CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the research results were discussed. In this final chapter, interpretations are made based on the empirical results presented in Chapter 6. The chapter will present the main findings from the previous chapter and draw conclusions. Thereafter, the implications of each main set of findings on choice factors and information sources are discussed and recommendations made. The limitations of the study are also presented and recommendations for future research are suggested. The chapter concludes with a retrospective evaluation of the research results obtained for each of the formulated objectives, as stated in Chapter 1, to determine if each objective was realised.

7.2   MAIN FINDINGS RELATING TO CHOICE FACTORS

The South African higher education landscape has evolved rapidly towards a market-orientated system in which institutions compete for student enrolments. In the interest of staying competitive and becoming more marketing-oriented, it has become increasingly important to understand students' decision-making processes when selecting a higher education institution.

The main findings of the study attempt to provide information to aid in the above and will be highlighted below.

7.2.1   CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE MAIN FINDINGS ON CHOICE FACTORS

The study attempted to determine the relative importance of 23 choice factors, as identified in the literature in Chapter 4. In the discussion that follows, the ranking of

each choice factor according to importance will be indicated by a number in brackets. The findings revealed that quality of teaching (1), employment prospects (2) and campus safety and security (3) of a higher education institution were the three most important factors influencing a student's selection process.

These factors were followed in order of importance by academic facilities (4), international links (5), language policies (6), the image of the institution (7), flexible study modes (8), academic reputation (9) and wide choice of subjects/courses (10) to form the top 10 choice factors.

Entry requirements (11), links with the industry (12), fees (13), financial assistance (14), location (15), attractiveness of the campus (16), multi-culturality/diversity (17), and social life (18) were indicated as moderately important.

The five least important choice factors were identified as: on-campus housing (19), sport programmes (20), the fact that friends attended the institution (21), the fact that brother/sister attended the institution (22), and the fact that their parents attended the institution (23), which was identified as the least important factor.

These findings support some of the international and local findings discussed in Chapter 4, while contradicting others. Davis (1998) found that students in America attached high importance to factors such as the beauty of the campus, good sporting facilities and the reputation of a prestigious institution. Although academic reputation ranked ninth in this study and thus supports Davis' findings, campus attractiveness only ranked sixteenth, while sport programmes were twentieth on the list. Martin *et al.* (1996) reported that career preparation, specific academic programmes, distance from home, academic reputation and library resources have a strong influence on institutions' selection in Australia. This holds true for this study, as almost all these factors ranked in the top 10, except for the location of an institution, which only ranked fifteenth. Interesting to note is that Bers and Galowich (2002:80) found that factors related to money were more influential than the institution's reputation or the influence of friends and family. While this holds true for the influence of family and friends, this study showed that academic reputation (9) was more important than fees (13) or financial assistance (14). Sevier (1993:48-50) determined in his research that the

reputation of the institution, availability of study courses, cost and the availability of financial aid were the most important factors influencing higher education institution choice for American students. Again, while reputation and a wide range of courses/subjects were indicated as very important in the findings of this study, fees were not included in the top 10 choice factors of this study. Freeman (1999:13) noted that African-American students are very much aware of the job markets and their decision to attend higher education institutions are greatly influenced by possible job opportunities. This was supported by the findings of this study, where employment prospects were identified as the second most important factor. Findings from a study by Price *et al.* (2003:215) showed that students in the UK indicated accommodation, the quality of university grounds, safety and security and sports facilities as less important factors. Though the latter proves to hold true, a major contradiction is the importance of campus safety and security, which ranked number three in this study.

In a local South Africa study, Coetzee and Liebenberg (2004:71) uncovered that academic reputation, image, sporting facilities, friends studying at the higher education institution and location were the most important choice factors. Coetzee and Liebenberg's study also showed that the mode of study, residence, fees and the fact that parents have studied there, were less important choice factors. The results of this study support the findings that academic reputation and image are important. However, location, friends and sport programmes were not indicated as very important by respondents in this study. The majority of the findings by Coetzee and Liebenberg were supported by this study, but interestingly, the mode of study/flexibility of study mode was indicated as the eighth important choice factor in this study, while it was indicated as of lesser importance in their study.

This study's findings further revealed several significant differences between males and females and the importance they attach to the different choice factors. It showed that females attach a higher importance than males in terms of wide choice of subjects/courses, quality of teaching, entry requirements, fees, campus safety and security, on-campus housing, multi-culturality, international links and employment prospects. Males attach a higher importance to sport programmes, social life on campus, brother/sister went there, and friends went there, than females – but both groups indicated a low importance overall for these factors.

Several significant differences were also found between the ethnic groups and the importance they attach to quality of teaching, academic facilities, entry requirements, fees, location of university, sport programmes, social life on campus, attractiveness of campus, on-campus housing, parents went there, brother/sister went there, friends went there, language policy, links with the industry, and a multi-cultural institution.

The main findings regarding language groups showed that there were significant differences for the following choice factors: quality of teaching, academic facilities, location of university, sport programmes, academic reputation, social life on campus, attractiveness of campus, on-campus housing, parents went there, brother/sister went there, friends went there, academic reputation, financial assistance, language policy, links with the industry, multi-culturality, and the image of a university.

Significant differences were also found between the six higher education institutions for 22 of the 23 choice factors, with the only exception that all six institutions rated employment prospects as equally important.

Thus, it can be concluded that although some local and international findings were supported, there were also numerous differences in the findings from this study. It can further be concluded that students from different gender, ethnic and language groups as well as institutions attended, differ according to the importance they attach to the 23 choice factors. The above-mentioned suggests that the student market is not a homogenous market and highlights the fact that higher education institutions need to continuously research their markets to try and understand their consumers, i.e. students, better. The results further showed that not all choice factors are equally important. This has several implications for higher education institutions, which will be discussed below.

7.2.2   IMPLICATIONS OF THE MAIN FINDINGS ON CHOICE FACTORS

Understanding the importance of the different choice factors that students use to select an institution, can help institutions to understand and position their institution in the competitive market. The findings do not only have implications for an institution's

positioning strategy, but also suggest possible repositioning based on choice factors importance. The findings could also impact on the communication, marketing and recruitment strategies of institutions. Choice factors that students indicated as less important do not necessarily mean that an institution should discard it, but that they should rather refocus their marketing strategies on the real concerns (important choice factors) of students. The findings also have implications for segmentation purposes, as differences in attitudes and perceptions of students according to the importance they attach to choice factors may imply different segments. These different segments need to be approached with a different marketing strategy for their specific needs concerning specific choice factors. Institutions will have to either emphasise the aspects most important to the particular segment, or try to adjust their characteristics (performance on the choice factor) in an effort to make the institution more appealing to the specific segment.

Higher education institutions have different options regarding their response to the results of the importance of the different choice factors. Due to the unique situation of each higher education institution regarding resources and current performance on each of the choice factors, institutions should keep the following options in mind, depending on their situation.

Firstly, an institution could reassess their institution's attributes and characteristics in such a way as to satisfy the needs of the student's based on their choice factor importance, based on the results of the importance of the different choice factors. Higher education institutions can, for instance, improve their quality of teaching or extend their range of subjects/programmes if that is a current weakness for them.

Secondly, institutions could consider altering their perceptions about their higher education institutions. This may be very effective in the case where an institution is actually performing well on the important choice factors, but prospective students are either not aware of this information or have formed the wrong perceptions for whatever reasons. This means that a higher education institution can try to alter the student's perceptions of where they actually stand on key choice factors. By supplying the correct information about their fees or possible job opportunities in the most effective

media, such as websites and brochures, it could indicate to students than they actually perform well on these important criteria.

Thirdly, if faced by a situation where institutions can do little about their own standing or performance on the important choice factors, they can attempt to alter students' perceptions of other higher education institutions. By trying to alter student perceptions of where a leading competitor stands on different choice factors, is called competitive repositioning. This may not be a very effective strategy in higher education marketing and can even be seen as unethical.

Fourthly, institutions can attempt altering the weight that a choice factor importance carries. This means that institutions can try to encourage prospective students to attach more importance to the factors that the institution excels in. For example, an institution can attempt to persuade students that having a balanced social life when studying is just as important as possible job opportunities or international links.

The fifth option that institutions can follow is to attract attention to neglected choice factors. With this approach, an institution can try to encourage students to pay attention to an attribute that they are normally unaware of or indifferent to, such as excellent sport programmes or social life, through extensive communication campaigns focusing on health and leisure activities.

Lastly, higher education institutions could try to shift students' perceptions of the choice factors they regard as important. This approach necessitates institutions to try to persuade students to change their ideal levels for one or more of the choice factors. For example, an institution might attempt to convince students that a bigger institution is better than a small institution, as a student may gain more exposure and interaction.

The above options imply that institutions need to take some sort of action according to their unique situation, resource availability and performance levels of the different choice factors. Depending on the option they take, several recommendations could be useful and are discussed in the next section.

7.2.3 RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING CHOICE FACTORS

It is recommended that institutions first need to analyse and understand how they perform on the choice factors. It is advisable to improve on the performance areas (choice factors) identified as important by students.

Institutions should initially focus on the choice factors indicated as very important, such as the top 10 choice factors identified by the study. In order to satisfy the needs and wants of prospective students, these factors must be addressed in an institution's marketing plan. The most important choice factors should be considered and liberated on, capitalised on and then be promoted. After an institution has ensured that the most important factors have been addressed, attention should be given to the less important choice factors.

Although institutions should focus their attention and resources initially on the most important choice factors to ensure effective and efficient use of limited resources, they must not neglect the less important factors. As needs and preferences can change, less important factors can get more prominent. Institutions should also keep in mind that by focusing on specific choice factors, they can create a niche market for themselves.

Below are certain recommendations regarding the choice factors using two different perspectives. Firstly, recommendations for each of the choice factors will be made, aiding institutions to improve their performance on those choice factors that they are not currently performing well in and/or enhancing or strengthening those choice factors identified as very important by students. Secondly, recommendations will be made to recruit and attract specific groups or segments of students by focusing on the choice factors identified as important by each group (gender, ethnic background, home language and institution attended). The latter will aid institutions that would like to attract a specific group of students, by suggesting the appropriate choice factors to concentrate on to attract these students and provide specific information on each choice factor that they want to improve or strengthen.

Although the choice factors are discussed separately, it is important to note that the various factors can and must be combined or integrated, as they do influence one another and cannot be addressed in isolation.

