



Citation for published version:

Wilkins, S & Huisman, J 2011, 'International student destination choice: the influence of home campus experience on the decision to consider branch campuses', *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 61-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2011.573592>

DOI:

[10.1080/08841241.2011.573592](https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2011.573592)

Publication date:

2011

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an electronic version of an article published in: Wilkins, S. and Huisman, J., 2011. International student destination choice: the influence of home campus experience on the decision to consider branch campuses. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21 (1), pp. 61-83.

Journal of Marketing for Higher Education is available online at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08841241.2011.573592>

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International student destination choice: the influence of home campus experience on the decision to consider branch campuses

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Abstract

Previous research has found that the country and institution choices of international students are greatly influenced by recommendations they receive from others who have experience of undertaking higher education overseas. For Western universities, it is of utmost importance to satisfy their international students, who can then encourage the next generation of international students to attend those same institutions. However, student satisfaction is not the only factor at play. Using a framework of ‘push and pull’ factors, rooted in the international student choice literature, this exploratory study investigates the determinants of destination choice of international students who decided to study at a university in the UK and examines their attitudes toward international branch campuses. The survey results and analyses suggest that overseas campuses could pose a considerable threat to home campuses in the competition for international students in the future.

Keywords student choice; student recruitment; international branch campuses; competition; higher education marketing

Introduction

Universities have always attracted international students; even in the mid-sixteenth century, most of the 70 universities in Europe had foreign teachers and students (Kerr, 2001). However, the number of students globally studying overseas grew exponentially during the second half of the twentieth century, from around 150,000 in 1955 (Naidoo, 2009) to 2.8 million in 2007 (UNESCO, 2009). This trend was encouraged in part by the economic, political and social forces of globalisation. Many Western universities responded to these forces of globalisation with a range of internationalisation objectives and strategies, the dominant objective being to attract foreign students to home campuses. English-speaking countries, such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have particularly benefited from the process of globalisation, as English has become the lingua franca in higher education, and these three countries between them hold 44% market share of the world’s international students (Lasanowski, 2009).

During the last two decades, the study choices available to overseas students have increased dramatically. Whilst English-speaking countries have always been the largest receivers of international students, countries such as Germany and France each have 9% market share, China has 7%, and in many countries where English is not the native language, programmes have been introduced that are delivered in English (Lasanowski, 2009). By the end of the twentieth century, many students in Asia were no longer travelling west for their higher education; instead they stayed in the east, enrolling at world-class universities in countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore. More recently, a new option has emerged: the international branch campus.

An international branch campus may be defined as an educational facility that has its own premises, where students receive face-to-face instruction in a country different to that of its parent institution. These would normally include teaching rooms, a library, a refectory and sometimes also recreational facilities and student accommodation. The branch operates under the name of the parent institution and offers qualifications bearing the name of the parent institution. It usually offers courses in more than one field of study, has permanent administrative staff, and usually permanent academic staff (ACE, 2009).

International branch campuses in Singapore and Malaysia, largely owned by universities based in Australia, the US and UK, are now targeting students from countries such as China, South Korea and India, which are currently the largest source countries of overseas students for Western universities. Clusters of international branch campuses have also sprung up in several other countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). During the last 2-3 years, universities with strong brand names (e.g., New York University, University College London, Imperial College London and Paris-Sorbonne) have realised that establishing branches overseas is an effective strategy towards expanding their student bases and strengthening their brands globally. For example, University College London now markets itself as “London’s global university” (UCL, 2011). Operating foreign branches can improve the domestic and international market positions of institutions, by strengthening their international profiles and increasing the flow of students in both directions between home and abroad. However, Western universities that have established branch campuses must ensure that these branches do not cannibalise existing or potential future demand for places at their home campuses.

Little research has yet been conducted on the attitudes of international students toward branch campuses, and whether or not those attitudes present any significant challenge or threat to the Western universities, which rely upon attracting foreign students to their home campuses. This paper aims, therefore, to make an original contribution that will enable development of international student destination choice theory as well as providing a valuable insight into student attitudes and choices, which can benefit strategic decision-makers and marketing professionals in Western higher education institutions (HEIs).

Students in countries all around the world desire to undertake higher education in the English language and to achieve a degree from a Western university. Once a student has decided to study abroad, their next decision is to select a country in which to study. Students are attracted to countries that have established higher education systems and (usually) where English is the native language. Students who are already fluent in languages such as French or Spanish often choose to study in countries where those languages are the native language. Previous research conducted at a UK university found that most international students had not considered international branch campuses as a possible alternative to the UK institution at which they had chosen to study (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

After starting their study overseas, international students review their country and institution choices, and provide feedback to friends and relations in their home countries. Previous research has found that the country and institution choices of international students are greatly influenced by recommendations they receive from others who have experience of higher education overseas (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009). It is at this time that the students studying overseas, and their friends and relations at home, may start to consider international branch campuses as alternatives to home campuses, especially if the experiences of the students living and studying overseas are not mostly positive. The focus of this study, therefore, is not on the original decisions of international students to study in the UK (or another Western country), but on the possible future decisions of these students regarding further study and the future recommendations they offer to friends and relations in their home countries.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the determinants of destination choice of international students who decided to study at a university in the UK and examine

their attitudes toward international branch campuses given their experiences of living and studying in the UK. Investigating the extent to which these students would consider undertaking future study at an international branch campus after their experience of living and studying in the UK, along with the extent to which they would recommend friends or relations in their home country who want to study overseas to consider them, gives an indication of the possible future threat of international branch campuses to home campuses.

