

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Reputation and information drivers in student recruitment: Comparing South African, Singaporean and Malaysian tertiary education

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**Higher education across the globe is facing various changes, including commercialisation, globalisation, funding restrictions and declining enrolment numbers; all translating in a higher level of competition. Attracting quality students in this highly competitive education environment is crucial as poor retention ratios is a reason for concern and government funding is consequently influenced adversely. This paper examined and compared criteria related to the importance of reputation and information to attract students in three different countries. All three countries are in a sense, centres of education where education is recognised as a crucial driving force and the accessibility of education is politically important. The main findings amongst others are that the most important attributes for the South African sample was the academic reputation of the institution, while the Malaysian sample preferred the reputation of the study program. The Singaporean sample rated the marketing activities as priority. Significant differences with regard to these outcomes were measured between all three sample groups**

**Key words:** International education, reputation, South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Chen and Zimitat (2006) the provision of educational services to students across national borders has been a major growth industry over the last 30 years. Although the authors point out the significant value of international education, it was noticed that only a few substantial studies were conducted to investigate transnational education from a marketing perspective. Institutions of higher education should take deliberate steps to apply sound marketing principles in order to attract quality students. Ho and Hung (2008) came to the conclusion that marketers should conduct thorough market analyses, which will segment customers into groups based on the benefits and needs they expect from particular suppliers. Consequently by designing product offerings and marketing material to match customer

expectations, institutions of higher education can attempt to serve these identified segments more efficiently and effectively.

## INTERNATIONALISATION OF EDUCATION

The internationalisation of education in Singapore, South Africa and Malaysia has a vastly different origin and implications. Over time, Singaporeans studying abroad was driven by low local capacity, high entry requirements and government restrictions. Simultaneously, Singapore has developed a market for overseas institutions and foreign students to the extent that in 2002 an estimated 11,000 foreign students were enrolled in tertiary education of some sort. The attraction for foreign students is that fees are subsidised by the Singaporean government in a tuition grant that bonds students to stay and work in Singapore for three years after completing their studies (Ministry of Education, 2000).

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According to Steynberg et al. (2005) the position of higher education in South Africa changed considerably after the democratic election in 1994. South-Africa was rapidly re-integrated into the global community by obtaining almost immediate membership of influential international organisations. This is partly brought about by influences in higher education to move from a "closed" to an "open" system especially with regards to access to those that were excluded in the past (Kishun, 1998) and opens doors for South-Africa to compete in the international trade of higher education.

From a Malaysian perspective, students enrolled in international education in order to develop an 'international' outlook as well as a passport to employment with multinational corporations (Pyvis and Chapman, 2005). In addition, the completion of an international degree is seen as a stepping stone towards a position in a multinational corporation. Malaysian universities in particular have been affected by declining international ratings, subsequently strengthening the position of non-Malaysian universities in the local market (EIU, 2006).

## MARKETING IN THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR

According to Maringe (2005), the meaning of marketing has evolved over time, but the most enduring in these developments has been the centrality of the customer in the decisions of the organisation. Marketing in this sense can be described as any exchange relationship to ensure that parties in the relationship derive the maximum benefit from the exchange. However, organisations differ in terms of the extent to which the marketing idea is implemented. Kotler and Fox (1995) point out that educational institutions, should take measures to develop sound marketing strategies. These measures should take the form of analysing its internal and external environments in order to identify marketing opportunities to determine which of them could be achieved by limited resources. This vital role of higher education management (including marketing) was later emphasised by Michael (2004) based on a solid understanding of the vital role of higher education and on management thoughts and practices currently used in a democratised and market driven higher education system.

According to Palihawadana (1999) the increased level of competition in the education environment has led to institutions of higher education employing managerial techniques to improve the efficiency and quality of their provisions and switched from a passive to a more active market approach (Ivy, 2008; Naudé and Ivy, 1999). In order to satisfy student expectations, institution of higher education must develop an awareness of perceived course offerings and reputation. Institutional policy makers should be aware of the influential factors and the associated impact on potential students (Moogan et al.,

2001:197). Ho and Hung (2008) came to the conclusion that after a market analyses is conducted, three essential methods should be used in designing successful marketing strategy: Market segmentation, target market selection and product positioning.

