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Article in *International Journal of Educational Management* · August 2016

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Syed Zamberi Ahmad F. Robert Buchanan Norita Ahmad

Article information:

To cite this document:

Syed Zamberi Ahmad F. Robert Buchanan Norita Ahmad , (2016), "Examination of students' selection criteria for international education", International Journal of Educational Management, Vol. 30 Iss 6 pp. 1088 - 1103

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Examination of students' selection criteria for international education

Syed Zamberi Ahmad

*Department of Management, College of Business Administration,
Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates*

F. Robert Buchanan

*Department of Management,
Eberly College of Business and Information Technology,
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania, USA, and*

Norita Ahmad

*Department of Management Information Systems,
School of Business Administration,
American University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates*

Abstract

Purpose – Motivations for study abroad in tourism and hospitality were examined as to the influence of a variety of personal criteria in the individual decision process of adult learners to select a host country and host institution of study. The paper aims to discuss this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – Push-pull factors (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) formed the basic framework of inquiry. Quantitative analysis was done through primary data collection using hard copy surveys. Qualitative inquiry involved interviews with open-ended questions.

Findings – Country attractions of the host location was the highest ranked decision criteria, followed by considerations of the educational institution.

Research limitations/implications – Prestige and reputation of the education provider is of high value. However, greater decision influence was seen in respondents' selection of host country for the attributes of safe and pleasant living conditions, as well as on going career opportunities locally. Sampling was cross-sectional and limited to one industry and one country. Although these are natural control variables, generalizability may be limited, and requires further study.

Originality/value – Policymakers should be mindful of the match between the educational program and the site selection. Prestige of the school may not overcome a suboptimal location decision.

Keywords United Arab Emirates, Emerging markets, Hospitality and tourism programme, International student decision choice, Push-pull, Transnational education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The number of international students choosing to study abroad for higher education has increased substantially over the past several decades. This growth has garnered scholarly attention (Ahmad and Buchanan, 2015; Ahmad, 2014; Choi and Nieminen, 2013). According to statistics released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1.3 million students enrolled in higher education outside their country of citizenship in year 1990, and the numbers increased to nearly 5 million in 2014 (International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) Monitor, 2014; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). It is predicted that the demand will rise to 7.2 million by 2025 (Böhm *et al.*, 2002). The rapid growth is due to a



large increase in student mobility from China, India, and European countries in particular. It is also important to note that the increase of student mobility in Europe could be driven by the Bologna developments. The new European mobility strategy set the target of 20 percent of graduates in Europe to have studied or been trained abroad by 2020 (Bologna Secretariat, 2012).

While traditional study destinations such as the USA, UK, Germany, France, Australia, and Canada received the largest shares of international students in 2014 (ICEF Monitor, 2014), newly recognized higher education hubs are emerging in the Middle-East, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Higher education institutions located in this area now actively promote and market themselves as the best overseas study destination to attract international students from China, India, Europe, African nations, and Asia Pacific (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2014).

There is extensive literature on how international students choose where to study abroad, and the experiences of these students (e.g. Lee, 2010). Most studies, however, address only students studying abroad in developed countries, despite there being considerable numbers of international students enrolled in higher education institutions in the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA) region in general (Lane-Toomey and Lane, 2012) or UAE in particular (Wilkins, 2013). To date, there has been limited study to investigate the factors influencing the flow of international students to the Middle-East from other continents of the world (Wilkins *et al.*, 2012). This issue is of importance, as there is an increased movement of international students coming from various countries to the Middle-East region (Lane-Toomey and Lane, 2012). There exist some studies that look at issues related to tourism and hospitality programs education in Jordan (Hawkins *et al.*, 2012), and other emerging markets that are considerably less developed than UAE (Abdul-Ghani, 2006; Chaisawat, 2005; Huimin *et al.*, 2007). The UAE has established itself as a strong market to host tourism and hospitality programs (commonly referred to as hospitality and tourism programs (HTP)) education (Durrani, 2015). A multicultural environment such as the UAE creates important learning benefit, resulted in a strong and diverse transnational education providers (Swan, 2013). In addition to the business school bachelor of tourism degree, there are program offerings in eco-tourism, cultural tourism, tourism law, heritage, and tourism, as well as bachelor of tourism management (Pearce, 2005).

