Funding Issues	Pimpa, 2003;

	Price, Matzdorf, Smith dan Agahi, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Soo dan Elliot, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith dan Pitts, 2010; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010
Culture	Mazzarol dan Soutar, 2002 Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Chung, Holdsworth, Li dan Fam, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Lee dan Morrish, 2011
Environment	Chen, 2007; Chung, Holdsworth, Li dan Fam, 2009
Influences, suggestions and support from family, friends and academician	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2002; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Lee & Morrish, 2011
Immigration prospect	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Bodycott, 2009
University Facilities	Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Bodycott, 2009
International Experiences	Bodycott, 2009
Perceptions of the quality of higher education systems abroad better	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Counsell, 2011
Marketing and Promotion Initiative	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002
Quality of Life	Bodycott, 2009
Security	Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009
Educational background and staff recognition	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Maringe, 2006
Students' satisfaction	Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010
The use of language and the opportunity to learn English as a non-native language and a second language	Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Engelke, 2008;

	Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010 Counsell, 2011
Geographical distance of host university	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010
Reputation quality of institutions in the host country	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Maringe, 2006; Soo & Elliott, 2008; Bodycott, 2009; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010
Courses offered	Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Maringe, 2006; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010
University Enviroment	Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009
Visa Application	Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010

Therefore, by examining the findings of the prior researchers, we found that there are various factors that encourage and influencing students' decision in choosing a study destination abroad. All of these factors has a different weightage and it can be manipulated positively to build an alternatives or strategies to achieve the goals to become a world-class university.

**Suggestion**

Based on the discussion on this concept paper, the following are suggestions that can be done by universities in implementing marketing strategies and communication:

**Table 3: The dominant and sub-dominant factors influence students' choice of study destination abroad**

Factors that influence students' decision							
A. Communication		B. Location			C. Social		
Communication Quality		Attraction and Study Destination			Social Network		
i. Online Communication Channels	ii. Offline Communication Channels	i. Study Destination	ii. University Image	iii. Programme and Course	i. Family and friends	ii. Academician	iii. Student Testimonial

		iv. Language	v. International Environment	vi. Tuition Fees			
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**A. Communication factor: Communication Quality**

The communication factor refer to the communication that exists between international students with the host university before and after their arrival at the university. Communication Quality is a key factor in influencing the respondents' decision to study abroad (Allwood, 2002; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). The online channel plays a key role in the application process before making a placement, students usually tend to use the search engine to collect information online. Google is said to be the most popular channel used by students. The search of university's website is the beginning of the connection betweet students and university. There are various views on online communication, where a university is able to provide sufficient information to attract the attention of prospective students to attend programs offered at the university (Gomes and Murphy, 2003; and Oplatka Hemsley-Brown, 2006).

**i. Online communication channels**

In addition, online communication methods can also be done through email. It refers to the importance of email feedback from the university administration regarding any concerns and questions that can influence the selection of the placement. Information on the facilities provided can be obtained directly from the university administrator and have a profound impact on the services of the university for new students. This will gives confidence to students about the commitment and credibility of the university.

**ii. Offline communication Channels**

While offline communication channels normally take place when students arrive at the host university involved. One of the type of offline communication is, face to face interaction, where students and universities meet at the education roadshow in their home country and the university representatives fully use this opportunity to influence the decision of these students.

**B. Location Factor: Study Destination Attraction**

Location factor is associated with useful information that influence the decision of an international student to choose a study destination location, where the complete knowledge about the study destination gives a different results (Shanka, Quintal and Taylor, 2005). For example studies destination attraction can be divided into the country destination of choice, education institutions image, courses offered, language, environment and studies cost (Chapman, 1986; Mazzarol, and Soutar, 2000; Crystal, 2001; Ringe, 2006; Parafianowicz, 2009) ,

**i. Country Destination of Choice**

Countries that considered of interest refers to the good reputation of a country in terms of security and openness of local communities to accept the international students (Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Bodycott, 2009). In addition to factors such as a stable political environment, freedom of individuals expression, low unemployment, economic stability, ethnic and cultural diversity and international education standards in the country (Ancheh, 2006). Additionally attractions of a city in the country, have become among the top choice for international students. Previous studies also showed a trend of students in making their choice is based on a desire to

stay in the big city during the study period overseas (Counsell, 2011). It also refers to the size of the city, infrastructure such as housing placement and transportation system. Apart from the social life of a country's attraction as a young life as a student leads to social life, including events organized by student associations and festivities throughout the year in a particular city

## **ii. Institution Image**

Institutions image have a direct impact on students decision-making when choosing a foreign educational institutions (Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol, Soutar and Sim, 2003; Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007). Status, position, accreditation and reputation of a university and employment opportunities are among the main criterias in establishing a good image of the institution. It also influences the students' decision since the university's image is closely linked with international status and areas of expertise that is owned by a university. Field of expertise in specific research universities strive to create career opportunities for the future that can be beneficial to students when they return to their homeland . The importance of the relationship between a university and industry is also seen as a major factor in decision making. Factors such as the inviting lecturer or professional of the relevant industry and giving a lecture to students are seen as an advantage for students to develop further relations between industry and increase the job opportunity after they graduate. The findings suggest that the reputation of institutions and job opportunities after graduation are considered as an important factors in influencing international students to choose a university program at certain countries.