Chen and Zimat (2006) pointed out that various universities across the globe have identified distinctive, major (internal and external) factors that attract students to undertake international higher education studies. For example, in China and India, the two driving forces for international education are the desire to understand the western culture and to obtain an education better than can be offered locally. In the case of Australia, it was the high quality of institutions, quality of courses, good reputation of courses in the field, and the potential for improved job prospects when returning home, that was pointed out as main influencing factors to study abroad.

Various factors influence the choice of potential scholars to study at a specific tertiary institution, including location (Chen and Zimitat, 2006; Ford et al., 1999; Robberts and Allen, 1997), reputation of academic quality (Chen and Zimitat, 2008; Landrum et al., 1998; Ivy, 2001), course specifics (Ford et al., 1999) and career opportunities (Ford et al., 1999; Krone et al., 1981). A recent study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (2003) in South Africa found that the most important influence upon choice of institution is reputation followed by geographical location. One of the reasons why location is important for students in South-Africa is that more than a third of all learners do not have suitable quiet place in their homes to study (Cosser, 2002) and thus value library facilities to study.

Ford et al., (1999) identified a different factor structure and include academic reputation, career opportunities, programme issues, physical aspects, location, and other. Oldfield and Baron (2000) suggest that there are three underlying factors of higher education service quality namely, requisite elements (essential to enable students to fulfil their study obligations), acceptable elements (desirable but not essential to students) and functional elements (of practical or utilitarian nature). Cheng and Tam (1997) found that, based on different conceptions of education quality and the different concerns about achievement of education quality, various people may use diverse indicators to assess education quality and miscellaneous strategies to achieve education quality. It may result in the exclusion of some aspects of input, process and outcome of an education institution. However, it could be argued that emphasizing the importance of the identified quality directives in marketing communication strategies after segmenting the market, select a target market and position itself, should be kept in mind, but more so, to stress the competence and ability of particular institutions of higher education to satisfy the needs of these desires better than competitors. For the purpose of this study the South African, Malaysian and Singaporean educational segments will be

regarded as distinct segments.

## MARKET ENVIRONMENTS

### Singapore

International education in Singapore is delivered by local universities or foreign universities either through branch campuses or twinning programs with local institutions such as professional bodies. In 2000, there were more than 50 institutions offering tertiary education of which the vast majority was UK and Australian based. Interestingly, non-Singaporean universities do not require approval to operate in Singapore or to issue their qualifications. The Singaporean government does however, issue licenses to local partner institutions to retain an involvement with foreign universities (Ziguras, 2003). More recently the Singapore government has targeted high end providers such as INSEAD and the Chicago School of Business to establish a local presence. In addition, Curtin University has transformed its presence from an agreement with professional bodies to a full blown branch campus presence (Curtin University of Technology, 2008)

In reaction to this and in line with Singapore's tradition of allowing market forces to dictate sectors, Singaporean institutions are corporatized and operate autonomously as not-for-profit public companies predominantly owned by the Singapore government (Li, 2006). From a developmental perspective, Singapore is adamant that the returns on tertiary education investment far outstrip returns on any other education (Ministry of Education, 2007) thus embracing tertiary education as a driving force for the strengthening of the Singaporean economy as a knowledge and value-adding economy. Simultaneously, there is realism in maintaining a sufficiently flexible system to cater for differences in preferences and to maintain education agility. In view of this, Li (2006) anticipates that by the year 2010, Singapore would have established up to ten specialised institutions.

### Malaysia

Private higher education in Malaysia has expanded significantly since 1980s. Since private colleges in Malaysia are not allowed to confer degrees, there has been a strong impetus to pursue formal agreements with foreign universities (Lee, 2003). In 2003 the Malaysian tertiary education system comprised 4 foreign, 14 private and 16 public universities alongside about 700 private colleges. Between them, they cater for more than 350,000 students of which 15,000 are international students (EIU, 2006). Australia has always been one of the top destinations for Malaysian students with a number of universities offering a wide selection of courses successfully (Malaysian Business, 2006).

The Malaysian effort to establish itself as an international education hub pivots predominantly around targeting the Middle East education market. Obvious similarities between Malaysia and Middle Eastern countries are the religious overlap translating in a like minded environment and limiting culture shock. At the same time, Malaysia is able to attract students on the back of a range of internationally recognised courses, mostly on delivering Western and English language qualifications though twinning arrangements (Shuib, 2007). In addition, the cost of living in Malaysia translates in a more affordable education than other international education providers.