In addition, the UAE is also considered as a dynamic emerging market, as tourism education in developed markets, particularly in the USA, has fallen behind in recent years (Ayoun *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to discover the attitudes of international students in HTP toward destination and institution choice for tertiary education. Evaluating the motivations factors of international student in HTP to undertake education in this area may be useful as the findings of this investigation may affect the recruitment policy of hospitality and tourism management institutions in general, and specifically in the UAE.

With its intention to become a key global economic power by 2021, the UAE government has committed to transform the higher education landscape. The UAE sees higher education as a critical sector to developing brainpower for their new knowledge-based economy. Of the seven emirates making up the UAE, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Ras Al Khaimah are currently active in recruiting international universities, faculty, students and knowledge industries. Given the popularity of Dubai and Abu Dhabi compared to the other emirates, it is of no surprise that most of the higher education institutions are located in these two emirates (Commission for Academic

Accreditation, 2015). In Dubai for instance, as of September 2014, there are 57 higher education institutions (national and international), offering a wide range of programs including vocational diplomas and associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees with an estimated total of more than 52,000 students from over 140 different countries (Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), 2014). The highest attracted enrollment of these students is within the field of business. However, in recent years there has been an increase in number of students' enrollments in various programs such as engineering, humanities, education, hospitality and tourism, law and natural and physical sciences (Knowledge and Human Development Authority, 2012).

The popularity of HTP has increased in the recent years and evidence by the growth number of higher education institutions established in the country such as the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, Higher College of Technology, Skyline University, Manipal University Dubai Campus, Emirates Munnar Catering College University, and European International College, offering courses related to tourism and hospitality management and attracting enrollments from national and international students. The keen interest in attaining an HTP in this country is also shown by the growing number of international students who are enrolling into the program (KHDA, 2014). The growth of the hospitality and tourism sector is expected to increase at 8.1 percent per year and to reach \$7.5 billion by 2016 (Jones, 2012). Recruitment in the hospitality and tourism sector rose 34 percent year on year, resulted in a high demand of qualified graduates from reputed educational institutions both locally and internationally with priority given to the graduates from the local institutions (Bouyamourn and Sahoo, 2014).

Key definition

Although the flows of students' mobility are a global phenomenon, definitions of the "international student" vary and the collection of relevant statistics is inconsistent. Andrade (2006) defined "international student" as "individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education that are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers." Some national governments simply consider international students to be anyone who is studying outside their normal country of residence (Gardiner *et al.*, 2013). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) definition of an internationally mobile student is the most widely accepted (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2014a). UNESCO refers "international students" as "students [that] leave their country or territory of origin and move to another country or territory with the objective of studying" (UNESCO, 2014a, p. 109).

UAE higher education landscape

UAE is considered a high-income nation by international indicators and one of the highest gross domestic products producers per capita among Middle-East countries (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2014b). The first higher education institution, UAE University, was established in Al-Ain in 1977. Then, in 1988, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) were set up to offer mainly vocational and technical programs. With a network of 17 campuses, HCT became the largest federal institution throughout the country. Zayed University, established in 1998 with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, was the third and final institution to be established by the federal government.

All of the others higher institutions in the UAE are referred to as “private” institutions (Wilkins, 2010). The private universities fall into one of these two categories: either owned or controlled locally, by individual emirates or local organizations, or from abroad, by foreign institutions of higher education that have established international branch campuses.

The first international branch campus was established in Dubai in 1993 by the University of Wollongong, a well-known and recognized institution from Australia. Many other foreign institutions since then have opened and established their presence in the country. More than 40 international branch campuses have been established in the UAE, with 27 of those are in Dubai (Swan, 2013). The desire to strengthen the private higher education sector is linked to the desire to improve economic development and recruit and retain highly skilled workers (Muysken and Nour, 2006).