7.2.3.1   Recommendations regarding the individual choice factors

- **Quality of teaching**

Quality of teaching was indicated as the single most important choice factor when selecting a higher education institution, with Caucasian students reporting the highest mean value. Resources provide the necessary basis and tools to deliver quality teaching and therefore institutions must invest in good quality lecturers, high quality facilities and up-to-date, relevant course content. Institutions need to ensure that their quality of teaching compares favourably with that being offered by competitors. This implies being able to attract and retain qualified staff as well as having well-equipped facilities and other resources for teaching, learning and research. Quality is not just important from a prospective student's perspective, but can also supply a competitive advantage, satisfy governmental requirements as well as meet the ever-increasing public expectations. Quality of teaching are also closely related and influenced by two other important choice factors, namely academic facilities and academic reputation, and these three factors need to be integrated.

- **Employment prospects**

Students indicated employment prospects as very important. This emphasises the fact that students seem to be adopting a consumerist approach to institution selection due to the importance attached to market motives such as employments prospects. Emphasis should be placed on the appeal of job opportunities when enrolling at a specific higher education institution. Institutions should ensure that their subjects and course content are relevant to the market demand by liaising with industry to ensure that students with a degree from their institution would have a better opportunity to find employment. Including practical assignments, experiential learning or internships as

part of the course content can better prepare students to obtain a job, as they will have some practical experience added to their theoretical knowledge.

Institutions should further develop career based, professional programmes that will also follow the guidelines of the Higher Education Department to responded better to human resource needs of the industry, while also making it more attractive for prospective students. Publicity and promotional campaigns must attempt to focus on the success achieved by students from the institution in securing high paying jobs. This could also have a positive effect on the image of the institution and indicate possible links with the industry.

- **Campus safety and security**

As campus safety and security ranked third out of a list of 23 choice factors, it is especially important that institutions pay attention to this factor. Given the high crime rate in South Africa, it is important that institutions ensure a safe learning environment. This could be accomplished by improving visible policing such as security personnel and having toll-free numbers for any suspiciously behaving individuals. It is also important to ensure that the campus attractiveness is linked to safety and security by ensuring sufficient lights at night time and to limit unruly gardens as a possible hiding place for criminals. Effective signboards and campus maps can also ensure that students and visitors do not get lost and endanger themselves. Adequate transportation for students living in residences in or around campus could be arranged, as well as ensuring that there are safe routes and means of transport, especially for evening classes. Institutions can link safety and security to their image and promote themselves as a safe learning environment, especially for female students.

- **Academic facilities**

The results of this study echo the findings of Price *et al.* (2003:212), namely that facilities play a very important role in institution selection in the UK. The fact that academic facilities rated fourth shows the importance of facilities, especially for Indian and Coloured students, who reported the highest mean value. Facility management

should therefore receive attention as a possible way of differentiation and image enhancement. As academic facilities can also be linked to other choice factors such as quality teaching, image and academic reputation, institutions must ensure that they have enough well-equipped computer labs, comprehensive libraries, state-of-the-art lecture rooms as well as maintaining the physical appearance of these buildings. For the constant upkeep, improvement and extension of facilities, institutions will have to invest capital. Another option is to get donors from outside/industry. Recognition can be given to donors from industry or alumni by naming the new facility after the donor. Not only will the institution benefit from the funding and students by the improvements, but new facilities funded by industry will also enhance the image of an institution liaising with industry.

- **International links**

As students perceive international links as an important selection criterion, institutions must ensure that they reflect their international orientation in their promotional material. Using guest lecturers from overseas institutions as well as obtaining donations from overseas industry members can enhance an institution's image as an institution with international standing. Research with an international perspective as well as publishing in international journals can further aid institutions in creating an image of an international institution. This factor can also be linked with job opportunities. By providing a qualification that is internationally approved and of a high standard, it can improve a student's chances of securing a job internationally. International links and the fact that an institution's qualifications are accepted by overseas companies add credibility to qualifications. Promotional material should emphasise the image of an internationally acclaimed higher education institution by mentioning their collaboration with other international institutions.

- **Language policy**

Responses by students showed that language is a very important choice factor when selecting a higher education institution. Institutions can take this into account when planning their marketing and communication strategies. Communication strategies can

be slightly adapted in order to have maximum appeal to all language groups and can communicate to prospective students that the institution provides education in multiple languages. Institutions must also be aware of the language preference of their students in their communication and promotional campaigns.

Most of the official correspondence of higher education institutions with students is often in English or Afrikaans, whereas a substantial percentage (38%) of students indicated African languages as their home language. Bearing this in mind, higher education institutions should consider whether its current communication efforts are reaching these segments of its student market. It is recommended that institutions investigate the use of correspondence in university brochures and websites in students' home languages. This could help build goodwill and lead to a positive image among the specific target market.

- **Image**

Increased efforts need to be made by higher education institutions to position their institution with respect to competitors in the minds of prospective students and their parents. As image was indicated as seventh most important, it is recommended that higher education institutions focus on image building in its corporate marketing campaigns. A higher education institution can therefore use its image as a leverage to influence and attract students. It is important for institutions to be knowledgeable about the elements that affect the image of an institution. Researching current and prospective students' perceptions of the image of an institution can aid institutions in building and sustaining a positive image that is distinct, understood and accepted by the students. This can be accomplished by employing the other 22 choice factors to build the desired image through an appropriate marketing strategy.

The institution must ensure that the choice factors rated as most important by the students are reflected in the institution's image, so as to be consistent with the image students expect. Image enhancing is also related to other choice factors, such as being known for providing high quality programmes at a reasonable price in a safe and friendly environment. The personnel of an institution also plays their part to project the

institution's image and must therefore always conduct themselves in a professional manner. The public relation departments of higher education institutions should try to enhance the image further through publicity in the general media of newsworthy events and noteworthy performances of students or staff members. As alumni are indicated as a useful information source, they can be encouraged to actively participate in and contribute to the achievement of the institution's goal of image enhancing. It is further imperative for institutions to continually monitor their image under prospective and current students with image audits, to determine if they have the desired image and if and where improvements can be made. Improvement plans must be incorporated in the marketing and communication plans of the institution. Institutions with a strong, distinctive image will be in a better position for the changed higher education landscape and increased competition.

- **Flexible study modes**

Findings from this study support findings from Hoyt and Brown's (2003) study in America, namely that flexibility in course scheduling or delivery times are important for students, although not included in many research studies. The need for flexible study modes implies a need for technology that can enable institutions to offer flexible study modes. Higher education institutions will have to make use of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) for offering their present face-to-face programmes, and to operate flexible and lifelong learning.

A possible solution to the demands of flexible study modes is Distance/Remote Education (DE) and online education. Information technologies can aid institutions to ensure flexible study modes by making use of three types of technologies. Computer networks such as the Internet make it possible for students to access information from data sources throughout the world. These networks enable facilitators to interact with individual students on campus or remote locations, for example webbased courses, which is offered entirely over the Internet. Institutions could also use Interactive Compressed Video (ICV) systems that combine computers with telephone lines to transmit signals. It involves the use of code devices that compress the signal on both sides of a digital phone line. Cellular phones are yet another example that higher

education institutions can use, whereby Wireless Applications Protocol (WAP) can be used by students to access the Internet with their cellular phones.

The second type of education technology that institutions can employ to ensure flexible study modes for students is audio and video communication. Audio and video cassettes, as well as audio and video conferencing, are examples of this type of technology. It is possible for higher education institutions to record sessions/lectures so that it can be screened at a later stage.

The third type of educational technology is known as interactive satellite communication systems. The use of satellite communication systems to convey signals may make interactive television systems for education a reality. Bluetooth is a wireless technology that is be able to connect a cellular phone to a notebook computer to provide access to online conferencing facilities.

The student population may also have the perception that ICT may be useful in their future careers and it could be linked to employment prospects and quality of teaching as well. However, institutions should be aware of the burden of extra resources and additional cost of this strategy.

- **Academic reputation**

As academic reputation was indicated as very important to prospective students, especially English speaking students reporting the highest mean value, institutions must spend enough time and money to maintain and improve their academic quality and reputation. To ensure a positive academic reputation, it is important that institutions create and support a learning environment that inspires students to reach their full potential. It should also inspire faculties to become fully engaged in the teaching and learning mission of the institution, as well to create and support an environment in which departments modify and develop academic programmes to facilitate student learning and to provide instructional resources that enhance the teaching and learning environment. This factor can also be used by institutions to enhance their image of an academically acclaimed institution.

- **Wide choice of subjects**

Due to the importance students attach to the availability of a wide choice of subjects and courses, institutions should ensure that they provide a variety of different subjects and courses. They must also ensure that the range of subjects and programmes are responsive to students' needs and will, in order to enhance the educational experience of the students. These courses and subjects must be accessible, affordable and effectively coordinated. However, institutions must ensure that a wide choice of subjects also reflect the needs of industry and enhance students' probability to obtain a job. They must further ensure that they have enough well-qualified staff to present such courses, as the academic quality could be influenced. Thus, a wide choice of subjects could positively influence a student's employment prospects, create links with industry as they are approached to determine their needs, as well as improving the academic quality of an institution.

- **Entry requirements**

As entry requirements influence prospective students, institutions must ensure that their entry requirements do not exclude minority or disadvantaged groups. Since institutions receive government subsidy on students' successful completion, they must balance their requirements to ensure good quality students. It is vital for institutions to have user friendly admission policies and procedures as well as support programmes such as bridging courses or foundation courses for students whose previous experiences have been inadequate in preparing them for higher education.

- **Links with industry**

As links with the industry are important for students, especially for Black African students reporting the highest mean value, institutions should aim to create these industry links. Higher education institutions should build relationships with employers and industry. Building relationships and links with industry on aspects such as the content and appropriateness of courses and subjects can improve students' job prospects as well as positively enhance the image of the institution. Creating links with

industry could be created though learnerships, experiential training, practical work, advisory boards, sponsorships and guest lectures from industry. Linking with industry also creates a good opportunity for academics to ensure that their course content is relevant. The educational standard and overall reputation will exert considerable influence over commerce and industry to sponsor or give funding to a higher education institution. Good links with the industry are also important to find work placements for students. If an institution has a bad reputation, employers may be reluctant to employ its students.