This research can be seen as a measure of the overall satisfaction of international students living in the UK and studying at a particular institution in the UK. The more these students are satisfied, the more likely they are to recommend the UK and the institution at which they are enrolled. This study seeks to discover the attitudes of international students toward international branch campuses, without requiring them to make detailed comparisons or judgements about home and branch campuses, as they only have first-hand experience of study at a home campus. However, students do possess a certain amount of knowledge about different locations. For example, a student from Bahrain or Saudi Arabia knows that had they chosen to study at a branch campus in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), rather than UK, they would have spent less time and money on air travel, and that in the UAE they would be living in an environment that shares the same language (Arabic), religion (Islam) and similar cultural values and cuisine as their home countries. It is possible that students under-estimate how important these things are to them when they make the decision to live and study in the UK. However, with hindsight, gained from experience in a Western country, students' future study choices and recommendations are shaped by their individual attitudes toward both positive and negative differences in different countries.

The study considers the role of marketing in helping higher education institutions (HEIs) in Western countries counter the potential threat of the new international branch campuses and also provides a test of the universally accepted push-pull model of international student destination choice (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The paper is structured as follows: first, the importance of international students to HEIs and to the countries in which they are based is examined; second, the rise of the international branch campus as a new competitor to home campuses is discussed; third, an overview of existing models of international student destination choice is provided and finally the role of marketing in the recruitment of international students is examined. The presentation and analysis of empirical research results on the decision-making processes and choice behaviour of international students provides much needed information that can be used by strategic level decision-makers and marketing practitioners in HEIs based in Western countries and researchers of marketing theory and practice in higher education, particularly those with an interest in internationalisation strategies.

The importance of international students

The US is the world's largest recruiter of international students. In 2008, the US welcomed 624,000 students from overseas, an increase of 7% on the previous year (Lasanowski, 2009). Overseas students make a significant contribution to the revenues of American and British universities and therefore also to the US and UK economies. By 2004, the UK higher education sector generated £4 billion revenue a year in the global marketplace, which represented about 40% of the total achieved by the UK's education and training sector, which is one of the top five sectors that generate export income for the UK (Tysome, 2004). In 2005-6, the number of overseas students studying in UK higher education was 330,080, representing 14.1% of the total student population (Universities UK, 2007). In 2007-8, this figure had increased to 368,970 (Universities UK, 2010).

At some UK universities, the income generated from international students exceeds the fee income from home students or the revenue generated from research and government grants (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008). It is not only the prestigious research-intensive universities that benefit significantly from having international students; for example, in 2003-4, the

University of Luton earned 17.7% of its total income from the tuition fees of international students, and, in the same year, the universities of Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Westminster each earned in excess of £20m in such fees (MacLeod, 2006). Without the fee income from international students, many universities would have a funding shortfall, and future growth and investment would be impossible. It could even be argued that without those fees, some universities might not survive.

It is important to mention non-financial benefits as well. In addition to paying tuition fees, international students can bring other benefits to UK universities. The number of international students at a university can be seen as a measure of status in the global marketplace, and students also contribute to research projects, research output and teaching. Given that several media rankings of universities globally use reputation criteria (Wedlin, 2006), the number of international students at an institution can be seen as a measure of international reputation, which can thus impact upon that institution's positions in rankings. The presence of international students can increase cultural understanding and encourage diversity in curricular design and learning experience, although sometimes there may be a lack of acceptance of foreign students and cultural pedagogical clashes.

New competition for home campuses

China and India are the top two source countries of international students in the US, UK and Australia (Lasanowski, 2009). In 2008-9, there were 19,940 students from China, and 8,455 from Malaysia, taking first degrees at UK HEIs; in the same year, 25,530 students from India and 19,005 from China were taking taught higher degrees (Universities UK, 2010). During the last few decades, one of the major reasons for students from the Far East and South Asia seeking higher education overseas was the lack of capacity in their home countries. However, several countries, notably Qatar and the UAE in the Middle East, as well as Singapore and Malaysia in the Far East, have in recent years added considerable capacity by establishing higher education hubs. These hubs have grown rapidly, largely by attracting branch campuses of universities from countries with established higher education sectors. The large number of students from Asia studying in the UK provides some justification for the international expansion strategies of UK HEIs in this region. The demand for places at some branch campuses has been huge. For example, the University of Nottingham's campus in Malaysia started with just 86 students in 2000 and has grown substantially every year since, to 3,600 students - from more than 70 different countries - in 2010 (University of Nottingham, 2010).

The new higher education hubs in Singapore and Malaysia are particularly well-placed geographically to attract students from China and India. For example, of the 2,618 students enrolled at the University of Nottingham in Malaysia in 2006, 35% came from outside Malaysia (Tham & Kam, 2008). Previously, colonial ties were thought to benefit the flow of students from Malaysia to the UK, but increasingly policy-makers in Malaysia have adopted a more insular outlook. For example, Malaysia's Ministry of Education has attempted to persuade parents not to send their children to international schools (Tysome, 1999).