In terms of international student circulation, the UAE has reportedly managed to attract a modestly growing number of students from India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran and the Middle-East, including Sudan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia (KHDA, 2014). This means that there are growing trends of international students who travel to UAE to study (UNESCO, 2014a). Most of the federally funded UAE institutions do not host large numbers of international students. The bulk of enrollments of international students have been in the private higher education institutions. With the growth in the number of international students coming to the UAE for educational purposes, little research has addressed the factors influencing their decision making in choosing UAE to pursue higher education. This study with an attempt to fill these gaps and extend the literature is therefore timely and worthwhile.

International students destination of choice

Research in the area of travel motives has been useful in understanding and predicting the factors that influence foreign-bound education. Researchers have shown two of the travel influences associated with motivation to be push and pull forces. Push forces are regarded as “the desire to travel,” while pull forces are considered as “the choice of destination” (Kim *et al.*, 2007a). Many researchers in the tourism field find that individuals’ travel decisions are best explained and predicted by the push and pull force approach to travel decision making. Similar to travel motives, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), contended that student motivations and decision criteria to study abroad are influenced by the push-pull factors. In studying the flow of international students who had gone from four different Asian countries to Australia to take a course in higher education, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identified such push factors as the perceived quality of education abroad being better than local, difficulty to gain entry at home institution, courses not available at home, a better understanding and exposure to the western culture, and intention for migration after completion. The pull factors that influence the selection of student’s host country encompassed of personal recommendations, tuition fees and general costs of living issues, study environment, geographical proximity, and social links. Key factors determining choice of institution were its reputation for quality, staff expertise, reputation of the institution, courses offered, and promotion and marketing efforts. Along with the push factors that propel students out of their home country to study abroad, it is the attributes of a particular country, its resources, and its facilities that pull students to enroll in their higher institutions.

Maringe and Carter (2007) researched the push and pull factors of African students’ decisions in choosing UK as their study destination for higher education. The findings revealed that push factors which students consider important in their decision making

includes uncertainty in home economic conditions, political instability, and lack of general local capacity within countries of origin. According to the findings, the inadequate supply of higher education in the African nations has made students choose to study overseas willingly or unwillingly. On the other hand, the primary pull factors that the students take into consideration for deciding UK tertiary education are international recognition, easy application process, excellent teaching and learning environments, and availability of part-time job to support their study. Despite highlighting new findings regarding the push-pull model of student destination decision making, the authors also reported that the main obstacles and enabling factors to student mobility include costs, visa restrictions and frequent changes in regulations, fear of not being able to find suitable part-time work, failure to meet course targets, fear of failure, and negative aspects of cultural/environmental influences. The research developed a synthesis model that incorporates the dynamic decision making process and suggested six elements influencing the decision for international students to study abroad, which are push factors as key influencers, pull factors at the country level, pull factors at institutional and course program level, risk and anxieties, and experiential dissatisfaction.

Li and Bray (2007) used a push-pull model to explore the motivations of Mainland Chinese students to study in Hong Kong and Macau. These students according to the authors are simultaneously domestic and international because Hong Kong and Macau are autonomous administrative districts with independent higher education systems within the People's Republic of China. This perspective led Li and Bray to pay attention not only to the negative "push" factors that drive students from their home turf but also positive "pull" factors that encourage them to stay relatively close to home. "The pull forces at home include a desire to stay with one's family, awareness of the relevance of domestic education and increasing internalization of domestic institutions" (Li and Bray 2007, p. 795). OECD's (2014) analysis on the process and factors in influencing international students to move abroad for higher education offered some useful insights into why certain destinations are more attractive than others. The research findings revealed that despite institutional reputation and academic rigor, skilled guest worker opportunities have a great impact on students' choices of destination. Countries with relatively loose visa and immigration policies are more likely to attract international student applications (Chen, 2007). The OECD provides confirmation that students from Mainland China are mostly pursuing their higher education in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, UK, and the USA, and that most of these popular destinations have systems that welcome international students as long-term residents (OECD, 2014). A study conducted in China by To *et al.* (2014) confirmed that among the attributes valued by students in selecting higher education abroad are high quality of education, cost of study, potential to work, and the possibility of future migration opportunities after graduation.