- **Fees**

Although moderately important to students, this factor is especially important to Indian and Coloured students. Price/fees should be linked to benefits derived from higher education and institutions can therefore concentrate on communicating the value for money they provide. Research needs to be undertaken to determine what prospective students consider as a fair price or good value for money for obtaining an education. Fees may not be as important to students, as they are often not the ones paying for their education. Fees may be of greater importance to parents as they are often the financial sponsors of their children's education. Therefore, institutions must choose a competitive price and communicate this to prospective students, but especially to their parents. Incentives such as reduced class fees should be considered to attract the most promising students to specific institutions. As fees play a role in institution selection, institutions must also be aware of possible fee (price) competitions. However, institutions must also remember that the perception of the quality of education is often influenced by the price. This implies that students may be looking for good value for money and not necessarily the cheapest institution.

- **Financial assistance**

Institutions will have to include scholarships, bursaries and loan schemes to attract higher quality students. Because many previous researchers (Geraghty, 1997:20; Sevier 1993:49; Mills 2004:28-29 and Price *et al.*, 2003:215-220) identified financial consideration as a very important factor, it was surprising to find it ranked only

fourteenth in this study. The fact that fees and financial assistance were not that prominent in the decision-making process of students however correlates with findings from Whitehead *et al.* (2006). Fees and financial assistance are closely linked and therefore not surprisingly ranked thirteenth and fourteenth on the list of importance. The financial aspect of higher education includes both fees and financial assistance and should be widely published to prospective students and their parents.

- **Location**

Literature suggests that students usually attend the institution that is the closest to their homes (Deighton, Garbers and Faure in De Wet 1983:85). In this study, students indicated a moderate importance to the location of an institution. The fact that only 60 percent of the respondents are residents in the province in which the chosen university is located, implies that this does not necessarily holds true for students that participated in this study. This factor may be more important for some institutions than others. Institutions might wish to attempt further research to clarify the importance of location, especially if they are planning to open other campuses or relocate. Location could have different meanings for prospective students, such as distance from home, climate, neighbourhood or even city/urban and needs to be investigated if institutions are planning to expand geographically. Location could also be linked to safety and image. Institutions could mention their convenient, unique or safe location in their promotional campaigns.

- **Attractiveness of campus**

As the physical layout, look and feel of a campus influence prospective students, institutions must ensure that grounds are well kept. This will also reflect on the image of an institution as well as the importance of facilities. Although not the most important factor considered by students, it could be integrated with image, academic facilities and location, especially if an institution has a very attractive campus. The physical appearance is also used to form perceptions about intangible aspects such as quality and must not be neglected due to the lower importance rating.

- **Multi–culturality/diversity**

Institutions must aim to attract a diverse student body by attracting international students as well as more domestic students from different ethnical and minority groups. A higher education institution needs to project a multi-cultural image, especially when recruiting Black African, Indian or Coloured students. Higher education institutions should aim to build successful partnerships with multi-cultural, diverse institutions and associations, by participating in diversity conferences.

- **Social life**

Although social life only ranked eighteenth, students are social beings and therefore portraying the social side of student life in advertising aimed at prospective students is recommended. This may also be a motive that students may be reluctant to admit and may be more important than the results show. Social life could be integrated with the attractiveness of a campus as well as image and could play a supportive role in an advertising campaign. Responses to the importance differed, as this factor had a high standard deviation, and the results suggest that this factor is especially important for Afrikaans speaking, male Caucasian students, who reported the highest mean values.

- **On-campus housing**

Although on-campus housing was not under the top 10 choice factors, this factor had a high standard deviation, which means that students varied in their responses. It appears that this factor is important to Afrikaans speaking female Caucasian students and possibly their parents. Institutions need to provide student support in an appropriate range of housing alternatives that meet the needs of a diverse student population. On-campus housing could also be linked to social aspects as well as safety and location to make an institution more attractive. On-campus living arrangements can potentially add greatly to a student's intellectual stimulation and personal growth. Improving this aspect can contribute to students positively evaluating their overall education and could be integrated with social life and could even reflect on the image of an institution.

- **Sport programmes**

It is of interest to note that sport programmes were not indicated as an important influence on higher education choice in general; however, responses varied and results indicated that it is especially important for male Caucasian, Indian and Coloured students. This fact could also be linked to social life and mention could be made of sport achievements through different media as well as emphasising the publicity that an institution receives through mass media. The different sport programmes offered as well as awards and accomplishments of their sports teams could also be mentioned in websites and in brochures or newsletters to make students aware of the sport programmes available. Well-known sport people from the institution could be used in fundraising, for publicity and for recruiting purposes. Institutions could focus on gyms, health and fitness programmes as well as leisure activities.

- **Friends, brother/sister or parents attended the institution**

As these three factors received the lowest ranking, it indicates that students are not really influenced by reference groups such as their friends or family members. The low ranking may also be due to the fact that their parents or siblings did not attend any higher education institution and consequently there is no tradition to follow. However, the results from the information sources section showed that they do make use of these groups as sources of information. Therefore, it is still important for institutions to build relationships with parents and alumni, as they are an important source of information for prospective students.

The next section will make recommendations based on the importance that different socio-demographic groups attach to choice factors.

7.2.3.2 Recommendations regarding the importance of choice factors according to gender, language, ethnic background and university attended

- **Gender**

The findings showed that males and females differ according to the importance they attach to choice factors. Institutions that want to target females in general or attract more females in certain programmes should focus on the choice factors that were more important to females. They can therefore focus on their wide choice of subjects/courses, high quality of teaching, accessibility due to their entry requirements, good value for money and reasonable, competitive fees, safe and secure learning environment, availability of ample on-campus housing, a multi-cultural diverse student population, being an internationally acclaimed institution, and providing qualifications that will enhance employment prospects.

Institutions wanting to recruit males could emphasise the choice factors that males indicated as more important to them, such as the variety of sport programmes, social life on campus, and following the tradition of attending an institution that their brother/sister and/or friends attended or are attending.

Instead of just focusing on the choice factors where significant differences were found between the gender groups, institutions should also be aware of the top 10 choice factors for males and females. Table 7.1 provides the top 10 choice factors according to importance for males and females.

Table 7.1:   Top 10 choice factors according to gender

No	Male	Female
1	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching
2	Employment prospects	Campus safety and security
3	Academic facilities	Employment prospects
4	Campus safety and security	International links
5	International links	Academic facilities
6	Language policy	Language policy
7	Image	Image
8	Academic reputation	Flexible study mode
9	Flexible study mode	Wide choice of subjects/courses
10	Wide choice of subjects/courses	Academic reputation

Higher education institutions wanting to make use of a generic marketing and communication approach can focus on the choice factor similarities in the top 10. However, although the top 10 choice factors are similar for males and females, their ranking order differ. For example, acadmic reputation is the eighth important factor for males but tenth on the females' top 10 list, whereas campus safety are second on the females' list, but fourth on the males' top 10.

- **Language groups**

Significant difference was found for 16 of the 23 choice factors, signalling that different language groups differ on the importance they attach to choice factor, thus implying that institutions that want to target specific language groups need to focus on the factors most important to each language group. One way is to look at which language groups reported the highest mean values for each individual choice. In this instance, African language speaking students reported the highest mean values of all three language groups to: wide choice of subjects, entry requirements, fees, academic reputation, financial assistance, links with the industry, multi-culturality/diversity, international links, employment prospects, and flexible study modes. Afrikaans speaking students reported the highest mean values for quality of teaching, sport programmes, social life, attractiveness of campus, campus safety and security, on-campus housing, parents attended the institution, brothers and sisters attended the

institution, friends attended the institution, language policy, international links and the image of a university. English speaking students reported the highest mean values for academic facilities and the location of the university.

However, this approach (mean values) does not provide the complete picture of which factors are the most important for each language group. Therefore, it is also necessary for institutions to take a purely descriptive approach by paying attention to the top 10 choice factors for each language group. Table 7.2 shows the top 10 choice factors per language group.

Table 7.2:   Top 10 choice factors per language group

	African	Afrikaans	English
1	Employment prospects	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching
2	Quality of teaching	Employment prospects	Employment prospects
3	Campus safety and security	Campus safety and security	Academic facilities
4	International links	Language policy	Campus safety and security
5	Academic facilities	International links	Academic reputation
6	Flexible study mode	Academic facilities	International links
7	Wide choice of subjects/courses	Image	Flexible study mode
8	Image	Flexible study mode	Wide choice of subjects/courses
9	Language policy	Wide choice of subjects/courses	Location
10	Links with the industry	Academic reputation	Links with the industry

Higher education institutions that specifically aim to attract African language speaking students can make use of African languages in their advertising campaigns and focus specifically on: employment prospects, quality of teaching, campus safety and security, international links, academic facilities, flexible study modes, wide choice of subjects/courses, image, language policy and lastly links with the industry. Thus, targeting African speaking students with the message that "attending the institution will improve their chances of employment as the institution provides high quality teaching in a safe environment with international links" will definitely get their attention.

When trying to recruit Afrikaans speaking students, instead of just using Afrikaans in communication to prospective students, institutions can also focus on the following

choice factors in their marketing strategies: quality of teaching, employment prospects, campus safety and security, language policy, international links, academic facilities, image, flexible study modes, wide choice of subjects/courses, and academic reputation.

English speaking students will be more attracted by communication and promotion in English, especially stressing the institution's performance on quality of teaching, employment prospects, academic facilities, campus safety and security, academic reputation, international links, flexible study modes, wide choice of subjects/courses, location and links with the industry.

Higher education institutions wanting to make use of a generic marketing and communication approach can focus on the choice factor similarities in the top 10 list. However, although the majority of choice factors in the top 10 for all three language groups are similar, institutions must take note that their ranking order differ and that they must stress their convenient location for the English speaking students and mention their good academic reputation to Afrikaans speaking students.

- **Higher education institution attended**

The six higher education institutions that participated in the study, as well as other higher education institutions located close to them, can benefit from paying attention to which factors their students rated the most important compared to the other institutions together with the top ten choice factors identified by students from each institution. These institutions must determine how well they are currently performing on each of these factors and attempt to improve where possible, as these factors are the way in which they need to attract prospective students and differentiate themselves from the other institutions.

Below is a discussion of the institutions that reported the highest mean values for each of the choice factors. Students from the University of Johannesburg reported the highest mean values for academic reputation, while students from the University of the Free State reported the highest mean values for: wide choice of subjects, on-campus

housing, parents attended the institution, brothers/sisters attended the institution, friends attended the institution, financial assistance and flexible study modes. The students of Tshwane University of Technology-Witbank campus did not report the highest mean values for any of the individual choice factors. The University of North-West had the highest mean value for quality of teaching, sport programmes, social life, campus attractiveness, language polices, international links and the image of the university. The University of Pretoria had the highest importance for the location of an institution of all six institutions. Students from the University of KwaZulu Natal indicated the highest mean values for academic facilities, entry requirements, fees, location, campus safety, links with industry, multi-culturality as well as flexible study modes.