### South Africa

In South Africa however, higher education institutions have experienced dramatic changes in structure, funding and student numbers. The Tertiary education sector in South Africa faces many new challenges, including recent mergers and the transformation of technikons into universities of technology. This transformation has not only brought about a change of status in these institutions, but also the mergers of intrinsically different institutions. The broadening of access to higher education under the present government policy has observed a growth in the number of applications to tertiary institutions (Bunting and Cloete, 2004). Mutula (2001) states that the decrease in subsidies affects the quality of teaching and research and has led to overcrowding in many universities, deteriorating physical facilities and a lack of resources for text books, educational materials, laboratory consumables and maintenance. The perceived quality has also had an effect on the choice of institution by eligible candidates. Tertiary education has experienced a dramatic decline in government subsidies and an increase in student fees in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia (Palihawadana, 1999; Soutar and Turner, 2002) that have similar educational systems to South Africa. This is due to various changes in the respective environments. In South Africa, the decline in funding from subsidies is also a direct consequence of the trend of falling pass rates (Naidoo, 2003).

It appears as if tertiary institutions face increasing market and financial pressures in almost all countries. The result has been a more competitive educational environment. African tertiary education faces challenges in the form of finances, governance, equity, relevance and quality (Saint, 1992). Overcoming this requires a significant amount of sector differentiation. South Africa has exploited these shortcomings and emerged as a preferred destination for students from neighbouring countries. Simultaneously, a number of British and Australian universities have sought to exploit this strength and strengthen the South African position by establishing local campuses (IIE passport, n.d.). Thus, this in turn has

launched South Africa as the continent's most prominent international education provider.

## MANAGING REPUTATION AND ACADEMIC ISSUES

According to Yoon et al. (1993: 215), the success of any marketing effort in the services industry has long been recognised to be related to the provider's reputation. The notion is that the reputation provides the ability to interact with potential customers in providing valuable information about and offering an associated element of the services in the wider market environment and by so doing influence buyer intentions. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) postulate that premium prices and higher level applicants will be attracted at the back of institutional and market signals of higher product quality and the subsequent establishment of a superior reputation and service delivery.

Overall, the notion of academic reputation is increasingly being captured in accreditation and ranking exercises. On another tier, this mostly implies a critical assessment of administrative and academic delivery, and course content and material. Gardner (1998) argues that a more effective assessment of quality requires the acknowledgement of the aspects of service quality as expressed by students themselves. In South Africa for example Ben Ami (2005) reports that almost a third of enrolled students across ten institutions reported dissatisfaction, in that, their expectations were not met. These findings create room for improvement by universities in respect to enhancing service and thus reputation. In the university sector, it is argued that a higher percentage of highly qualified academic staff would contribute to a higher efficiency of the institution (Cloete and Bunting, 2000). In addition, Ban Ami (2005) confirms the importance of highly qualified and skilled academic staff to deliver programs. At the university level and from an operational perspective, the actual presentation of lectures was found to be significantly correlated to the extent to which students value the learning process and university studies (Tait et al., 2002). The echo of this finding is based on the importance of lecturing staff for learners.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Higher education is facing increasingly more challenges on the global arena. As institutions of higher education compete for human and financial capital, it is equally important to understand and address the expectations and demands of students and industry. This is even more so as universities increasingly develop an international presence and seek to attract international students. Overall, the problem is attributed to lack of information to enable institutions of higher education to identify and adhere to students needs in order to attract them from

the global market.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Conceptualising the purpose of the investigation

In order to achieve the primary objective of the research, the service quality variables related to higher education are grouped into marketing and image related service quality variables.

The following secondary objectives were formulated:

1. To evaluate the expressed levels of importance of South-African, Singaporean and Malaysian students with regard to these selected higher education variables;
2. To determine the existence of significant differences between the South-African, Singaporean and Malaysian students with regard to their expressed levels of importance with these variables related to higher education.

### Research hypotheses

With regards to the objectives, the researchers formulated the following hypotheses:

1.  $H_0$ : There exist no significant differences with regard to the importance of the service variables related to higher education between the South-African, Singaporean and the Malaysian samples.
2.  $H_a$ : There exist significant differences with regard to the importance of the higher education related service variables between the South-African, Singaporean and Malaysian students.