The number of international branch campuses has increased significantly during the last decade and there are now in excess of 162 around the world (Becker, 2009). At least 49 of these have been established during the last four years. The largest host countries of overseas branch campuses are the UAE, China, Singapore and Qatar, although the UAE is by far the leader with over 40 (Becker, 2009). If this pace of branch campus expansion were to continue until 2020, in addition to the public sector expansion of higher education that is occurring in many countries, then it is likely that the supply of places will exceed demand in several locations and the competition for international students could then become intense. The key to understanding this competition is to learn how international students make their choices. This study gives a possible indication about how easily these students could be tempted away from studying in the UK, or indeed other Western countries, by international branch campuses.

Models of international student destination choice

Empirical studies of university choice typically focus on identifying those attributes that most influence students' decisions (Hagel & Shaw, 2010). Researchers have also attempted to build models that can be used to explain student choice. Structural models explain student choice in the context of the institutional, economic and cultural constraints imposed upon students (Ryrie, 1981; Roberts, 1984; Gambetta, 1996). Economic models (Fuller et al., 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983; Kotler & Fox, 1995) work on the assumption that students are rational and consider the value of each alternative available to them in terms of costs and benefits. Whilst these models are not specifically concerned with the decision-making of international students, there also exists a rapidly growing body of literature that has examined or attempted to model student choice and decision-making in an international context (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Cubillo et al., 2006; Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Vrontis et al., 2007; Chen, 2008; Bodycott, 2009).

Virtually all of the studies reported in the literature that attempted to explain the decision of students to study overseas identified sets of 'push and pull' factors that influenced the student's decision. McMahon (1992) proposed two models to explain the flow of international students from 18 developing countries to the US during the 1960s and 1970s. The first model was concerned with 'push' factors from the host countries, which included the availability of higher education and each country's economic strength, while the second model focused on the economic, political and social 'pull' factors of the US as a destination for higher education study. Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) continued working with the push-pull concept in their study of 2,485 students, who had gone from four different Asian countries to Australia to take a course in post-secondary education. They confirmed McMahon's (1992) hypothesis that the movement of international students can be explained by a combination of push and pull factors. The push factors operate within a source country to initiate the student's decision to study overseas, while the pull factors operate in the host country to make that country more desirable than others as a place to study and live.

The most common push factors are the lack of places in higher education in students' home countries, the unavailability of certain subjects, insufficient quality or recognition by employers and the lack of post-study employment opportunities when study is done at home. Some of the pull factors that attract students to study in Western universities/countries include the prospect of studying a greater range of subjects, the chance to study with other international students and with world-leading academics, the opportunity to develop English language skills and to experience living in a different culture, the possibility of gaining a qualification that will be more highly regarded by employers both in their home countries and internationally and possibly the provision of the means to aid migration from their home countries on a permanent basis.

Those models that do not focus on push and pull factors tend to consider instead the student decision-making process as a series of stages. Jackson (1982) suggested that the student decision-making process goes through three stages: the first stage is concerned with their preferences, the second stage involves creating a list of institutions to exclude from further consideration and in the third stage the student forms a choice set. Various other researchers have since created their own student decision-making models. Maringe and Carter (2007) observe that despite variations in the models, most now seem to conceptualise the student decision-making process as a five-stage model: (1) Identification of a problem needing a solution (2) The search for information (3) The evaluation of alternatives (4) Making the purchase decision and (5) Evaluating the purchase decision.

Cubillo et al. (2006) proposed a model of the international student's decision-making process that had purchase intention as an independent variable dependent upon five factors: personal reasons, the effect of country image, the effect of city image, institution image and the evaluation of the programme of study. Consideration of these five factors, whether done consciously or unconsciously by the prospective student, determines their final choice. This

was a theoretical model that aimed to integrate the factors identified in the existing literature, but it was not tested empirically.

Vrontis et al. (2007) produced a contemporary higher education student choice model for developed countries using a contingency methodological approach, which initially utilised existing models to create a preliminary generic higher education student choice model. The core of the final model consists of the basic five-stage consumer behaviour model, as observed by Maringe and Carter (2007). Surrounding the five stages, various factors determine choices at each of the five stages: individual student attributes, institution characteristics, secondary education characteristics, and environmental determinants (economic and cultural factors, public policies). The model leads the authors to reflect on institutional strategies to deal with the increasing complexity of student choice and they argue the need for branding and improved marketing communications, the need for greater personal attention and improved customer care and the need to pay greater attention to business ethics and social responsibility.

As a point of departure, the universally accepted concept of push and pull factors as identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) was chosen. Using the findings of previous studies enabled pre-prepared lists of factors that might influence the destination choices of international students to be prepared, which made it possible to record student responses quicker and more accurately during the interviews.

International marketing of higher education

The increased competition for international students among universities based in the US, UK, Australia and Canada, as well as from numerous other countries globally, has resulted in universities having to find ways to differentiate themselves from the crowd (Marginson, 2004; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). In order to fund investment and growth, universities are under pressure to become more efficient and operate more like profit-seeking businesses, especially as many have received less public funding, which has increased the role and importance of marketing in higher education. Researchers have become increasingly interested in higher education marketing. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) conducted a systematic review of the literature on the subject and found that the potential benefits of applying marketing theories and concepts that have been effective in the business world are gradually being recognised by researchers of higher education marketing.