Irrespective of mean values of each choice factor, institutions should also have a descriptive focus and be aware and make use of the ten most important choice factors identified by their students. Table 7.3 shows the top 10 choice factors for each institution.

Although the majority of the top 10 factors seem to be similar, there are however differences in the rankings. Institutions must focus on those choice factors that are unique in the top 10 if they want to differentiate their institution.

Table 7.3:   Top 10 choice factors according to institution attended

	UJ	UP	UFS	UNKZN	UNW	TUT
1	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching	Employment prospects
2	Employment prospects	Employment prospects	Campus safety and security	Campus safety and security	Employment prospects	Quality of teaching
3	Academic facilities	Campus safety and security	Employment prospects	Employment prospects	Language policy	Campus safety and security
4	Campus safety and security	Academic facilities	Academic facilities	Academic facilities	Campus safety and security	International links
5	Academic reputation	International links	Flexible study mode	Image	International links	Language policy
6	International links	Language policy	International links	Flexible study mode	Image	Wide choice of subjects
7	Flexible study mode	Wide choice of subjects	Image	Academic reputation	Academic facilities	Flexible study mode
8	Wide choice of subjects	Image	Academic reputation	International links	Financial assistance	Image
9	Image	Academic reputation	Language policy	Entry requirements	On-campus housing	Academic facilities
10	Links with industry	Flexible study mode	Wide choice of subjects	Fees	Academic reputation	Academic reputation

The six higher education institutions that partook in the study can make use of the top 10 choice factors identified by their students as very important. The institutions can make use of these factors to recruit new students and to ensure that they constantly excel in these factors to retain their current students.

The University of Johannesburg needs to communicate to prospective students that they strive for a high quality of teaching, that their degrees will ensure better employment prospects for their students, that they have outstanding academic facilities, that their campus safety and security is very good, that they have a good academic reputation, that they have multiple international links, that they provide flexible study modes to students as well as having a wide choice of subjects, while projecting a positive image and liaising with industry.

The University of Pretoria could firstly focus on their quality of teaching and ensure that their qualifications will enhance students' prospects of being employed. They also need to attempt to provide a safe and secure learning environment with outstanding academic facilities, as well as emphasise their international links and making provision

for students from different language groups, both in lecturing and promotional activities. They must provide students with a wide choice of subjects while projecting a positive image as an institution with a good academic reputation with flexible study modes for their students.

The University of the Free State also needs to focus on the quality of teaching and campus safety and security, employment prospects, academic facilities, flexible study modes, international links, image, academic reputation, language, and a wide choice of subjects. This will ensure that they attract prospective students.

The University of KwaZulu Natal could focus on promoting their high quality of teaching in a safe environment that will enable students to gain employment. They need to maintain their academic facilities and project an image of the institution with a good academic reputation that provides flexible study modes to their students and have international links. They also need to state their accessible entry requirements in their brochures, newsletters and websites.

The University of North-West needs to focus on their quality of teaching, possible employment prospects and language policy when recruiting prospective students. They also need to ensure that their campus is safe and that they emphasise the fact that they have strong international links, project a positive image, have good academic facilities, provide financial assistance and on-campus housing, as well as have a good academic reputation.

Interesting to note is that the students of UKZN were the only group that rated fees and entry requirements among the top 10. Links with industry could be used to recruit students to UJ. UNW should concentrate on the fact that the students indicated financial assistance and on-campus housing, which none of their other institutions' students have included in their top 10. Although language policies were not included in the top 10 of UJ and UKZN, all four the other institutions should pay special attention to their language policies.

It is apparent that there are a lot of similarities in the top ten choice factors of the six institutions. This means that institutions that want to attract good quality students will

have to outperform the other institutions or create a niche for themselves by focusing on one or two of these factors.

• **Ethnic groups**

By looking at which ethnic group attached the highest importance to each individual choice factor, institutions can form an idea of which choice factors will appeal to which ethnic group. Black African students reported the highest mean value of all three groups for wide choice of subjects, financial assistance, links with the industry and international links. Caucasian students had higher means than the other groups for quality of teaching, sport programmes, social life on campus, attractiveness of campus, on-campus housing, parents attended the institution, brothers and sisters attended the institution as well as the language policy. The third ethnic groups that comprised mainly of Indian and Coloured students reported the highest mean values for academic facilities, entry requirements, fees, location, campus safety and security, academic reputation, multi-culturality, employment prospects, flexible study mode and the image of the university.

Regardless of the mean values of each choice factor, institutions should also consider a descriptive approach by compiling the top 10 choice factors for each ethnic group. This information will aid them to better understand the needs of different ethnic groups and aid them in developing effective marketing strategies. Table 7.4 indicates the top 10 choice factors for each ethnic group.

Table 7.4:   Top 10 choice factors according to ethnic orientation

	Black African	Other (Indian and Coloured)	Caucasian
1	Employment prospects	Quality of teaching	Quality of teaching
2	Quality of teaching	Employment prospects	Employment prospects
3	Campus safety and security	Campus safety and security	Campus safety and security
4	International links	Academic facilities	Academic facilities
5	Academic facilities	International links	International links
6	Flexible study mode	Image	Language
7	Wide choice of subjects/courses	Flexible study mode	Image
8	Academic reputation	Academic reputation	Academic reputation
9	Image	Language	Flexible study mode
10	Language	Fees	Wide choice of subjects/courses

Higher education institutions that want to target Black African students should firstly mention the potential employment prospects that a qualification from their institution would secure. Secondly, they must ensure high quality of teaching in a safe and secure environment. They also need to stress the fact that they have multiple international links and that their academic facilities are of a high standard. Their promotional campaigns should further focus on flexible study modes, wide choice of subjects and courses, academic reputation, image and language policy.

In order to attract Indian and Coloured students, institutions should consider promoting their institutions as performing well on the following choice factors: quality of teaching, employment prospects, campus safety and security, academic facilities, international links, image, flexible study modes, academic reputation, language policies and fees. (For statistical purposes, the third group labelled as "other" and consisting of mainly Coloured and Indian students were formed - refer to Chapter 5. It should however be noted that there may be differences between the two groups.)

If an institution wants to target Caucasian students, they need to focus on the factors most important to that specific group, namely: quality of teaching, employment prospects, campus safety and security, academic facilities, international links, language policies, image, academic reputation, flexible study mode and wide choice of subjects/courses.

Although there are differences in the ranking of the top 10 choice factors per ethnic group, gender group, language group and university attended, as confirmed in the hypotheses, the majority of choice factors in the top 10 are similar. This implies that higher education institutions that do not wish to recruit one specific group can focus on the top five or 10 generic choice factors to appeal to a broad student market. The number of choice factors that institutions choose to focus on will depend on their performance levels on the factors as well as the resources available and the image and position they are trying to create for themselves.

7.3   MAIN FINDINGS RELATING TO INFORMATION SOURCES

To effectively communicate with current and prospective students, it is important that higher education institutions are aware of the best way to reach students. As indicated in the previous section on choice factors, it is imperative that higher education institutions should make mention of their standing or performance on the important choice factors. However, if this information does not reach students, the effort is in vain. Therefore, it is vital that institutions should know how to reach their current and prospective students by making use of the most effective communication media or information sources. Section 7.3.1 will highlight the main findings regarding the usefulness of the different information sources investigated in this study.

7.3.1 CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE MAIN FINDINGS ON INFORMATION SOURCES

Students indicated campus visits and open days as the most useful information source, followed by university websites, university publications, word-of-mouth, alumni, events on campus, school visits by university staff, high school teachers, parents, advertisements in magazines and newspapers, advertisements on radio and advertisements on television.

To gain more insight into the usefulness of the 12 sources investigated, it was decided to form three groups, namely: university related information sources consisting of school visits, publications, websites and campus visits/open days; reference group

related information sources consisting of alumni, parents, high school teachers and word-of-mouth; and mass media related information sources consisting of advertisements on radio, television, magazines/newspapers and campus events.

Based on the above-mentioned classification, the findings indicated the most useful information sources as those coming directly from a higher education institution, such as open days, websites and publications, while mass media related information sources such as advertisements in magazines and newspapers and on television and radio were the least useful.

Comparisons were made between gender, ethnic groups and institution attended, and the usefulness of the three groups of information sources. The results revealed certain tendencies and will be briefly mentioned below.

The findings of university related information sources indicated that females tended to rate all four university related information sources (school visits, publications, websites and campus visits and open days) as more useful than males. However, both males and females indicated school visits as the least useful and campus visits as the most useful university related information source.

All four ethnic groups indicated school visits as the least useful and all the groups, except Coloured students, indicated open days as the most useful. Coloured students indicated websites as the most useful university related information source. Black African students and Caucasian students tended to rate the usefulness of school visits much higher than Indian and Coloured students. Almost 35 percent of Coloured students rated school visits as poor to very poor. Black African and Coloured students rated the usefulness of university publications and websites much higher than Caucasian or Indian students. Indian students tended to rate the usefulness of university publications and websites the lowest of all four ethnic groups.

Four of the six higher education institutions rated campus visits and open days as the most useful, except two that indicated websites as the most useful. However, all six indicated school visits as the least useful.

It can therefore be concluded that although university related information sources are very useful, school visits are not as useful as open days and campus visits, websites and publications.

Females rated all four reference group related sources (parents, high school teachers, alumni and word-of-mouth) as more useful than their male counterparts. Both genders however indicated word-of-mouth as the most useful source, while males viewed high school teachers as the least useful and females viewed their parents as least useful.

Almost all the ethnic groups indicated word-of-mouth as the most useful, except Coloured students, who indicated high school teachers as the most useful. Black African, Coloured and Indian students indicated parents as the least useful, while Caucasian students indicated high school teachers as the least useful.

The findings showed that students from five of the institutions indicated word-of-mouth as the most useful of all the reference group related sources, except students from TUT, who indicated high school teachers as the most useful. The students of TUT and UKZN indicated that alumni were the least useful source, while UJ indicated parents as the least useful. The other three institutions indicated high school teachers as the least useful.

Females also rated the four mass media sources (campus events, magazines, and radio and TV advertisements) as more useful than males. Both males and females indicated campus events as the most useful mass media source. It seems that ethnic groups differed concerning the most useful mass media information source. Black African and Indian students indicated magazines and newspapers as the most useful of all the mass media related information sources, while Coloured students preferred advertisements on radio and Caucasian students preferred campus events.