## **iii. Programme and Courses**

While the contemporary program that is versatile can be a major factor that is capable of attracting international students when making their selection (Ringe 2006; Bodycott, 2009). Typically students repeatedly refers to a program or course that contains a comprehensive learning and fulfilling the needs and requirements of the job market. While offering a program that consists of courses that involve external industry as an "attachment", "industrial training" shaped "hands-on" make it value added (value added) of students' interest.

## **Iv. Language**

Teaching language and learning is a key factor influencing the decision to choose a program and study destination (Cubillo, Sánchez and Cervino, 2006; Counsell, 2011). Most of the students showed a tendency to select the countries that use English as a compulsory language (Crystal, 2001). However, the interest and desire of students to learn the local language can be enhanced with the help of the local community and the university that suggests mastering the local language as an option for students from foreign countries. The university also could show concern for the efforts to empower local language by providing language classes especially for international students. Mastery of the local language by international students is viewed to not only able to give confidence but also considered as a value added to the eligibility of international students in the future (Chung et al., 2009). However, for the assessment of courses taken as examinations and university assignments, students still putting tendency to follow by using English.

## **v. International Environment**

World-class learning environment is an important element in the selection of the study destination country (Mazzarol, Soutar and Sim, 2003). For a university that encourage students from a wide diversity of cultures and trying to create the image of a world-class universities, the initiative is an attraction to the selection of study destination abroad. The internationalization of a university can be identified from the university's website where it can be accessed through a different languages and also provide a feedback from international students who are currently

enrolled. Convergence towards students' feedback who pursuing studies and enrolling program in a university specifically shows the experience and learn a new culture about the countries. Therefore issues such as cultural gap turned into an attraction to new students to experience the culture of the host country and give different perspective about cultures in that world-class higher education level and make it as an advantage for students to choose the country destination of their choice (Lustig and Koester, 2006 ; Lee and Morrish, 2012).

#### **vi. Tuition Fees**

Expenses of tuition fees and cost of living are the main elements taken into account because the majority of students are those who come out with own sponsorship and without receiving any scholarships. Therefore, a country with a low cost of living, would be an option for students who do not have substantial financial support (Landes, 2008; Parafianowicz, 2009; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). While the internal political situation of a country like the waves of a country's inflation is also considered as a factor that can affect the selection of interested students to do part-time jobs while studying in a country. In addition, the opportunity to get scholarships and financial assistance offered by a university to students who enroll and have excellent academic performance is the catalyst for their decision to choose the university (Ringe and Carter, 2007). Some of these universities offer scholarships to students who come from a third country ( "good will of the institution") as a purpose of the human capital development.. There is also a university that strives to promote and increase the rate of enrollment by using the agents services who bring in a group of students from foreign countries (Scott, 2000). These methods show an increase in foreign student enrollment statistics and not only directly benefit the university and even provide space for groups of students to get tuition fees waived.

### **C. Social Factor: Social Network**

Social factor that influence the choice of students to pursue study overseas is social network. Social network of students refers to their relationship with the people around them. The students' social network relationships include a relationships with family, friends, academician, and staff from the preferred university.

#### **i. Family and Friends**

Social relationships, whether with family, relatives or friends who are in the destination country can affect the student's decision to study in their country (Lee and Morrish, 2012). The information and support from family and friends is seen as an element of trust that has a strong influence on the individual perception. Previous research found that while students making decisions about their destination country based on their own knowledge, the family and friend's feedback and discussion influence their perception of the university and the country indirectly (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2000; Pimpa, 2003; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). The active social network capable in improving students' decision-making period to study abroad.

#### **ii. Academician**

Recommendations from the academicians such as professors and lecturers can also change the students' decision in choosing study destination abroad . The academicians' suggestions are often seen with a high value and able to boost students' confidence towards the chosen university. In other words, the view of academicians is considered to have a high credibility and reliable information.

### iii. Student Testimonial

Testimonials of an alumni or students who had undergo the university's program either through the website or directly to the student group can also make a significant impact on the selections. Past studies have found a method of referring to the students' experience and insights giving a clearer picture of the students' lives in a program, universities and certain countries (Ancheh, 2006). The information is said to become more convincing and has a high trust value if the students' testimonials came from different cultural backgrounds but from the same country of origin. Eventhough, the culture is not seen as a major factor in influencing the decision of students to go abroad; however, previous studies suggest some of the cultural aspects were seen as fair and implicit consideration in making the decision (Chung et al., 2009; Chirkova, 2011).

### Conclusions

The concept paper identifies the factors that influence the decision of international students in choosing the destination country where practical implications is suggested to the university in driving direction of marketing and recruitment strategy to attract more international students. This concept paper also unravel the factors that influence the students' decision to extend studies from the perspective of students' communication, location and social factors. Next, it presents the importance of understanding the motivation and justification for international students in choosing program and courses in certain universities. It is also discuss about the significant of communication factors that influence their decision on selecting destination country. In this context, the practical implications and recommendations is very crucial in order to formulate a marketing communications strategy that meet the target groups of students more effectively. Generally, the conducted discussions can contribute to the improvement of understanding the various factors that influence students' decisions to choose the destination for further studies. It become a key element in formulating an effective communication as well as the recruitment strategies that can be applied by higher education institutions specifically in Malaysia with the aims to increase student's enrolment and to empower the internationalization.

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