Kotler (2003) states that the key to successful marketing lies in identifying the core business of the organisation and then aligning the development process in a way that reflects the needs of customers. However, Vrontis et al. (2007) argue that the time has arrived for HEIs to stop simply adapting their marketing management to wider marketing theories. Instead, they need to understand student consumer behaviour and focus more on utilising specific services marketing theories. Furthermore, they argue that marketing should no longer be a mere tool toward the achievement of strategic goals; rather it should be a philosophy and frame of thinking for all individuals in all processes of the organisation. The application of corporate marketing in higher education has been criticised for lacking appropriate contextualisation, being poorly organised and co-ordinated, and lacking strategic focus (Baron-Cohen, 1998; Maringe, 2005). Maringe (2005) suggested the CORD model as a framework for improving marketing in educational institutions, where CORD stands for Contextualisation, Organisation and co-ordination, Research and Development. These are the processes that Maringe claims institutions should focus on in order to develop more effective marketing strategies.

Although branding was originally conceived as a means to establish a product's name and to convey the legitimacy, prestige and stability of the product, it has now evolved into a concept of cultural engineering that embodies ideal lifestyles (Holt, 2002). Rolfe (2003) observes that branding has risen up the strategic agenda in UK universities. De Chernatony et al. (2011) claim that successful branding can deliver sustainable competitive advantages and

superior market performance. Strong branding can enhance an institution's reputation and reputation plays a significant role in determining positions in some of the most globally well-known media rankings (Chapleo, 2011). A study by Wilkins and Huisman (2011) found that reputation and rankings were two of the most influential factors that determined international student choice of institution, particularly among postgraduate students.

Pilsbury (2007) also found that international students have become more brand aware and concludes that in the future many lower-rated universities might find it difficult to achieve their recruitment targets. A possible danger for students, however, is that skilful branding and marketing can help institutions to project an image of high quality when quality is in fact considerably lower (Naidoo, 2007). Whilst most universities have embraced marketing as a tool to help achieve their strategic objectives, Gibbs (2007) has questioned whether marketing, particularly advertising, might not actually be causing more damage to higher education because its primary intent is to persuade rather than inform and that by being intrusive, invasive and manipulative, the potentially resulting exploitation can harm the goal of education for a common good.

Mazzarol and Soutar (1999) proposed a model of sustainable competitive advantage for education service enterprises in international markets, which drew together theories of competitive advantage developed by industrial economists and management theory, with literature relating to services marketing. If marketing and market entry strategies achieve their desired purposes, the result will be the creation of a series of distinctive competencies that provide sources of competitive advantage, such as a quality image, strong brand identity, increased innovation and creativity, and high service quality. However Gronroos (1990) observed that measuring service quality can be problematic due to differences in consumer perceptions and expectations.

An important aspect of sustainable competitive advantage is the ability of an institution to develop strategies that cannot or will not be imitated by competitors (Bharadwaj et al., 1993). Many research-intensive HEIs have gained a competitive advantage through achieving research excellence and high rankings in league tables. However, it is important for every institution to develop and promote its corporate brand, identity and reputation if it wants to compete in the global market. It is already clear that whilst some international branch campuses have failed, those possessing a strong brand and reputation, such as New York University and Paris-Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi, the University of Nottingham in China and Malaysia, and Monash University in Malaysia, are amongst those attracting the highest numbers of applicants and achieving the fastest rates of growth. Some branch campuses will be unable to compete with the global elite and so marketing practitioners are likely to identify and then target suitable market segments. For example, Heriot-Watt and Murdoch universities in Dubai have both been successful in attracting applications from the local expatriate community by implementing strategies that emphasise quality education at an affordable price, which has led to both institutions achieving impressive rates of growth (Bardsley, 2010; Wilkins, 2011).

Marketing practitioners must undertake high quality market research that identifies the needs and wants of international students and the data generated by this study could be used as a starting point. If foreign students start believing that they can obtain a similar education and experience at an international branch campus at a far cheaper price and at a more convenient location that is closer to their home, in comparison to the education they would achieve at a home campus, then student recruitment at home campuses could suffer considerably. The marketing practitioners at home campuses need to identify the unique features and qualities of their products and offerings, whether related to the education provided, historical buildings and beautiful grounds or the living experiences in their countries, and highlight these in their promotion to potential students.

Conceptual framework and research questions

The literature reveals that universities in Western countries such as the US, UK and Australia depend heavily on international students as a source of revenue, as contributors to research and teaching activity, and as a means to increase cultural diversity (Tysome, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Lasanowski, 2009). The rapid establishment of international branch campuses in the new higher education hubs in the Middle and Far East is a recent phenomenon and their potential impact on the recruitment of international students at home campuses to date has received little consideration from researchers. However, industry experts have warned that UK universities should not be complacent and ignore the threats of new competitors in the global higher education market (Baty, 2009). Universities in the UK and other Western countries should adopt integrated marketing strategies, improve their market research and devote more resources into gaining and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage for the provision of higher education to international students (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Naidoo, 2010).