Five of the six institutions viewed campus events as the most useful, with TUT indicating magazine advertisements as the most useful mass media related information source. Males and females, all four ethnic groups and students from all six institutions indicated television advertisements as the least useful mass media information source.

The study investigated the relationship between the distance of students' permanent homes and the higher education institution they were attending as well as the use of open days and campus visits as information sources. The results of this study did not show a significant difference between the distance from students' permanent homes in terms of the higher education institutions they attended and the use of open days and campus visits as an information source.

Previous international studies on information sources also implied a relationship between students' residence in a province in which the higher education institution is located, and the use of word-of-mouth as an information source, but the result of this study did not show a significant difference between students that are resident in the province in which the higher education institution are located, and the use of word-of-mouth as an information source.

The study investigated the relation between students' academic ability and the use of websites. The results of this study did not show a significant difference between students of different academic standing and the use of websites as an information source.

The next section will address the implications of the findings highlighted above.

7.3.2   IMPLICATIONS OF THE MAIN FINDINGS OF INFORMATION SOURCES

Higher education institutions need to make use of a variety of useful information sources and a combination of information sources to ensure they reach a diverse student market. It is clear that information directly from the institution, such as brochures, newsletters, websites, school visits and campus visits, is the best way to disseminate information to prospective students. Higher education institutions should critically analyse their existing marketing, communication and recruitment strategies by identifying their strengths and weaknesses concerning the most useful information sources.

It is important to note that students' needs and preferences change over time and that the usefulness of information sources may also change in future. Institutions can therefore not keep using successful information sources purely because it worked well in the past and assume that it will always be useful and effective. Institutions need to, from time to time, carefully examine the information sources they use to ensure that they make use of the most effective sources.

For years higher education institutions have fashioned communications strategies based on mass media messages, but times are changing and the Internet era have led to more media opportunities than ever before. Thus, higher education institutions must not be content with their current mix of communication media or even the sources recommended in this study. They need to constantly monitor and be aware of new innovative communication/information sources to reach prospective students. Seeking new methods or information sources will not just ensure effective communication, but also provide a possible way of differentiating and competing with other higher education institutions. The high usefulness of websites clearly indicates a move towards the increased use of technology for communication and recruitment purposes.

Institutions should also carefully choose the source to be used depending on the specific segment of prospective students they want to target as some sources are more useful than others for different groupings. The information sources that institutions make use of is yet another way to build their image and differentiate themselves from other institutions. Higher education institutions that are targeting a specific niche market should make use of more focused communication sources such as brochures or newsletters.

Higher education institutions should align, balance and train their recruitment teams to optimise the most useful information sources. Proper planning is necessary to ensure sufficient resources such as funding, personnel and technology to effectively disseminate information to prospective students. Appointing specific people to manage different sources, as well as coordinating all the sources used in communication and promotions campaigns, is vital to ensure a uniform message to reach prospective students. They must furthermore ensure that they have a system in place for accurate and timely communications (letter, e-mail, telephone, personal) with prospective

students throughout the recruitment process (campus visits, school visits). Support personnel, technologies and an administrative system for all campus events, school visits and other communications contribute to the success of a communication campaign.

Communication and recruitment campaigns must be scheduled with sensitivity to sport, academic, social and extra-curriculum activities as well as public holidays, seeing that conflicting dates can reduce the effectiveness of the information sources used, especially when organising an open day, campus event or school visit.

Higher education institutions need to evaluate the impact of the communication strategies, tools and information sources they are using. Advertising expenditure should be worthwhile, and if not, institutions can redirect those funds from mass media to more direct marketing activities that provide information to prospective students. It is very important for higher education institutions to remember that no matter which source or combination of sources they make use of to communicate to their prospective and current students, the communication should sound and feel the same across the various sources. Thus, institutions should aim for message integration that is coordinated and consistent throughout the institution. In order for a higher education institution to deliver a consistent message, it is important that all promotions and communications go through a marketing or communication office.

Based on the specific situation each higher education institution faces regarding resource availability and current information sources used, the following recommendations may be useful.

7.3.3   RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING INFORMATION SOURCES

For any promotional or communication strategy to work well, it is important for higher education institutions to determine and decide which media source or a combination of sources to use in order to effectively communicate information about their institutions. Although it is recommended that institutions mainly make use of and focus on the sources identified as most useful, all the sources will be highlighted (in ranking order of usefulness), as institutions may differ on their existing communication

mediums/information sources used and resources and expertise available. Although sources are explained separately, it is important for higher education institutions to integrate and combine the information sources to improve the overall effectiveness and reach of its communication and promotional strategies.

7.3.3.1 Recommendations regarding the individual information sources

- **Campus visits and open days**

It is evident from the findings that open days and campus visits are very useful sources of information. As respondents indicated open days and campus visits as the most useful source of information, institutions should focus on providing informative open days. Open days provide an opportunity for higher education institutions to provide information on their degrees and courses as well as other activities for prospective students, their families, alumni and the community. The main focus of a campus visit or open day should be to provide academic advice to prospective students. Institutions must ensure that staff working at the open day is knowledgeable and available to answer questions and provide expert academic advice on choosing a course, qualifications, and possible job opportunities. Offering departmental and campus tours, as well as interactive demonstrations, can provide prospective students and their families with a real insight into studying/enrolling at the institutions. The library, bookshops, residential housing and other facilities of interest should all be open to be viewed. Open days can thus be used to create awareness of courses and programmes offered, the instructional environment and support services. They can also be used as opportunities to change perceptions of prospective students and can be viewed as opportunities to build relationships with prospective students and their families.

Special effort should be made to invite secondary schools in the vicinity of the institution by means of invitations or letters or even a recruitment campaign during school visits. Higher education institutions should remember to include parents in their target market for open days and campus visits. Personalised invitations could also be sent to parents of top performing Grade 12 learners, as direct marketing from the

institution, as seen in the findings, are more effective than mass marketing tools such as promoting an open day on radio.

Academics and even current students need to recognise their roles as sales people during open days. They must be trained to answer expected questions and to project an image that will produce a favourable reaction during campus visits and open days. Although open days have the opportunity to bring hundreds of prospective students to a higher education institution, the limitation is that there is often little opportunity for one-on-one communication. Hosting an open day is usually to provide a more general idea about institutions. However, higher education institutions should try to provide more specific information during open days instead of just providing general information in order to encourage students to apply and enrol. Institutions must be aware of the fact that open days are not only effective for recruiting prospective students and distributing information, but it also provides a valuable initial orientation opportunity. Therefore, institutions must ensure that they do not create a superficial impression that is a poor representation of the actual academic experiences being offered by the institution.

For a higher education institution, the success of an open day depends on how many students attend the day and then go on to apply at the institution. The main benefit of an open day for prospective students is that it allows them to get a feel of the institution and obtain as much information as possible about their chosen course. It is vital that the institution will give a good impression, as often it will make or break a prospective student's decision.

- **Websites**

The usefulness of websites creates excellent opportunities for institutions to quickly and effectively make information available to prospective students, as well as constantly update their information. Websites are not just a tool for dissemination of information, but can also be used for making announcements. Since institutions' websites are being widely used by prospective students, the web image help to form the institution's image and therefore careful attention must be given to the look and feel

of websites. Higher education institutions must ensure that their websites are user friendly and easily accessible, as students struggling to access or use a website may form a bad impression of the institution. Websites are also an information source where the institution has a degree of control over what is said, how and when it is said, opposed to open days and campus events where standardisation and control is more restricted.

An up-to-date, user friendly website also projects the image of an institution on the forefront of computer technology. It is recommended that higher education institutions visit other higher education institutions' websites as well as those of organisations in industry known for their well-planned websites. This will ensure that they are up to standard and if not, can invest in specialists to help with the website development and administration. As prospective students, like other customers today, often demand 24/7 access to a company and whose first contact point is the website, it is important to ensure that prospective students have access to the relevant information through self-service strategies. Making use of self-service strategies via websites provides information to prospective students on courses, supporting services and contact details, while reducing the cost of communication.

It is imperative for higher education institutions to have a website strategy and that their websites should be extensions of their marketing plans, which ultimately extend the position of their institutions. Higher education institutions devising a website strategy should ensure that their site is always current and appealing and that they have their own online identity. Since a website is an extension of the institution's brand, they must ensure that the website address is visible on everything from brochures to letterheads. It is further recommended that institutions determine how many website changes are needed. Different design elements such as speed, function, graphics, content and how it could complement their brand, should also be considered. It is also important for institutions to remember to plan for and apply the available resources in terms of funds and human resources required to maintain their websites and to decide on the level of integration with the rest of the institution. One such an example is online applications. Higher education institutions should also ensure that their website is visible to search engines and it is therefore important to identify which search engines and specific search phrase will drive the most traffic to an institution's

website. Websites are a very effective, affordable and measurable way for higher education institutions to create awareness and market their institution to prospective students and will become even more popular in future.

- **University publications (newsletters and brochures)**

Based on the findings, it is recommended that higher education institutions should make use of more targeted promotional material such as brochures and newsletters. Higher education institutions planning on using university publications such as brochures to reach their prospective students need to consider the content and design of the publication, how to distribute it and how to reach prospective students, as well as the cost and timeframe. If institutions do not have enough expertise to design their own brochures or newsletters, it is advised that they make use of external specialists to help them design a professional brochure that will reflect their image. Publications can be used in conjunction with other sources such as school visits, open days and even be put on the website of the institution. It is important for institutions to determine what type of information prospective students need and to design their brochures accordingly, thus ensuring complete, accurate and comprehensive information without being dull.

Institutions should give special attention to the front and back covers of the brochures, as these covers can entice prospective students to read the brochure. The front cover should state some of the benefits of attending the institution or provide thought-provoking statements to motivate the prospective student to read it. Higher education institutions should furthermore ensure that information in the brochure or newsletter has a logical flow. For a long brochure, a list of contents in bold and separated from the rest of the text is essential and should stress how the prospective student can benefit from attending the institution. Institutions should try to be creative and innovative in their publication design to ensure that their brochure or newsletter stands out, for instance by giving the brochure an interesting shape or size. Higher education institutions should also remember to include an invitation to prospective students to take action by calling a toll-free number for further information, enrol now, visit the website for an online application, or visit the administration office or faculty.