Singh *et al.* (2014) explored the push and pull factors influencing student destination choice to study in developing countries such as in Malaysia. The results indicated that international students from the Middle-East region tended to specify three main reasons for their decision such as safe and peaceful place, religion and cultural proximity, and the low tuition fees. In contrast, reasons claimed by the Asian students who are studying in Malaysia are the close proximity to their home countries, sharing the same culture and languages, reasonableness of the fees structure, and low cost of living. Importantly, the study also found that international students appeared to be attracted to the attributes of the country first, and the particular characteristics of the institution second. An initial step toward generalizing these findings cross-culturally is

made by testing the push-pull model of study abroad destination choice in the context of the UAE.

Despite the insights gleaned from the push-pull model, it does have number of limitations. For example, push-pull model was based relatively more on a macro environmental perspective (Li and Bray, 2007). The models are unable to fully explain the process of individual students' characteristics that chose to study abroad (Wilkins *et al.*, 2012). Student characteristics include socio-economic background, personal characteristics and preferences, academic ability, social capital, and creative capital. Thus individual students might react to different push-pull factors differently.

Research methodology

Data collection

The research subjects comprised of international students who enrolled in HTP as full-time students in the UAE institutions. This study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to discover how international students in HTP decided on their destination choices. This study used the multi-method approach for data collection to avoid biases associated with specific methods (Kent, 2008). Triangulation of methods was used in this research to determine the consistency of data collected from both methods, and the research findings were compared to the findings from the literature review.

Quantitative research method

In this study, a survey questionnaire was used to collect data. It was self-administered to international students across three university campuses (Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, Higher College of Technology, and Skyline University) to identify the factors influencing or determining choices of international students. Given the content of this research, most of the respondents had no hesitation in participating in the survey. Confidentiality was assured in a letter of disclosure introducing the researcher to the staff and students at the respective universities. The permission letter was also scanned and sent to the targeted institutions when requesting participation for data collection. For Institutional Review Board compliance, respondents assured their voluntary willingness in the initial page of the survey. The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to maximize the representation of nationalities, study discipline, and gender diversity of the international students. The researchers collected the completed questionnaires personally. This effort generated 89 usable responses; thus achieving an overall response rate of 68.46 percent. The questionnaires were analyzed using statistical package for the social science (SPSS, version 20), and descriptive analysis was performed for all survey items.

Qualitative research method

A qualitative research approach in the form of in-depth face-to-face interviews was conducted with eight international students at their institute of learning. The researcher identified respondents based on their response in the survey. A random selection was made from the list of the respondents who completed the survey. Areas of inquiry emerged from the literature but were flexible enough to allow for the interviewers to steer questions into areas of richer data and/or additional insights. Students were encouraged to express their opinions and feelings freely without restriction. The interview guide was constructed after results from the quantitative

data were obtained with a combination of open-ended and semi-structured formats. All of the international students were interviewed in English as a common medium, were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and coded. The duration for each of the interviews was 1 to 2 hours, took place in university coffee shops, cafeteria, common, or other public areas around the institutions involved. All of the respondents were very cooperative and open, as the researchers had clearly explained the aims of the research. Sample questions that guided the study include: “tell me about your reasons for seeking study abroad,” “why you chose UAE as your study destination”, and “what are you looking for in the ‘ideal’ study abroad destination?” Analysis involved noting the frequency of similar responses, drawing connections between ideas or comments presented, and identifying patterns of associations between different items. Transcripts of interviews were returned to the students for credibility and accuracy checks.

