

**A HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING PERSPECTIVE ON CHOICE
FACTORS AND INFORMATION SOURCES CONSIDERED BY SOUTH
AFRICAN FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

by

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SYNOPSIS

The South African higher education sector is currently facing many challenges. Factors such as a decrease in government funding, mergers and student unrest compel higher education institutions to apply effective strategies for funding and recruitment of quality students. Higher education institutions are forced to focus on restructuring and repositioning themselves, build a strong brand, communicate their image and to sustain their position in order to ensure a competitive advantage.

In order to be locally relevant and globally competitive, higher education institutions need to become more marketing-oriented. In a restricted financial environment, higher education institutions will have to assess and reassess marketing strategies aimed at attracting quality first year students. A proper assessment of the importance of the choice factors students consider when selecting a higher education institution as well as the usefulness of the information sources they consider, will enable institutions to allocate funds, time and resources more efficiently and effectively.

A quantitative study with a self-administrated questionnaire was used to allow students to complete the questionnaire during class lectures. Non-probability convenience sampling was used and a sample of 1241 students responded from six higher education institutions: the University of Pretoria, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Johannesburg, University of the Free State, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and the North-West University. The sample consisted of 64 percent females and 36 percent male students. The ethnic orientation distribution was as follows: 46 percent Caucasian, 41 percent Black African, 9 percent Indian, 3 percent Coloured and 1 percent students of other ethnic groups.

The main goal of this study was to investigate the relevant importance of the choice factors, as well as the usefulness of the information sources, that first year Economic and Management Sciences students at selected higher education institutions in South Africa considered when they decided to enrol at a specific higher education institution. The findings indicated that some choice factors were more important to students than others, as well as the fact that students from different gender groups, ethnic groups,

language groups and institutions differed in the importance they attached to the choice factors. The top ten choice factors respondents regarded as important in the selection of a higher education institution are: quality of teaching, employment prospects (possible job opportunities), campus safety and security, academic facilities (libraries and laboratories), international links (study and job opportunities), language policy, image of higher education institution, flexible study mode (evening classes and use of computers), academic reputation (prestige), and a wide choice of subjects/courses.

The findings also revealed that information sources directly from a higher education institution, such as open days and campus visits, university publications and websites are the most useful to students, while information from mass media such as radio, television, magazines and newspaper advertisements are not as useful.

The findings give marketing educators an indication of the importance of choice factors considered by prospective students in selecting a higher education institution, and enable higher education institutions to use their limited funds more efficiently to attract quality students, create a unique position and gain a competitive advantage. Based on the usefulness of information sources and the importance of choice factors considered, student focused marketing communication can be developed. This should aid students to make more informed decisions about the higher education institution they wish to attend. The study also add to existing theory in the fields of services marketing, higher education marketing and consumer behaviour, especially the field of outlet selection, as the institution can be viewed as the outlet for buying education. Information obtained from this study also contributes to the available research and literature on this topic and could be used by other researchers as a basis for future research.

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