- **Word-of-mouth**

Higher education institutions must ensure that current students, alumni, industry, high school teachers and other well-connected people that have influence in their communications, are part of the targeted groups to be informed about the strengths, accomplishments and successes of the institution. If higher education institutions want to make use of word-of-mouth advertising to their advantage, they should remember to determine what is currently said about their institution by conducting research by means of focus groups. They need to be aware of the fact that there might be cultural differences and be adaptable and flexible in their communication. Word-of-mouth marketing is effective when it inspires conversation about the institution. Thus, positive publicity, high quality services and outreach programmes to communities are ways in which institutions can encourage positive word-of-mouth. Institutions lacking the necessary skills should employ the help of marketing experts to help them to manage their word-of-mouth campaigns. Word-of-mouth marketing is truly successful if it motivates prospective students to enrol at institutions and therefore institutions should make sure it is a positive conversation. Keeping track of who is spreading the word by asking prospective students that apply where they heard about the institution is another way of managing word-of-mouth.

Word-of-mouth is usually linked with other information sources such open days, campus events, radio advertisements or school visits and must not be perused in isolation, as it is a very powerful information source due to the fact that it is perceived as credible and real. Ensuring satisfied current students and alumni will ensure positive word-of-mouth. Institutions can encourage current students with "bring-a-friend-along" campaigns when they market their open days and even consider giving small rewards to current students or alumni that refer students to their institutions.

- **Alumni**

A cultivation of alumni can serve a number of purposes. Alumni could be used in student recruitment as well as provides a source of publicity for the institution as the achievement of past students is often newsworthy. Moreover, an alumni network can

unlock doors that lead to research funding, consultancy, student placements, and even donations or sponsorships. As students indicate alumni as a very useful source of information, they are in a prominent position not just as a source of information, but also because they could influence the image of a higher education institution. Institutions should ensure that their alumni are fully satisfied, since they are used as an information source by prospective students. Satisfied alumni and current students can impact positively on prospective students and parents by spreading positive word-of-mouth.

Institutions can make use of testimonials by alumni to encourage prospective students to enrol at the institution and project a positive image to the broader public. As alumni are regarded as a very useful source of information, they can be combined with other sources such as school visits and open days. Alumni can visit their former high schools to promote and create awareness of the institution. Alumni could be used at schools to invite prospective students to open days or distribute brochures or newsletters. Alumni is such a useful source of information that it is imperative that institutions have an up-to-date alumni list to ensure that they are kept informed about the institution's activities and achievements and possibly start an alumni office or alumni relations if they do not yet have such a division.

Alumni who currently occupy influential positions in both the public and private sector could be used to an institution's advantage for creating a positive image by spreading positive word-of-mouth, fundraising and recruiting. They can be used as guest lecturers as well as being possible employers of students or even supplying bursaries or sponsorships. They can act as role models and opinion leaders and prospective students can emulate them by following in their footsteps, which include attending the same higher education institution. Higher education institutions need to manage their alumni through an alumni relations office or alumni association. This office should take responsibility of keeping a database, process all alumni correspondence and inquiries, organise alumni meetings, arrange events, identify successful graduates, keep alumni websites updated and stay in touch with alumni of the institutions. Searle (2007:6-7) even suggest offering a career-service office or portal for alumni to aid in job search. The alumni office should also provide the opportunity for alumni to contribute financial and other meaningful ways to the advancement of the institution. It is essential that

alumni are kept up-to-date with activities and events on campus, the latest academic developments as well as academic and sport accomplishments. Alumni could assist higher education institutions to gain insight into the image of the institution (through online surveys), help to recruit prospective students of outstanding quality and to identify possible donors. Thus, one of higher education institutions' marketing goals needs to be the visible increase in alumni satisfaction.

- **Campus events**

Prospective students get a feel for an institution when they attend events on campus. It is important that institutions realise the value of such events and use it to their advantage. Any event hosted on campus, may it be sports, music or cultural, must be seen as a potential marketing and communication opportunity. If the institution itself is hosting the event, it is important that it should be done in a professionally organised manner to reflect the appropriate image of the institution. A campus events coordinator may be helpful to ensure a high quality event in line with the institution's image. Choosing events to host on campus is important, as these events reflect what the institution stands for and what prospective students attending such an event might expect to experience at the institution once enrolled. This means that an institution emphasising its excellent sport programmes in recruitment material will try to host enough sporting events to reflect this.

Campus events are yet another way of creating positive word-of-mouth and to gain publicity about the institution. An important component of campus events is the effective marketing and timing of such events. Events reflect the institution's image and must be well-planned and well-executed, otherwise it will reflect badly on the institution's image and possibly create negative word-of-mouth.

- **School visits**

Higher education institutions that want a more focused approach to marketing and recruiting can make use of school visits. Visiting feeder schools on a continuous basis to disseminate information and to hold talks at school career functions can be a very

effective way of recruiting and communicating with prospective students. As findings suggest that school visits are viewed as a useful source of information for the majority of students, higher education institutions should organise information sessions at secondary schools in its target market. This could be presented as mini open days including general information, brochures and videos. Institutions can also consider producing a newsletter especially for high schools, booklets or brochures. Institutions must appoint a department or person responsible for co-coordinating the school visits with high school teachers and ensure that high schools are invited to open days or that campus tours are arranged. Alumni and current students could also be used in school visits to talk to prospective students. School visits should not only be aimed at prospective students, but also pose a good opportunity to build relationships with teachers and parents. Higher education institutions can lastly develop customised marketing strategies for individual high schools in their feeding areas, depending on their specific needs.

- **High school teachers**

Secondary school teachers could be institutions' greatest allies in helping students making a decision about enrolling at a higher education institution. Institutions should attempt to get the support of high school teachers. They can influence the prospective students as they are uniquely positioned in high schools to shape the early perceptions of prospective students about their higher education options. It is therefore also imperative to know their opinions and attitudes towards the institution and if need be, will need to be researched or investigated through, for example, personal interviews. Such research can provide information that prospective students may seek, such as financial aid information, academic counselling, and higher education options.

Although high school teachers are not the only source of information, their perceptions have some influence on the opinions of prospective students and often their parents. High school teachers should be equipped with the necessary information so that they can assist high school learners in making informed choices regarding entry into higher education. This includes information about the institution in general, but also information regarding the respective degrees and/or faculty and possible career

opportunities. Institutions are therefore advised to enhance communication efforts by visiting secondary schools and building relationships with teachers, particularly career guidance officials, and focus especially on the schools in the provinces where the majority of their students come from. By providing training and information to teachers, they can distribute information to their prospective students. A group or department responsible for coordinating school liaising activities is thus necessary. Including current students and alumni to visit their former high schools can also be considered.

- **Parents**

The results support the findings of Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), who determined that parental influence on schooling decisions in England seem to wane as children get older. Parents rated ninth out of the twelve information sources. Although parents may not be the most useful information source used by prospective students, research do suggest that they play a very important role in encouraging the children from a young age to further their studies at higher education institutions. It is also possible that parents ranked low because the parents of students of previously disadvantaged groups do not have sufficient information on higher education institutions. This may possibly show a gap in institutions' marketing toward parents. Higher education institutions should consider sending marketing information to parents as well as invitations to events such as open days. Institutions could especially focus on the parents of high performance learners in secondary schools to encourage a good quality student to enrol at the institution.

For communication purposes, it is important to reach the parents of prospective students. The extent to which parents are used as a source of information is surprisingly small, since their attitudes and options are usually assumed to be extremely important in the formation of educational ambitions. The explanation may be that parents have a strong influence on the aspiration to continue studying, but at the actual point of higher education selection, parents may have a lesser influence on the specific choice due to gradual independence of a prospective student or limited knowledge of parents about tertiary fields. As parents may have a bigger influence when learners are still in high school, it is important for institutions to communicate to

parents throughout the child's high school years. It may be worthwhile for higher education institutions to include parents in their promotional material by sending brochures to them as well and inviting them to open days. A parents' day or parent orientation is an excellent way of providing information and knowledge about the institution, keeping in mind that parents may be looking for different information than the prospective student, for example career development, health and safety on campus, and transport. Corresponding with parents of high school achievers through personal invitations to open days or information on bursary and fees can prove to be beneficial to institutions.

- **Advertisements in magazines, newspapers, radio and television**

As advertising on radio, television, and magazines were not indicated as very useful, higher education institutions that currently make use of these mass media should take note that they may not be reaching prospective students effectively. Institutions planning to make use of mass media to communicate or recruit prospective students must do market research to determine which magazines, newspapers, radio stations or television stations prospective students are exposed to as well as which approach to use in order to attract their attention. Further research needs to be conducted to determine why mass media is not a source of choice and how to use it more effectively as part of a communication campaign. It may be that prospective students are so used to information overload that mass media is not a good way to reach this group.

The fact that students do not see mass media information sources as useful suggests a range of things. It could be that they find the information provided through these channels as inadequate or misleading, or it may be that prospective students do not find these sources as trustworthy for their decision-making. Higher education institutions should rather focus on how to make better use of mass media through publicity such as news releases, targeted media plans and media liaison, in order to ensure word-of-mouth marketing.

Although students indicated that they also make use of other sources, they did not specify which sources they refer to. Higher education institutions should take

cognisance of the fact that there are possibly other useful information sources that warrant further investigation. Institutions must not be content with only focusing on the useful information sources identified in this study, as needs and preference may change and so may the information sources that students find useful. Although the findings from this study is a good starting point when developing or adapting current communication and recruitment strategies, institutions must not limit themselves to the 12 sources identified and investigated in the study and should always try to find new and innovative ways to communicate and recruit prospective students.

The next section will make recommendations based on the usefulness that different socio-demographic groups attach to the individual information sources.

7.3.3.2 Recommendations regarding the usefulness of information sources according to gender, ethnic background and university attended

- **Gender**

By looking at which gender group attached the highest usefulness (by combining the good and excellent responses for each source) to each information source, institutions can form an idea of which sources to use to reach the specific grouping. Females tended to rate all the information sources as more useful than males and therefore institutions need to look at the ranking order of the individual sources for each gender to gain more insight. Table 7.5 indicates the usefulness in ranking order of the information sources for male and females.

Table 7.5:   Usefulness of information sources according to gender

No	Male	Female
1	Open days & campus visits	Open days & campus visits
2	Websites	Websites
3	University publications	University publications
4	Word-of-mouth	Word-of-mouth
5	Campus events	School visits
6	School visits	Alumni
7	Alumni	Campus events
8	Parents	High school teachers
9	High school teachers	Parents
10	Magazine and newspaper advertisements	Magazine and newspaper advertisements
11	Radio advertisements	Radio advertisements
12	Television advertisements	Television advertisements

It is evident that the four most useful and three least useful information sources are identical for both males and females. Institutions that want to communicate to both genders should therefore make use of open days, websites, university publications and word-of-mouth. For females, school visits and alumni are more useful than for males, while institutions will benefit by making use of campus events and parents to communicate and recruit, especially males.