Questionnaire design

Based on a review of the relevant literature on international student destination choice (Bodycott, 2009; Chen, 2007; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Kim *et al.*, 2007b; Lee, 2014; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Wilkins *et al.*, 2012) the questionnaire featured the push-pull factors previously discussed. The goal was to discern student decision influences in regard to choosing a study abroad destination. The questionnaire was composed of two parts. The first part consisted of 37 items asking respondents to indicate the degree of importance of attributes that influenced their destination choices and were based on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “very unimportant,” 3 “neutral,” and 5 “very important.” Respondents were asked to provide information about their gender, nationality, age group, year of study, and level of study (undergraduate/postgraduate) in the second part. The survey questionnaire was written in English and was completed by respondents using hard copies. A pilot test had been performed using three international faculty members and 12 international students studying in the UAE higher education institutions. The faculty members and students offered several comments and some items were eliminated or modified in the final version based on their suggestions. This procedure ensured that the content validity of the questionnaire was adequate (Churchill, 1979).

Findings

Demographic profile of respondents

A demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table I. The respondents were mostly female (71.9 percent) and in the UAE between one to four years for study. The respondents were aggregated into regional groupings to facilitate segmentation. The three largest groupings in the sample on the basis of geographical origin were from Middle-East region (32.6 percent), Asia (29.2 percent), and Europe continents (21.3 percent). Most respondents were studying at undergraduate level (60.7 percent), certificate (25.8 percent) or postgraduate (13.5 percent) level of HTP. Interestingly, majority of the respondents (57.3 percent) indicated that they had traveled to the UAE prior to undertaking their tertiary education.

Factors that contributed international students in HTP studying abroad

It is no surprise that students develop criteria to assist their decision making about their choice of destination, as well as their institution for higher education. The results shown in Table II indicated considerable differences in ratings of factor importance

Categories	Number	%	Examination of students' selection criteria
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	25	28.1	
Female	64	71.9	
<i>Duration in UAE (years)</i>			
Below 1	8	9.0	
1-2	52	58.4	
3-4	24	27.0	
Above 4	5	5.6	
<i>Country of origin</i>			
Middle-East (Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Oman, Bahrain)	29	32.6	
Asia (Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, India, China)	26	29.2	
Europe (UK, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, France, Italy)	19	21.3	
Oceania (Australia, New Zealand)	5	5.7	
North America (USA)	3	3.3	
Others	7	7.9	
<i>Level of study</i>			
Certificate	23	25.8	
Undergraduate	54	60.7	
Postgraduate	12	13.5	
<i>Have you ever been to the UAE?</i>			
Yes	51	57.3	
No	38	31.7	
Note: <i>n</i> = 89			

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Table I.
Summary profile
of respondents

among international students in HTP in choosing to travel to the UAE for study. Among the four sets of factors assessed in the study, country attractions showed the strongest pull influence on the international students' study decision, followed by the pull factors of institutional attractions, push factors for seeing and learning experiences, and finally push factors of recommendations from various group.

Factors influencing choice of UAE

As noted in Table I, majority of the international students reported in this study suggested that the lure of the UAE in general proves to be the most important influence. For these students, the sense of UAE as a safe (mean score = 4.85) and pleasant country (mean score = 4.75) to study was important. According to Overseas Security Advisory Council (2014) report, the UAE is a relatively safe country and the crime rate is considerably lower than other countries and cities in the world. For students living in countries experiencing conflict and political instability, which includes several countries across the MENA region, the UAE seems like an appealing destination for study. These findings are consistent with Maringe and Carter (2007) who identified that a safe place to study was one of the key considerations for international students.