### The sample framework

A sample of 565 students at the management faculties at two universities in South-Africa and two Universities in Asia, one in Singapore and one in Malaysia were chosen at random. Two hundred and twenty two of the respondents were students from two large South-African Universities, while one hundred and fifty eight of the respondents were students from a university in Malaysia and one hundred and eighty five students from a university in Singapore. The attitudes of the two student samples were tested regarding the importance of pre-identified service quality issues related to higher education when selecting a specific tertiary institution. The list of variables was based on extensive literature research and the findings of focus groups consisting of students and lecturers.

### The measuring instrument and reliability measures

For the purpose of this paper, only the variables related to marketing and image and academic issues are included in the study. This was done after a structured questionnaire was developed to measure the overall preferences of students when deciding on a specific institution of higher education. The questionnaire addressed the following issues:

1. Section A: Biographical information of the respondents,
2. Section B: Nine image and marketing variables to determine the level of importance on the internationalisation aspects of a higher educational institution.

Section A utilised nominal scales whilst a five-point Likert-type

**Table 1.** Respondent profile.

Selected demographics	Singapore (n =185)		Malaysia (n = 158)		South Africa (n = 222)	
	%					
<b>Gender</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>
	42	58	55	45	42	58
<b>Level</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>
	26	25	43	23	36	51
21-22 years old	94		52		33	
Better job prospects	59		47		55	
Influenced by friends	52		57		52	
Parents pay fees	32		94		59	
Living with parents	33		63		55	

scale was used for Section B to measure the levels of importance with regards to these higher education related variables at three institutions of higher education in South-Africa, Singapore and Malaysia. The scales were categorised as 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = not important nor unimportant, 4 = not important and 5 = not important at all. The inputs for section B was gathered through an intensive literature study on the topic as well as focus group discussions with students enrolled at institutions of higher education.

#### Data collection and analyses

The data was gathered and captured by trained field workers over a period of twelve months between the second semester of 2006 and the second semester of 2007. The SPSS version 17.0 statistical package was utilised to analyse the data. Due to the ordinal scale used (five point discrete rating scale) non parametric tests were used to test for significant differences between the groups. A Kruskal Wallis test was used for this purpose to test the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis that there exists no significant difference in the levels of importance between the two groups and there exists significant differences between the groups (South-African, Singaporean and Malaysian students).

An item analysis was carried out to test the reliability of the questionnaire (image and marketing category) and an overall Cronbach's alpha of a 0.87, 0.85 and 0.90 were obtained for South Africa, Singapore and Malaysia, respectively.

#### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Table 1 indicates some major findings related to the demographic composition of the three sample groups.

Despite the respondents in all locations, in that, all being full time students, there is little homogeneity amongst the three groups. The gender composition in Singapore and South Africa is identical having more female students, while the Malaysian sample has a male dominated nature. While the Singapore group has an equal amount of first and third year students, the Malaysian sample is dominated by first years and the South African sample is largely third years. Similarly, the Singapore cohort are almost all aged 21 or 22 years old,

while about half the Malaysian cohort is in this age bracket compared to about a third of the South African cohort. The different age distribution is likely to be a reflection of the different academic year groups.

Although all groups indicate 'better job prospects' as a major driver for studying the range differs from almost 60% for Singaporeans to less than 50% for Malaysians. Similarly, more than half of all respondent indicate being influenced by friends in their decision making. The notion of paying for education attracted vastly different responses. For Singaporeans students, only a third indicated that their parents paid for their education, while for South African this amounted to almost 60% and in Malaysia this increased to over 90%. On a similar vein, about one third of Singaporean students live with their parents compared to just over half of South Africans and almost two thirds of Malaysian students.

The means of the categories (Table 2) are located between very important and not important nor unimportant, with the majority of the ratings generally clustered around important. For the purpose of the discussion, the South African sample will be discussed first followed by the Malaysian and the Singaporean sample.

In the reputation and marketing category (Table 2), the most important variable for the South African students was the academic reputation of the institution (v88) ranked third by the Malaysian sample and second by the Singaporean sample. Significant differences exist between the means of the three sample groups with regard to this variable with the South African sample ranking it more important than the Singaporean and Malaysian samples. Similarly, the spread of responses as reflected in the standard deviation confirms the wide spread.