- **Ethnic orientation**

By looking at which ethnic group attached the highest usefulness to each individual information source, institutions can form an idea of which sources will appeal to which ethnic groups. Institutions that want to communicate especially to Coloured students need to be aware of the fact that they rated the usefulness of advertisements on radio and websites the highest of all four groups. Caucasian students rated campus events, alumni, word-of-mouth, school visits, campus visits and open days the most useful. Higher education institutions recruiting Black African students should keep in mind that advertisements in magazines, newspapers and on television, high school teachers, parents and university publications were rated the most useful by them. Indian students however did not rate any information source as the most useful of all the

ethnic groups and therefore institutions need to also consider each ethnic group's individual ranking order to determine the usefulness of the different information sources. Table 7.6 reflects the usefulness of the information sources according to ethnic orientation.

Table 7.6:   Usefulness of information sources according to ethnic orientation

No	Black African	Coloured	Indian	Caucasian
1	University publications	Websites	Open days and campus visits	Open days and campus visits
2	Open days and campus visits	University publications	Websites	Websites
3	Websites	Open days and campus visits	Word-of-mouth	Word-of-mouth
4	Word-of-mouth	School teachers	University publications	Campus events
5	School teachers	Advertisements on radio	School teachers	University publications
6	School visits	Word-of-mouth	Parents	School visits
7	Alumni	Alumni	School visits	Alumni
8	Parents	Campus events	Alumni	Parents
9	Magazine and newspaper advertisements	School visits	Magazine and newspaper advertisements	School teachers
10	Campus events	Magazine and newspaper advertisements	Campus events	Magazine and newspaper advertisements
11	Advertisements on radio	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on radio	Advertisements on radio
12	Advertisements on television	Parents	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on television

Open days and campus visits, websites, word-of-mouth and university publications can be used by institutions to recruit and communicate to students of all ethnic groups and institutions wanting to recruit a diverse group of students should focus on these sources. Higher education institutions should realise that information directly from them is the most effective way to reach prospective students and to create credible, persuasive communication.

Black African students could best be informed through university publications, open days, websites, word-of-mouth, school teachers and school visits. Integrating school visits and school teachers could be a very useful and effective way of communicating to Black African students. Institutions should however remember that campus events,

in addition to radio and television advertisements, are not very useful information sources for Black African students.

Indian students would best be targeted through open days, websites, word-of-mouth, university publications, school teachers and parents. Indian students could be reached through school teachers and their parents, but campus events are not very useful to them. It might be that institutions should look at the events they host and try to see if they could host more events to attract Indian students and, when hosting events, institutions should also view it as a communication and promotional opportunity.

Caucasian students would be best informed through open days, websites, word-of mouth, campus events, university publications and school visits. Higher education institutions can focus on campus events and school visits to reach Caucasian students. School visits are especially important, since this group do not view school teachers as a very useful source of information and institutions should attempt to also disseminate information to school teachers and try to involve them in school visits to improve their usefulness.

Coloured students would be best informed through websites, university publications, open days, school teachers, campus events and word-of-mouth. Institutions aiming their communication at Coloured students should focus on school teachers and should note that this is the only group who rated radio advertisements as a useful source. Radio advertisements should be very successful when aimed at this group. Institutions should take cognisance of the fact that parents are not useful at all to this group and it may indicate a weakness in the communication or relationships institutions have with parents from this group. Institutions could attempt to improve their communication to parents of Coloured students and build a relationship with these parents to make this a more useful source of information to prospective students.

- **University attended**

By looking at respondents from each higher education institution that partook in the study, institutions could form an idea of how to reach prospective students based on

the views of useful information sources. The respondents from TUT indicated the highest usefulness for university publications, parents, high school teachers, word-of mouth, advertisements on radio, magazines and television, while students for UNW had the highest ratings for school visits, websites, open days, alumni and campus events. As this do not provide a clear indication of the usefulness of sources for all the institutions, it is important to look at the individual rankings according to usefulness for each institution.

This information will aid institutions to better understand which information sources to use in order to communicate, promote and recruit prospective students. Table 7.7 indicates the top 10 choice factors for each institutional group.

Table 7.7:   Usefulness of information sources according to institution attended

No	TUT	UP	UJ	UFS	UNW	UKZN
1	Open days and campus visits	Open days and campus visits	Websites	Websites	Open days and campus visits	Open days and campus visits
2	University publications	Websites	Open days and campus visits	University publications	University publications	Websites
3	Websites	Word-of-mouth	Word-of-mouth	Open days and campus visits	Websites	Word-of-mouth
4	School teachers	Campus events	University publications	Word-of-mouth	Word-of-mouth	University publications
5	School visits	University publications	Alumni	Alumni	Campus events	School teachers
6	Word-of-mouth	Parents	School teachers	Campus events	Alumni	Parents
7	Advertisements in magazines and newspapers	Alumni	School visits	School visits	School visits	School visits
8	Parents	School visits	Campus events	Advertisements in magazines and newspapers	Parents	Alumni
9	Alumni	School teachers	Advertisements in magazines and newspapers	Parents	Advertisements in magazines and newspapers	Campus events
10	Advertisements on the radio	Advertisements in magazines and newspapers	Parents	School teachers	School teachers	Advertisements in magazines and newspapers
11	Campus events	Advertisements on the radio	Advertisements on the radio	Advertisements on the radio	Advertisements on the radio	Advertisements on the radio
12	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on television	Advertisements on television

Higher education institutions in general need to steer away from advertisements on radio, television or in magazines and rather focus on reaching students via websites, publications and open days. They also need to keep in contact with their alumni, as they provide a useful source of information and ensure the spread of positive information through word-of-mouth.

Higher education institutions should pay attention to the usefulness of the information sources, as this may either indicate that they are currently making effective use of the information source or a bad ranking may indicate that they either do not make use of it correctly or that students do not prefer this type of source. Depending on the individual institution and the current recruitment policies and communication strategies, they need to decide on a plan of action to strengthen, improve, change or abort using certain information sources.

In addition to the fact that all the institutions can benefit by making use of open days, websites, word-of-mouth and university publications, the following should be noted.

Interesting is that alumni, which is overall indicated as a very useful source of information (fifth), only ranked ninth at TUT. Campus events are yet another source that is not very useful to students from TUT. This is however the only institution where students ranked magazine and newspapers advertisements as somewhat useful and these could therefore be used effectively to communicate to TUT students.

School teachers, school visits and alumni are valuable information sources for UJ, but they need to improve their communication strategies with their parents in an attempt to improve their usefulness as an information source.

UP should take note that they could really focus on campus events as a unique and effective way of supplying prospective students with information. They might want to pay more attention to school visits and school teachers as well, because they were ranked sixth and seventh out of the twelve sources.

UFS should use campus events and school visits as communication and recruitment opportunities and should also investigate their current communication strategy and

liaising activities with school teachers and parents to try to improve and strengthen their relationship with students.

UNW could make the most of their campus events and alumni to communicate to their prospective students, but they need to pay attention to high school teacher liaising, as this source is not currently viewed as very useful.

UKZN should make use of parents, school visits and school teachers to distribute information to their students, but they should also investigate how they can improve the usefulness of campus events.

The recommendations and implications of the choice factors and information sources ultimately have implications for the marketing strategy of a higher education institution, since it impacts on their products/services, prices, promotions, processes, distribution, people and physical evidence decisions.

Although all the recommendations have been thoroughly discussed, the next section will briefly highlight how the results and findings can possibly impact on a higher education institution's marketing strategy.

7.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS ON AN INSTITUTION'S MARKETING STRATEGY

The development of a marketing strategy involves the coordination and combination of the marketing mix elements and it is the coordination of these elements that enables higher education institutions to meet students' needs and provides value. Higher education institutions need a well-developed, comprehensive marketing strategy that is carefully communicated throughout the institution. The services marketing mix will help higher education institutions to shape their service offerings according to the needs of their students.

The aim of this study was to investigate the choice factors and information sources students make use of in their institution selection process. This information would enable institutions to develop a more effective and efficient marketing strategy.

The most basic decision that higher education institutions have to make, is which programmes and services they will offer to their students. An institution's service product strategy determines its identity, position and how prospective students will respond to the institution. In the light of the findings of the study, it is clear that institutions should provide a **wide range of subjects and courses** that will enable students to **find jobs**. Institutions must ensure that their courses have a **career focus (employment prospects)** and are market related for the national as well as **international** job market, to attract more students. They should also focus on adapting their **language policies** to student preferences. Restructuring and transformation of current programmes offered may be necessary to make them more career focused with **increased liaising with the industry** and hence more attractive to prospective students. Students also expect that the service products will be of a **high quality** and that it would be reflected in an institution's **academic reputation**. Some programmes and services are more central than others. Academic offerings are essential programmes that institutions cannot do without, whereas **sport programmes** and **social activities on campus** are less important to students. It may be easier to modify these non-core offerings because it may have a lesser impact.

Higher education institutions must also develop a pricing strategy for their service products. The pricing decision is of utmost importance, as this will ensure income for higher education institutions and plays an important role in the marketing mix, quality perception, attracting customers and providing revenue to institutions. According to the findings, **price** and **financial assistance** is moderately important to students, but may be of greater importance to their parents. Institutions should pay careful attention to the financial assistance they offer when they recruit males as well as Coloured and Indian students.

Higher education institutions can have good quality educational services offered at the right price to students, but if students and parents are not aware of these services and prices, they will not consider choosing the institution. It is therefore important that

higher education institutions communicate with their prospective students and parents. Higher education institutions should use **campus visits and open days, university websites, university publications, word-of-mouth and alumni,** while **events on campus, school visits by university staff, high school teachers and parents** could be used to a lesser extent. Institutions should steer away from using advertisements in magazines and newspapers, and advertisements on radio and television, as they are not perceived as very useful to students. The findings suggest that students do not place equal emphasis on all the choice factors. Thus, when communicating by means of the various sources, it is important that they focus their communication on the benefits or choice factors that they provide and that are important to students, e.g. providing **quality of teaching** that will enhance **students' employment prospects** in a **safe and secure** learning environment. Mention could also be made in communication strategies about the **academic facilities**, **international links, language policies, image of the institution, flexible study modes, academic reputation and a wide choice of subjects/courses.**

Distribution means making education/programmes available to potential students in the most convenient and accessible way. Accessibility means that solutions must be found for obstacles such as distance, time and cost. Possible solutions for cost may be the provision of funding, bursaries and grants **(financial assistance)** to enable students to study, telematic education or distance education **(flexible study modes)**, as well as **residences on campus** for students who can possibly bridge the geographic obstacles (distance). **Flexibility** in the time scheduling of lectures, such as evening classes, full-time or part-time classes, may increase the accessibility of an institution and bridge the time obstacle. It is evident from the study that **flexible study modes** are a very important aspect to students, while the physical **location** of an institution is of lesser concern. However, the **safety and security** aspect of the location is very important**,** especially to female students.