Other reasons that were most often cited as "very important" by international students for country attraction factor were "prospects of better employment and higher salary" (mean score = 4.70) and "perceived as an exciting place to live" (mean score = 4.68). Due to its strong economy and modern cityscape, international students often get the

Dimension/factor	Mean	SD
<i>Factor 1: country attractions</i>		
UAE is a safe country to live	4.85	1.79
UAE is a pleasant country to study	4.75	1.72
Prospects of better employment and higher salary	4.7	1.74
Perceived as an exciting place to live	4.68	1.65
UAE is strategically place for vacation	4.65	1.69
Strong economic growth of the country	4.59	1.68
Stepping stone for migration after graduation	4.54	1.43
UAE is strategically located for study	4.52	1.65
Muslim and Islamic connections	4.43	1.62
Familiarity/comfortable with culture and lifestyle	4.39	1.48
The ease and speed for visa application and acceptance	4.31	1.57
Diverse and multicultural environment	4.23	1.65
Ethnic ties to the country	4.21	1.59
Geographical proximity	4.2	1.54
UAE has strong economic and political ties with my home country	4.18	1.54
Improvement of foreign language skills	4.01	1.53
Comfortable climate of UAE	3.95	1.43
Affordability of living	3.95	1.47
<i>Factor 2: institutional attractions</i>		
Reputation for quality of education/program	4.73	1.75
Recognition of international qualification	4.69	1.64
Attending a prestigious institution	4.54	1.71
Ranking of the institution	4.31	1.58
Range of program available	4.23	1.6
Easy to get admission	4.18	1.52
Quality of professor in HTP	4.05	1.47
Desire education not available in home country	4.01	1.45
Availability of scholarship	3.95	1.4
<i>Factor 3: seeing and learning experiences</i>		
Seeing many attractions	4.67	1.67
Experiencing a new culture	4.53	1.64
Experiencing different lifestyle	4.38	1.61
New learning experience	4.26	1.58
Seeing and experiencing a new destination	4.17	1.54
<i>Factor 4: recommendations</i>		
My friends recommended, studied, or planned to study in the UAE	4.67	1.73
Recommendation from my family/spouse	4.52	1.67
My professors recommended or studied in UAE	3.67	1.62
Recommendation from school counselor	3.04	1.58
Recommendation from my sponsor	2.89	1.51
Notes: SD, standard deviation. Variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 5 = very important to 1 = least important		

Table II.
Rating of factors
that attract and
influence decision
making of
international
students in HTP
studying in the UAE

impression that working in the UAE is a lucrative option. Indeed, expatriates working in the UAE make up roughly 85 percent of the emirate's population. The hospitality and tourism sector has experienced a huge boost in the recent years and offers many job opportunities (Bouyamourn and Sahoo, 2014). Many international students expressed a preference for attending a HTP located in a metropolitan city such as Abu Dhabi or

Dubai, since they were used to living in a similar environment in their own country. Students already studying in the UAE feel that it is an exciting place to live due to the lively and cosmopolitan cities, relatively tolerant and open society, attraction of many tourism destinations, and diverse multi-culture environment.

Other factors which also achieved high mean scores contributing to the international students' decision include "UAE is strategically place for vacation" (mean score = 4.65); "strong economic growth of the country" (4.59); "Muslim and Islamic connections" (4.43); as well as "familiarity/comfortable with culture and lifestyle" (4.39). The perceived attributes of the UAE as a stable Islamic nation have attracted many international students from Islamic countries. For many students of Muslim background, UAE has a special attraction of common religious and cultural practices, although many students found these differed somewhat from their home culture. The background of such students included students from Bahrain, Botswana, Nigeria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, and Algeria. The events surrounding September 11, 2001, in the USA also created a new trend of international students' mobility to the UAE. Facing the imposition of severe visa restrictions into the western countries for students from the Islamic world, many Muslim students now diverted their destination to the MENA region. One Jordanian student simply said, "our generation is completely influenced by the geopolitical events of the past 15 years" (Informant 3). Students in the interviews pointed to the events of September 11, 2001, as the catalyst for their interest in the MENA region and eventually their decision to study abroad in the UAE (Informants 2, 5, and 8).