The aim of this study is to identify the criteria used by international students to select a country and institution for higher education, and to establish the attitudes of those students toward the branch campuses of Western universities established overseas. This specific issue is a subset of a larger phenomenon: the student decision-making process and their choices of country and institution for higher education. The research questions of this study are therefore linked to a larger theoretical construct, and its method has been guided by the methods already proven effective by other researchers. As already stated, the 'push-pull' model features in most of the prior research that has sought to explain the choices made by international students, and it provides the analytical framework for this study. No previous study has considered student decision-making specifically with regard to the consideration of international branch campuses, and this is the major contribution of this study.

By considering the impact of the international branch campus on the decision-making process of international students, this study will enable the development of the theory of student choice and decision-making, while at the same time being significant for practitioners regarding their policies and actions relating to the recruitment of international students. The research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. What were the criteria used by international students to make their choice to study at a particular university in the UK?
2. Do the factors considered by international students who decided to study at a university in the UK differ significantly across groups categorised by (a) gender, (b) programme of study, and (c) nationality?
3. Given their experiences of living and studying in the UK, would current international students consider international branch campuses if they were to undertake further study in the future and would they recommend friends or relations at home who want to study overseas to consider them?

Method

In order to ensure content validity (the adequacy with which the measures assess the domain of interest), the study used a two-step deductive approach to item development (Hinkin, 1995). First, the existing literature was rigorously examined to discover previous findings about how international students make their choice of destination (e.g., McMahan, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Cubillo et al., 2006; Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Chen, 2008; Bodycott, 2009). The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that determined the decision of international students to study overseas and to identify the factors they considered to select a country and institution. Of particular interest is whether or not the students had considered international branch campuses when deciding where to undertake their current study and their views on international branch

campuses generally. The literature review revealed that the 'push-pull' model of international student decision-making could provide an appropriate framework to generate items.

The study was conducted at a single research-intensive university in the West of England. Given that prior research on international student destination choice has not specifically considered international branch campuses or study at the new higher education hubs, it was believed that also utilising a qualitative pre-study would maximise content validity. The pre-study involved a series of twelve in-depth individual interviews with international students. A convenience approach was used to gain volunteers, and a diverse mix of students was achieved with respect to gender, nationality and subject studied. However, all students were postgraduates aged between 22 and 35, so some selection bias is likely, although for the purpose of identifying suitable construct variables this was not particularly problematic. The interviews took a semi-structured format, with an emphasis on open questions so that the students would not be constrained in their responses. The interviews each lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, and they were recorded, from which additional notes were later made.

Each point made by a student was categorised as a push or pull factor, against pre-prepared lists that had been guided by the literature. Examples of push factors, relating to problems or weaknesses in the students' home countries, include: lack of higher education places, unavailability of certain subjects, poor quality, and lack of recognition by employers. Examples of pull factors, relating to advantages or attractions for study in a foreign country, include: opportunity to study a greater range of subjects, opportunity to study with world-leading academics, development of English language skills, experience a different culture, undertake work experience abroad, and possible aid to migration. Of particular interest were factors mentioned by the students that were not on the lists. A few of these were gained, such as: "my father decided that I would study in the UK" (from an undergraduate Chinese student); "somewhere I could easily buy food I like" (from a postgraduate Chinese student); and "at a place where there are not so many Indians" (from a postgraduate Indian student, when explaining why she had *not* selected a particular university in Birmingham).

The resulting questionnaire consisted of 35 items that were used in the exploratory factor analysis. To make the questionnaire easier to complete for respondents, especially as English was not the native language for most of them, and to avoid systematic error, the questions were grouped according to three topics (decision to study overseas, choice of country and choice of institution) and reverse-scored items were not used. The questions about the students' decisions to study overseas, choice of country and choice of institution had 9, 10 and 16 items respectively, which were each rated using a four-point scale according to extent of agreement/disagreement or importance to them personally. For example, statements such as 'difficult to gain university place at home' or 'lower quality of education at home', which each required an agree/disagree response, were seeking to discover the extent to which push factors were affecting the student's decision-making. The questions about choice of country and destination listed factors such as quality of education, high rankings, best for employment prospects, safe environment and best for improving English. A response was required for each factor, ranging from 'not important' and 'slightly important' to 'important' and 'very important'. This scale prevented respondents from selecting a middle 'neutral' position, and it generated sufficient variance among respondents to enable the subsequent statistical analysis.

A further 20 questions asked the students whether they had considered any international branch campuses when they had been considering where to undertake their current study, their views on a range of criteria relevant to destination choice and branch campuses (using a five-point Likert scale, representing their extent of agreement/disagreement), and their views on international branch campuses using a series of dichotomous agree/disagree responses to statements such as 'tuition fees and living costs are lower at international branch campuses' and 'branch campuses are closer to my home, so would be cheaper to get to and easier to return home for vacations'. The final questions asked were whether or not they would consider international branch campuses if they were to undertake further study after

completion of their current programme and whether or not they would recommend friends or relations in their home country who want to study overseas to consider international branch campuses.