A student's first impression of a higher education institution is often based on his/her interaction with the people of the institution as well as other students. The findings of the study suggest that **friends and alumni** can play a very important role in spreading word-of-mouth about the institution, as they are also used as potential information sources. The academic and administrative staff all contributes to the **image** and

reputation of institutions and is regarded as a very important choice factor to students. Other students also impact on the service delivery process and experience and as students indicated that diversity is important, institutions should ensure that the student body reflects diversity.

In service organisations, the cooperation between marketing and operations is vital for an effective and efficient service system. The process strategy must be visible for prospective and current students to enable them to understand the processes of the higher education institution. Higher education institutions should ensure that their recruitment and communication processes are effective to inform prospective students and parents on aspects such as their **language policy**, **entry requirements**, application process, applying for **financial assistance** and registering.

It is not just the process strategy that needs to be managed; institutions must also ensure that the physical evidence of their processes and the other marketing mix instruments are evident in their organisation. Although the **attractiveness of the campus** and **on-campus housing** were of lesser concern to students, **campus safety and security** as well as the **academic facilities** were of utmost importance and institutions should ensure that they maintain and provide good academic facilities in a safe and secure environment.

It is apparent from the discussion in this chapter that the task of marketing a higher education institution is complex. The diversity of the student market with an equally diverse set of needs and wants make it difficult to derive one plan that will adequately serve the needs of all the students. It is therefore advisable to address specific groups or segments with a marketing strategy especially formulated for their needs. The marketing strategies should reflect the position of the institution by summarising the key facets of the institution and allow some scope for modification.

7.5   LIMITATIONS

This study attempted to make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on the higher education institution selection process in South Africa. Specific limitations

were evident in the literature review and empirical phase of the study and should be noted.

7.5.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of limitations, based on the literature review of the study, can be stated, namely:

- The aim of the literature search was to include all relevant literature on the topic. It is possible that some important empirical research on the wider topic application of higher education selection may have been done but not yet documented in literature or not accessible - and therefore excluded. Literature could also have been overseen by the researcher and therefore not included.

- Although abundant information could be found in the literature regarding the consumer decision-making process, there is limited literature available on the consumer decision-making process applicable to higher education selection.

- There is also limited literature available on the consumer decision-making process of South African consumers.

- Due to the lack of literature on higher education selection and student decision-making in South Africa, the theory relied strongly on literature from other countries.

7.5.2 EMPIRICAL STUDY

A number of limitations should be highlighted, following the empirical research part of the study.

- Due to the nature of this study (non-probability sampling), the non-response error and sampling error could not be determined.

- The study was limited to students from six universities located in five provinces, thereby excluding students from other higher education institutions.

- The study was limited to first year Economic and Management Sciences students, thereby excluding students from other study fields.

- The study had a retrospective focus, as the sample population was first year students who had to report how they have made their selection the previous year. First year students acted as "substitutes" for Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners, because gaining access to school learners proved to be problematic.

- Due to the nature of non-probability sampling, the respondents used in this study are not representative of the broader South African student population. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to the entire population. It is suggested that future studies attempt to draw a representative sample of all higher education institutions.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study provide guidance to higher education institutions on the choice factors and information sources used in the institution selection process.

7.6   PERSPECTIVES/RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following future research can be recommended:

- A similar study can be conducted with students from other study fields to determine if there are similarities with the main findings from this study.

- A similar study can be dedicated to determining the similarities or differences between South African students and students from other countries such as Australia.

- It could prove valuable to conduct in-depth research on each of the choice factors, for example what type of image students prefer or what constitutes an attractive campus to students.

- A future study could include a comparison between different higher education institutions to determine how students perceive different institutions on different choice factors.

- Literature on related aspects in higher education marketing should be expanded by relevant research in South Africa.

- South African higher education institutions should engage in longitudinal research studies on aspects such as students' socio-demographic information, media use, and reasons for choosing an institution, similar to American CIRP surveys, to improve their understanding of their students' needs in order to implement more effective marketing and communication strategies.

7.7 EVALUATION OF THE OBJECTIVES SET VERSUS THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The results presented in Chapter 6 enabled the researcher to evaluate the research hypotheses and address the formulated research objectives. In this section, the objectives of the study are compared to the outcomes of the research findings. Each of the nine objectives, as identified in Chapter 1 and Section 5.2 will be stated, after which the research results are summarised to indicate whether the objective have been met.

The first objective was to determine the relative importance of each of the 23 identified choice factors that first year Economic and Management Sciences students use to select a higher education institution. The results revealed that students attach different levels of importance to each of the 23 choice factors investigated. The relative importance of the choice factors respondents regarded as important in the selection of a higher education institution are, in descending order: 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 modes (evening classes and use of computers), academic reputation (prestige), a wide choice of subjects/courses, entry requirements, links with the industry, fees (cost), financial assistance (bursary and loans), location of higher education institutions, attractiveness of campus, multi-culturality/diversity, social life on campus (Rag, music festivals, campus dances), on-campus housing/hostels, sport programmes, friends went there, brother/sister went there, and lastly parents went there (tradition). This objective has thus been satisfied.

The second objective was to investigate the usefulness of the sources of information considered by first year Economic and Management Sciences students in the selection process, as perceived by ethnic groups, gender groups and academic institutions attended. It was apparent from the empirical results that all the information sources investigated were useful to some extent to students. The usefulness of information sources ranked in descending order: campus visits and open days, university websites, university publications (newsletters and brochures), word-of-mouth (friends and other people), alumni, events on campus (music festivals, Rag, sports events), school visits by university staff, high school teachers, parents, advertisements in magazines/newspapers, advertisements on radio, and lastly advertisements on TV. The results further revealed tendencies that might suggest similarities and differences between gender groups, ethnic groups and academic institutions and the usefulness of information sources. This objective has been met.

The third objective was to ascertain whether students from different ethnic backgrounds differ regarding the importance they attach to choice factors when selecting a higher education institution. Hypothesis testing revealed that students from different ethnic backgrounds indeed differ regarding the importance they attach to choice factors. The results indicated that the differences between the ethnic groups were evident for 15 of the 23 choice factors, namely: quality of teaching, academic facilities, entry requirements, fees, location of university, sport programmes, social life on campus, attractiveness of campus, on-campus housing, parents went there, brother/sister went there, friends went there, language policy, links with the industry, and multi-culturality. This objective has been met.

The fourth objective was to determine whether students with different home languages differ regarding the importance they attach to choice factors when selecting a higher education institution. The results from the hypotheses testing indicated that there were significant differences between students with Afrikaans, English and African home languages and the importance they attach to the different choice factors. These differences were significant for 16 of the 23 choice factors: quality of teaching, academic facilities, location of university, sport programmes, academic reputation, social life on campus, attractiveness of campus, on-campus housing, parents went there, brother/sister went there, friends went there, academic reputation, financial assistance, language policy, links with the industry, multi-culturality, and the image of a university. Thus, sufficient information was obtained to state that this objective has been reached.

The fifth objective was to establish whether there are gender differences regarding the importance students attach to choice factors when selecting a higher education institution. The results revealed significant differences for 13 of the 23 choice factors. Females attached a higher importance than males in terms of wide choice of subjects/courses, quality of teaching, entry requirements, fees, campus safety and security, on-campus housing, multi-culturality, international links, and employment prospects. Male students attached a higher importance to sport programmes, social life on campus, brother/sister went there, and friends went there, than females. This objective has been satisfactorily addressed.

The sixth objective was to determine whether students from different higher education institutions differ regarding the importance they attach to choice factors when selecting a higher education institution. The results indicated that there were significant differences between the six higher education institutions for 22 of the 23 choice factors, with the only exception that all six institutions rated employment prospects as very important. Thus, objective six has been met.

The seventh objective was to establish if students that live seventy kilometres or further from a higher education institution make more use of campus visits or open days as a source of information than students living close-by. Hypothesis testing

revealed that there was not enough support, as results did not show a significant difference between the distance from students' permanent homes in terms of the higher education institutions they attended and the use of open days and campus visits as an information source. Both groups indicated the usefulness of campus visits and open days as good. This objective has thus been achieved.

The eighth objective was to determine if students who are residents of the province in which the higher education institution is located make more use of word-of-mouth as a source of information. The t-test result did not show a significant difference between students that were residents of the province in which the higher education institution is located, and the use of word-of-mouth as an information source. Thus, this objective has been satisfied.

The ninth objective was to ascertain if students with an average of seventy percent or more in Grade 12 make more use of higher education institutions' websites than students with a lower average in Grade 12. The results did not show a significant difference between students of different academic standing and the use of websites as an information source. Both groups indicated the usefulness of websites as very good. This objective has thus been achieved.

7.8   CONCLUSION

The research contributes to the information on choice factors and information sources used in students' decision-making process with regard to selecting higher education institutions. Higher educations institutions and the marketer they employ should consider such information much more than in the past, because of the changing higher education landscape facing increased competition and decreased funding. It is therefore important for higher education institutions to understand how prospective students are influenced so that the institution can employ appropriate marketing strategies. The findings of this study provides an understanding of the choice factors that are most important to students and provides insight into the information sources or promotional tools that can be used to communicate with prospective students. Results could be used for effective planning and resource allocation for recruitment,

communication and marketing. The findings and recommendations in this final chapter contribute to a growing knowledge on higher education marketing. In particular, the research adds to the understanding of how students choose a higher education institution in South Africa and where students look for information to base their decisions on. There is also potential for the information gathered by this study to be used by higher education institutions to assist prospective students to make more informed decisions and more appropriate choices. Ultimately, higher education institutions could use the information from the study to become more marketing-oriented and to adapt their marketing mix to correspond with the findings of the study, to recruit and retain South African first year university students.