Factors influencing choice of an institution

The image of institutions and recognition of educational qualification are also important factors in determining the motivation and decision of international students to travel to the UAE for tertiary education. Choi and Nieminen (2013) stated that international students mainly chose their higher education destination based on the academic reputation and quality of the university, the choice of the academic programs offered, and the relevance and value of the foreign degree obtained. The majority of the students in our study claimed "reputation of the program" (mean score = 4.73) as the most influential attribute when choosing an institution. This is consistent with the findings of a previous study conducted by Wilkins *et al.* (2012) on the motivation factor of international students studying at an international branch campus in the UAE where the students believe strongly that the programs offered by their institution are highly recognized, which influenced their choice of university. This attribute was closely followed by "international recognition of the qualification" (mean score = 4.69), "prestigious institutions" (4.54) and "ranking of the institutions" (4.31). The emergence of published university rankings and the relative importance given to it by many UAE higher education institutions, which advertise rankings on their websites, reflects the perception that the quality of the institution is important for international students. As Lee (2014) noted that for international higher education students, quality of education is an important factor and their choices may be influenced by the reputation and information about the institution. Similarly for many in our study, the quality of education available at a chosen study destination was also tied to the perceived overall quality of the university, and specifically, higher education institutions in the UAE. According to a student from Italy who is currently taking a HTP certificate in one of the private institutions, "quality of program and reputation of institution is important as pursuing higher education is a lifetime investment and it needs to be worthwhile"

(Informant 7). Students in the interviews also believed that studying at a highly recognized institution, no matter where it was located, positioned them well in their future career prospects and job opportunities. Response from one of the female HTP students from China, “tuition costs do not necessarily discourage prospective international students, as long as the quality of education provided is high and its likely returns make the investment worthwhile” (Informant 1).

The importance of seeing and learning experience

Among seeing and learning experiences variables, international students in this study reported that “seeing many attractions” (mean score = 4.67), “experiencing a new culture” (4.53), and “experiencing different life-style” (4.38), are among the top three push factors associated with their decision to travel to the UAE for higher education. Several of the respondents claimed, “there are many attractions found in the UAE and among most preferred activities by the international students are sightseeing, shopping, going to beaches and amusement parks” (Informant 4 and 6). These findings are inconsistent with those of Michael *et al.* (2004) who stated that the most popular activity by international students was shopping. Study findings of Field (1999) and Shanka *et al.* (2001) also concur with this study’s finding, indicating that preferred activities by international students included sightseeing, shopping, touring a city, visiting friends and historical sites, going to beach and night club/dance.

The UAE may be an ideal destination for international students interested in Arab and other cultures as the country offers a unique and valuable multicultural experience. For example, one student from Botswana stated, “I came to study in the UAE to gain an understanding of what the country that is dominated by expatriates actually looks like” (Informant 8). Another student chose the UAE in order “to practice my Arabic language and to better understand the Muslim world” (Informant 5). During the interviews, some students believed that their efforts to study in the UAE would be rewarded with opportunities to work in the country. International students in this study were much more likely wanted to work in the UAE, with many of them articulating the sentiments during their interviews on choice of a specific type of organization within the hospitality and tourism industry that they would like to join in the future after graduation. As the job markets in the UAE are more stable in the past few years compared to other countries, many students come to the UAE as a way to gain qualifications and finding opportunity for entering the job market. In general, career intentions of international students who choose to study HTP in the UAE were much focussed.

The importance of recommendations from related parties as study destination

A number of studies cited family influence as the most influential factor affecting students’ decisions to undertake tertiary education (Buchman and Dalton, 2002; Johnson and Kumar, 2010; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Our survey data indicated that for majority of international students in this study, it was friends (mean score = 4.67) followed by family (4.52) who first suggested the idea of study in the UAE. The majority of students selected the institution and destination on the basis of advice from people who had some association and knowledge of the universities’ reputation. One student from Yemen said “I chose UAE, at first my brother was here, he came here before me and he told me UAE was a good stable country and the most important thing is that they have a very good higher education system compared to our country.” (Informant 2). Another student responded: “my choice to study abroad at the UAE was made during

my visit to one of my best friends' house. I met him when he came home for summer vacation. He told me UAE is a nice place to study and learning environment there is nice and suits our culture" (Informant 5). According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), word of mouth referral is one of the most powerful forms of promotion. Friends, parents and relatives who have graduated, worked or traveled to the respective destination and enjoyed the experience are likely to recommend it to their family or friends.