The convenience sampling method was used to administer the self-completed questionnaire to 160 international students over a three-week period in March 2010. Previous research has found that in most cases a minimum sample size of 150 observations should be sufficient to obtain an accurate solution in exploratory factor analysis, provided that item intercorrelations are reasonably strong (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988). Students completed the questionnaire at a variety of locations: in classrooms, after lessons had finished, at the university international office and in the university library, in an area where group working, talking and eating/drinking is allowed. The sample comprised of 84 males, 76 females, 28 undergraduates and 132 postgraduates. The most common nationalities were Chinese (60 students) and Indian (21 students) but students from Thailand, South Korea, Germany, Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria and a range of other countries also participated in the survey.

Results and analysis

A summary profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1. The sample is considered fairly representative of the population of international students at the university where the study was conducted, except for the bias toward postgraduate students.

TABLE 1 Summary profile of respondents ($n = 160$)

Categories		%	Categories		%
Gender	Male	52.5	Level of study	Undergraduate	17.5
	Female	47.5		P/G Taught	73.1
				P/G Research	9.4
Nationality	Chinese	37.5	Would consider international branch campuses*	Yes	26.9
	Indian	13.1		No	73.1
	European	25.0			
	Other	24.4			

P/G Taught = taught postgraduate programme, P/G Research = postgraduate programme of research.

* Respondent would consider international branch campuses if they were to undertake further study after completion of their current programme or would recommend friends or relations in their home country who want to study overseas to consider them.

An exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components with Varimax rotation was used to determine the underlying components of 35 items that reflected the factors considered by international students in their choice of destination. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test measuring the adequacy of sampling produced a value of .722, which is larger than the cut-off point of .60, thus indicating that the sample used for the study ($n = 160$) was adequate. Furthermore, the result of the Bartlett test of sphericity ($p = .000$) indicates that the data has a high enough degree of correlation between at least a number of the variables, making it suitable for exploratory factor analysis. Using criteria such as Eigenvalue >1 and factor loading $> .45$, five factors were extracted that accounted for 63.9% of total variance (Table 2).

The first component consisted of eight variables, which included quality of education in the UK, reputation of university, rankings and professor expertise/reputation. This component was named 'Quality' and it accounted for 26.7% of total variance. The second component

containing five variables, such as ‘easy application process’ and ‘accommodation provided/arranged’ was named ‘Convenience’, and it accounted for 14.2% of total variance. The third component, which contained variables to do with the development of language skills, accounted for 9.3% of total variance. The remaining two factors explained a further 13.7% of total variance. Internal consistency of the factors was tested using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. The alpha values ranged from .70 to .90, satisfying the minimum .70 recommended by Nunnally (1978) and indicating that the measures of each factor are reliable. The results of the exploratory factor analysis support those found in the literature. For example, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found quality to be a key factor influencing choice of institution; Maringe and Carter (2007) found that students were motivated by a simple and straight-forward application process (convenience); and Chen (2008) found that the development of foreign language skills was a main reason for students deciding to study abroad. However, although the questionnaire was designed to account for both push and pull factors, it was found that push factors played only a very minor role in the student decision-making process.

TABLE 2 Factor loadings for determinants of international student choice of destination

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Factor 1: Quality					
Quality of education in the UK	.846				
Reputation of university	.812				
Content of programme	.793				
University/department rankings	.777				
Quality of programme	.745				
High rankings in the UK	.705				
The UK is best for employment prospects	.686				
Professor expertise/reputation	.656				
Factor 2: Convenience					
Easy application process in the UK		.752			
Accommodation provided/arranged		.748			
Tuition fees/cost of living in the UK		.679			
Parental decision/influence		.603			
Easy application process at institution		.540			
Factor 3: Development of language skills					
Improve my English overseas			.913		
Studying in the UK will improve my English			.898		
Living in the UK will improve my English			.748		
Overseas study is best for employment			.480		
Factor 4: Value for money					
A UK degree is best for employment				.765	
Tuition fees/costs of living in the UK				.634	
Tuition fees/costs of living at specific location				.546	
Programme offers value for money				.544	
Factor 5: Attractive place to live and work					
Pleasant/historic/safe town					.692
Would like to work in the UK after study					.685
Opportunity for work experience in the UK					.559
Eigenvalue	6.41	3.41	2.24	1.84	1.45
Variance (%)	26.71	14.19	9.33	7.65	6.03
Cumulative variance (%)	26.71	40.90	50.23	57.88	63.91
Cronbach’s Alpha	.90	.76	.81	.72	.70
Number of items (total = 24)	8	5	4	4	3

A one-way between groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to investigate differences between males and females, students on different types of

programme and students of different nationality on Quality, Convenience and Language Development, the three components that explained the largest parts of total variance. Of particular interest were the attitudes of Chinese and Indian students, as China and India are the two largest source countries of international students worldwide and also two of the countries being most heavily targeted for student recruitment by the international branch campuses in the new higher education hubs in the Middle and Far East. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted for multivariate normality and homogeneity of covariances, with no violations.

The MANOVA test results showed statistically significant differences between groups based on gender, type of programme and nationality. On the combined dependent variables of Quality, Convenience and Language Development, there appeared a statistically significant difference for males and females, which was: $F(3, 156) = 4.89$; $p = .003$; Wilks' Lambda (Λ) = .914; partial eta squared (η^2) = .086. On the combined dependent variables of Quality, Convenience and Language Development, a statistically significant difference based on type of programme taken by the students was: $F(6, 310) = 5.93$; $p = .000$; Wilks' Lambda (Λ) = .805; partial eta squared (η^2) = .103. Finally, on the combined dependent variables of Quality, Convenience and Language Development, a statistically significant difference based on the nationality of the students was: $F(9, 375) = 14.24$; $p = .000$; Wilks' Lambda (Λ) = .489; partial eta squared (η^2) = .212.