The most important variable identified by the Malaysian respondents is the reputation of the study program (v103). Incidentally, this was rated as third most important by both the South African and the Singaporean sample. Although no significant differences were measured between the means of the three sample groups,

**Table 2.** Level of importance of reputation and marketing.

Item	Item wording	Singapore		Malaysia		South Africa		Result of hypotheses
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
V88	Academic reputation of institution	1.75 2-	1.98	1.84 3*-	0.93	1.54 1*	0.92	p-value = 0.001 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected
V89	Sport reputation of institution	3.20 9	1.13	2.75 9	1.13	2.83 9	1.26	p-value = 0.021 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected
V91	Academic reputation of faculty	1.84 6	1.97	1.93 4	0.91	1.63 2	1.01	p-value = 0.000 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected
V92	Reputation of lecturers at institution	1.77 4	1.87	1.77 2	0.79	1.74 4	0.94	p-value = 0.467 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> accepted
v93	Availability of information about faculty	1.81 5	1.74	2.01 8	0.85	1.77 5	1.01	p-value = 0.002 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected
v94	Marketing activities of Institution	1.64 1	1.84	1.93 4	0.87	2.25 8	1.14	p-value = 0.000 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected
v95	Scholarships available	2.39 8	1.15	2.00 6	1.05	1.97 7	1.22	p-value = 0.024 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected
v103	Reputation of study program	1.76 3	1.72	1.75 1	0.80	1.73 3	0.91	p-value = 0.683 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> accepted
v112	Career advisors accessible and informed	2.14 7	0.82	2.00 6	0.92	1.89 6	1.07	p-value = 0.007 Conclusions: H <sub>0</sub> rejected

the South African sample regarded it to be relatively more important followed by the Malaysian and the Singaporean sample.

The Singaporean respondents indicated the marketing activities of the institution (v94) to be most important. Neither of the other respondent groups deemed this to be the case. At the same time, the second most important variable rated by the South African sample was the academic reputation of the faculty (v91). The Malaysian respondent ranked the reputation of lecturers (v92) as the second most important variable.

The least important variable for all respondent groups is the sport reputation of the institution (v89). Significant statistical differences between the means of the three groups exist with the Singaporean sample regarding it as least important followed by the South African and the Malaysian samples.

Overall, the H<sub>a</sub> hypotheses is accepted for the majority of variables that there exist significant differences with regard to the importance of the higher education related service variables between the South-African, Singaporean and Malaysian students.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of the image and marketing category, the academic reputations of the institution, faculty and the study program have been rated the three most important variables by the South African sample. The Malaysian and Singaporean samples rated these variables in a different sequences of importance and although no significant differences is measured between the three samples in terms of the reputation of the study program, and statistical significant differences were indeed measured in terms of the other variables. In terms of the reputation of the institution as well as the faculty's reputation, significant differences are measured between the three samples groups with South Africans, which rated it to be more significantly important than the Singaporean sample followed by the Malaysian sample. It was noticed that the reputation of the faculty was prioritized a little lower (forth and sixth respectively) by the Malaysian and the Singaporean samples.

The mentioned three most important variables (as rated by the South African sample) are likewise also rated

relatively important by the Malaysian sample and the Singaporean sample (except for the academic reputation of the faculty that should be replaced with the marketing activities of the institution that was rated first). This is an indication that the overall reputation of an institution as well as the various individual components contributes to the overall attractiveness and choice of an institution of higher education. This finding corresponds with a global trend that the reputation of the institution is important and can be enhanced by appropriate marketing activities.

The sport reputation of the institution has overall been rated least important while no significant differences exist between the two sample groups. However, Malaysian students rated this variable to be more important compared to the South African students. However, the Singaporean sample rated it significantly less important compared to the other two samples.

Dealing with reputation through appropriate marketing communication ways may benefit the institution over the long term. Building and maintaining a good overall reputation could be done by implementing high quality training of international standard. International partnerships in training should be high on the agenda and should be emphasised in internal and external communications with employees and alumni. The importance and power of word-of-mouth communication should not be underestimated and should be utilised as such. Academic institutions' active involvement in research of acceptable standards will ensure a good national and international academic reputation.

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