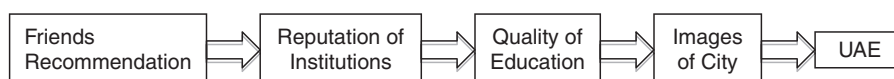
Discussion

Figure 1 presents the most important factors in the international student in HTP decision-making process identified through this empirical research.

These influences may not seem unusual bearing in mind that the students surveyed were already studying in the UAE and had made their decision to study HTP. The findings highlight that although some of the students in this study mentioned about the attributes of the particular institutions as important factors for decision making choice of higher education institution, it appears that primary criteria for decision making was the country in which institutions are located. The perceived attributes of UAE as safe country to live and study also affect the students' decision. Nevertheless, the attraction of less onerous visa applications also helps determine the choice. Many international students from Muslim countries commented that it was extremely difficult to obtain a USA and Canada student visa, and many had been rejected; therefore the UAE is a perfect alternative for them. From an institution image perspective, the quality of its program, international degree recognition, prestigious institution, and ranking of institutions are among the most important influences.

Conclusion

Recently, the UAE has received an increased number of international students. While international students have traditionally favoured English-speaking countries for tertiary education, the trend started to change lately. There are many students who chose non-western countries as their destination for international education in the last few years (Wilkins *et al.*, 2012). To provide a better understanding of this contemporary behavior, the specific aim of this study was to examine the importance of factors and features identified as influential in the decision to study abroad. We examine the choice of study abroad destination using Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull model as a framework for this study. The results offer some useful insights into why international students travel to the UAE for higher education. This research specifically looks at students who have chosen to study HTP and who were already in the country. Thus it is less focussed on the financial side of their education. They were attracted by economic and political stability of the country and looking forward for job market opportunities after graduation. Consistent with earlier findings by Singh *et al.* (2014) we found that current international students' decisions are mainly based on the perceived attributes of the country in terms of safe and secure environment, cosmopolitan cities, and strong economic growth as a primary factor; while the particular characteristics of the institution such as educational standards and international recognition are a



Note: Factors that contributed to international students in HTP to study in the UAE

Figure 1.
Decision process

secondary criteria for decision making. These findings have significant implications for higher education administrators' to formulate effective marketing and promotional strategies in light of attracting international students to seek higher education in the UAE in general and in HTP in particular. For example, higher education institutions could provide students first-hand experience through internships and partnerships with companies in the HTP sector. This would enable their graduates to be well placed with the companies for their future careers.

In generalizing the results more broadly, we empirically show the value of a destination country that fits a program of study, when it also provides ongoing employment advancement potential for graduates. For HTP, the UAE is a rich country with cutting edge organizations representing the industries of interest. There are also opportunities for potential graduates from the local institutions. Similar implications might exist for countries that support strong industries of medical, engineering, financial, and performing arts.

While providing valuable information and insight, this study has limitations. First, the results may not be widely generalizable because the target population was limited to international students in HTP who study in the UAE educational institutions. In order to better predict the behavior of international students, further studies on decision choice are suggested. Second, it must be stressed that the current study is a snapshot in time. The international higher education market is dynamic. Students' interests and expectations can change rapidly. General implications for policymakers would emphasize the value of location. As such, competitive advantage from a national standpoint can recognize and capitalize on strategic strengths possessed by the country. Educational institutions need to deploy their commitments and resources into host locations that maximize those efforts through their portfolio of natural endowments. These actions are driven by the students themselves in a legitimate customer model of education (Koris and Nokelainen, 2015), to the extent that they use a rational decision making process in selecting their host.

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Corresponding author

Syed Zamberi Ahmad can be contacted at: drszamberi@yahoo.com

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