In order to better interpret the MANOVA results, univariate ANOVAs were performed as post-hoc analysis (Table 3). Given the possibility of Type I errors occurring from performing different ANOVAs, the critical p -value has been divided by the number of tests that are performed, in this case three, and so the usual cut-off of .05 becomes 0.017 (.05/3). Therefore for gender there are only significant group differences between males and females for the Quality and Convenience components; for groups based on type of programme the student was taking, the only significant group difference is for Quality and for groups based on the nationality of students, the only significant group differences are for Quality and Language Development.

TABLE 3 MANOVA test results

Components	Group means* (SD)			F	Sig.	η^2
	Male	Female				
Quality	3.28 (.47)	3.51 (.45)		9.822	.002	.059
Convenience	2.42 (.61)	2.66 (.54)		6.610	.011	.040
Language development	3.12 (.71)	3.33 (.69)		3.619	.059	.022
	UG	PGT	PGR			
Quality	3.06 (.46)	3.43 (.46)	3.69 (.29)	11.598	.000	.129
Convenience	2.49 (.46)	2.59 (.61)	2.17 (.52)	3.661	.028	.045
Language development	3.16 (.52)	3.26 (.75)	3.07 (.62)	.608	.546	.008
	Chinese	Indian	European			
Quality	3.31 (.46)	3.58 (.42)	3.27 (.47)	3.701	.013	.066
Convenience	2.48 (.70)	2.71 (.38)	2.44 (.50)	1.494	.218	.028
Language development	3.37 (.60)	2.13 (.56)	3.35 (.45)	30.291	.000	.368

* Measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree/not important to 4 = strongly agree/very important.

UG = undergraduate programme, PGT = taught postgraduate programme, PGR = postgraduate programme by research.

In order to assess the attitudes of international students who had already decided to study in the UK to international branch campuses they were asked, after answering some other questions that would have encouraged them to think about the potential benefits of studying at an international branch campus, whether they would consider these campuses if they were to undertake further study after their current programme or whether, given their experience of living and studying in the UK, they would recommend friends in their home country who wanted to study overseas to consider them. Pearson's chi-square tests were used to investigate whether there was association between groups of students categorised by gender, types of programme and nationality and whether or not they would consider international branch campuses, either for themselves or for friends/relations.

The tests involving gender and nationality had no cells with an expected count of less than five, however the test involving types of programme had one cell with an expected count of less than five, and so an exact significance test was selected for Pearson's chi-square. The Fisher's exact test produced a result of .019. The relationship between student attitudes to international branch campuses and each of the groups of students categorised by gender, types of programme and nationality were found to be significant (Table 4). The strength of association between each pair of variables was assessed using the Cramer's V test, which indicated relationships of moderate strength.

TABLE 4 Chi-Square test results

Group	Would not consider international branch campuses (%)	Would consider international branch campuses (%)	χ^2	<i>df</i>	Sig.	Cramer's V
Males	64.3	35.7	7.031	1	.008**	.210
Females	82.9	17.1				
Undergraduate	64.3	35.7	6.731	2	.038 ^a	.205
P/G Taught	71.8	28.2				
P/G Research	100.0	0				
Chinese	70.0	30.0	9.133	3	.028*	.239
Indian	81.0	19.0				
European	87.5	12.5				

* Significant at the .05 level, ** Significant at the .01 level.

^a The analysis showed that one cell had an expected count < 5, so an exact significance test was selected for Pearson's chi-square.

P/G Taught = taught postgraduate programme, P/G Research = postgraduate programme by research.

The survey generated other findings. It was discovered that at the time the students were deciding where to undertake their current study, only four of the 160 respondents had considered one or more international branch campuses as an alternative to the UK institution they had finally chosen. Some 73.1% of the survey respondents agreed with the statement 'the quality of education at international branch campuses is not as high as at the main home campuses'. However, some 20 students said that they would consider going to an international branch campus if they were to undertake further higher education and, given their experiences of living and studying in the UK, 34 students said that they would recommend friends or relations in their home country who want to study overseas to consider international branch campuses. These results suggest that international branch campuses

might in the future become more of a threat to the home campuses of well-respected Western universities in the competition for overseas students, especially if the branch campuses are able to develop sets of core competencies and benefits for students that result in achieving a competitive advantage.

The survey identified some outcomes that could cause student dissatisfaction. For example, 65% of the respondents said that adjusting to life in the UK had been difficult for them due to different cultures, lifestyles and food. Institutions must, therefore, find ways of helping international students to settle into their new environments. For example, the university used in this study offers a daily drop-in service, where international students can obtain advice and support on a wide range of things, such as cultural adaptation, visa renewals, healthcare entitlements and employment in the UK. The university also offers an international student mentor programme, and a host programme, which gives students the opportunity of spending a weekend with a British family. Trips and activities are organised specifically for international students, and an oriental foods supermarket operates on its campus. Some 88.8% of the respondents believed that tuition fees and the costs of living are too high in the UK. If the costs of tuition and accommodation continue to increase considerably above the rate of inflation, then at some point international students will be unable or unwilling to pay them. When this point is reached, students may be 'pushed' into seeking a more affordable alternative to study in major Western countries.

Discussion and conclusion

As revealed in the literature review, most of the models and explanations of international student destination choice in the literature are based on the push-pull concept (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Bodycott, 2009). Interestingly, this study found minimal influence of push factors; it was the pull factors that had far more influence in determining students' choice of country and institution. The pull factors that were significant in determining student choices may be grouped in three categories: factors that influenced the student's general desire to study overseas, such as 'overseas study is best for employment' and 'improve my English overseas', factors that drew students to a particular country, such as 'quality of education in the UK', 'best to improve my English in the UK', 'easy application process in the UK' and 'programmes are of shorter duration in the UK' and finally, factors that drew students to a particular institution, such as 'university/department rankings', 'quality of programme' and 'professor expertise/reputation'.

Government organisations and agencies concerned with the recruitment of international students, such as the *British Council*, do and should continue to emphasise to potential overseas students the benefits and advantages of studying in the UK. Likewise, individual institutions need to consider what the key concerns of students are and then implement the appropriate strategies to address them. The results of this study suggest that HEIs with home campuses in the UK, or indeed in other English-speaking countries, should focus on maintaining, improving and publicising their quality, rankings and reputations whilst emphasising other benefits such as easy application processes, the provision of accommodation and, where applicable, the possibility of staying in the country where the study was undertaken for employment after the programme has been completed. The development of language skills was a key motivator for studying in the UK among Chinese and European students, so institutions should ensure that they provide high quality language programmes and organise extra-curricula activities that enrich and enhance the cultural experiences of students, and which increase their contact and interaction with home students.

The importance of different types of pull factors emerging from this study hints at the increasing complexity of student choice (Vrontis et al., 2007). The shift from push to pull factors may be explained by the fact that more and more options – at home and abroad – have become available for contemporary students in higher education. This would imply that

competition has increased, as universities in the Western world are not only sought after by relatively resourceful students that cannot find what they want in their home systems. Apparently, a broader range of students is looking for an experience abroad and for this group of students minor differences in perceptions of foreign systems and their institutions may significantly influence their destination choice decisions. This undoubtedly will challenge the current international marketing strategies in place (Maringe, 2005; Pilsbury, 2007; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). The suggestion of increasing competition is supported by the findings regarding the attractiveness of international branch campuses.

Many international branch campuses operate in lower-cost environments and/or have a lower cost base, which will enable them to compete with home campuses on price. This could offer a valuable competitive advantage, as 88.8% of the students participating in this study believed that tuition fees and the costs of living are too high in the UK. The home campuses of Western universities might currently be benefiting from the common belief among students that the quality of education at international branch campuses is not as high as at the main home campuses (73.1% of the survey respondents held this view) but some international branch campuses might soon be able to compete with home campuses on quality, teaching and research excellence, and reputation. Several international branch campuses, such as the University of Nottingham's campuses in China and Malaysia, Monash University in Malaysia and the University of Liverpool in China, have already introduced doctoral programmes and invested in the staff and resources required to increase the volume and quality of their research output, with the objective of developing their research profiles.

It was not surprising that none of the postgraduate research students who participated in the survey would consider or recommend considering international branch campuses because the vast majority of these campuses still do not offer doctoral programmes. However, more than a third of the undergraduate students who participated in the survey said that they would consider or recommend considering international branch campuses. The implication for home campuses is that they must ensure that the students who are already enrolled are fully satisfied with their programmes, with the institution's facilities and with the opportunities offered to them, otherwise they might undertake further study at a branch campus or give negative feedback to friends and relations at home, causing them not to apply to the institution.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample obtained by using the convenience sampling strategy at a single university means that the results are not generalisable to all international students in the UK. Furthermore, the sample had some bias toward postgraduate students and so was not fully representative of the student population at the university where the study was conducted. Generalisation of the study's findings is also limited by the fact that the study was conducted at a highly ranked and well-respected research-intensive university, which is located in a particularly pleasant and historic UK town.

That said, the findings of this study have offered an insight into the decision-making processes of international students when choosing a destination and, to some extent, an insight into their attitudes and perceptions of international branch campuses. The study has theoretical value in suggesting that the universally accepted push-pull model of international student destination choice could be evolving into a model where the push factors become less significant and where home campuses and international branch campuses each have their own discrete set of pull factors, and this has consequences for how international marketing should be conceptualised and theorised.

The study has practical relevance for marketing practitioners as well as researchers. Word-of-mouth can be a powerful marketing tool but it can also have negative effects if students are not fully satisfied with their study experiences. HEIs should conduct market research to identify the needs, wants and expectations of international students and then ensure that those needs, wants and expectations are met. It is important that feedback is sought from students so

that the student experience is improved. HEIs that operate international branch campuses must conduct market research and implement differentiation and segmentation strategies to ensure that they do not cannibalise potential demand for their home campuses.

It is clear that there is scope for both marketing practitioners and researchers to do more research into the decision-making processes of international students, especially with regard to their attitudes, beliefs and opinions on international branch campuses, which have so far been largely ignored in the literature.

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