Factors, Affecting Students' Decision to Enroll in a University

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Globally, Higher Education Providers are seeking new ways of increasing student recruitment and diversify economic growth. The market in Dubai for higher education is very competitive originating ``excess educational supply.'' In the case of Dubai, the factors which students consider may vary due to a diverse background of the students and a wide selection of study options. Analyzing and forecasting student choice factors enables a university to take the right strategy, position on the market. Therefore, a university should be able to distinguish itself by focusing on factors which students consider locally, instead of known common aspects which over universities overseas consider for their students. Two surveys were conducted highlighting the decision factors. Secondary research created the foundation for the primary research targeting Dubai-based students. In total, 75 current and 220 potential students participated in the survey, where demographics, factors, and preference of university location were examined. To analyze the data, the mean analysis and MANOVA were used. Also, an integrated marketing communication (IMC) analysis of the brand was conducted. The researchers observed a significant difference between Dubai and the global market. Results reveal that majority of the students consider degree recognition as the most important aspect of their education, followed by career after graduation, academic excellence, and practical approach. There was no direct correlation between the location and a final decision to join. The list of recommendations was created to enhance the IMC practices in the niche market, including conventional and digital marketing, events and PR. One of the limiting factors of this research can be considered the diverse sample of respondents (nationality, curriculum, residency location). This research serves as a foundation for marketing campaigns for Dubai universities and can contribute to the strategic roadmap by focusing on prime factors affecting students' decision.

Keywords: Student Recruitment, Universities in Dubai, Marketing in Education

INTRODUCTION

The economic environment affects the business and plays a critical role in its success. Private Education is a very challenging industry and requires a profound strategic approach in order to deliver quality service and remain profitable. As enrollment patterns continue to shift, an increasing number of colleges are experiencing declining revenue Craig (2017) . The market in the UAE for higher education is very competitive, with some universities residing for more than a decade and the new branch campuses opening every year. According to KHDA open data, only in Dubai, there are 35 KHDA-licensed private universities, out of which 26 are offering programs in a business field.

In order to remain relevant and distinguish itself from competitors, a university requires to develop a strategic plan to improve its' performance, increase brand awareness, maintain high satisfaction rate of its' students, offer a challenging curriculum. The subject of this case study is an established campus of MODUL University in Dubai. It is a private institution providing academic programs in areas of hospitality, tourism, business, and management. For strategic plans of the university, it should be important to analyze the various factors which provide an impact on the future enrollment numbers, inclusive the brand, the location, the content, the programme choice and more.

In case of the UAE, the market is extremely competitive with over 56 Higher Education Providers (HEP) and consist of approximately 60 thousand students, according to the open data provided by Knowledge and Human Development Authority of Dubai.

Thus, this study would focus on the following objectives, which would support the feasibility report at a later stage: a) analyze the impact of various factors in the students' decision to join a university; b) identify the trend for a university choice based on the element of the campus facility; c) provide recommendations for in-depth analysis.

The following will be required in order to meet the objectives of this thesis: a) perform a literature review of case studies of various business schools worldwide; b) perform a survey within a student population and cross-examine the result with a survey within applicants' body; c) compile an analytical report to identify the primary trend of university choice.

Prior to conduction this study, the following assumptions were made based on the author's opinion: a) university location is an essential factor for different students in Dubai; b) there might be a pattern or correlation between student choice of university-based on location and student residency; c) there might be superior factors which would impact the student decision higher than the location of the campus; d) students of different nationalities would have a different perception of those factors.

This research is divided into five main sections. The first section "Introduction" provides a general overview of the topic and research objectives. The second section "Literature Review" describes international case-studies of various universities on factors, which are important to the students to decide to join an institution, the summary of research papers is provided with in-depth analysis of the market in Dubai, using the open data from the government authority (KHDA). After that, third section "Methodology" provides insight on the structure of research process, methods used in the primary research, survey design, a sample of the conducted surveys and most importantly - data analysis of the conducted surveys. In the forth part of this research, "Results and Discussion," an overview of MODUL's brand and its' marketing activities analysis would explain the nature of decisions making the process of the students, which were influenced by MODUL's marketing activities. Finally, the conclusion would summarise the paper and provide recommendations o the way forward.

METHODE

The research facilitated an extensive survey with a clear split of participants in order to understand the decision-making patterns. In total, 75 current students of MODUL University Dubai participated in the survey as well as 220 Dubai-based school students (out of which 219 are considered valid) through an online tool Google Forms which helped to facilitate a fast and engaging response.

With the support of Marketing and Student Recruitment and Student Services Teams of MODUL University Dubai, it was possible to reach out to the applicants and the students of the university. Two comprehensive surveys were conducted with existing students of the university (who already made their choice to study at MODUL University Dubai) and potential applicants/school students in the UAE.

The questionnaire consisting of 3 groups of questions was created. Each question was randomly placed on the survey to ensure each question would be answered individually. All items used a 5-point rating scale where one = not essential, and five = extremely important. Respondents completed the survey questionnaire online. The online link was distributed over two weeks in April 2018, generating 75 usable responses for current students. Also, the link was shared with 220 school students over five weeks during April and May 2018.

The survey was designed with the recommended questions from the literature review with the adoption of the local market. In order to facilitate the answering process, the participants were presented with options to choose from on a scale of one to five as well as some additional information for the rest of the questions to help them respond.

The following set of questions was designed to meet the objectives of this study as well as additional information was collected to a) cross-check the validity of the responses and use the data in future research:

[Table 1 about here.]

A summary profile of existing students and potential applicants was presented:

The total number of students-respondents is 75. The existing student body profile consists of 43 male and 32 female students. Majority of the student population (52%) is 18 to 20 years of age. Replicating Dubai's model of diversity, the student population varies by nationality and the country of origin. The count of 7 different location zones was identified by the location map of the emirate. Majority of student population residing in Zone 2 (close to the campus) with 36%.

The total number of applicants-respondents is 220. However, only 219 were verified as valid. More female applicants recorded their answers (63%) in this survey. Out of all respondents, 65% are 15 to 17 years old. Students from India who are residing in the UAE compiled a majority for this survey (65%).

The breakdown of participants shows 25% located in Zone 2 in Dubai. Majority of respondents (58%) are studying Indian Curriculum.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

State the objectives of the work and provide an adequate background, avoiding a detailed literature survey or a summary of the results. Higher Education Providers compile their own identity and brand McAlexander et al. (2005) while facing enormous competition in their industry. Internationally, several research projects were conducted to identify customer behavior and decision making in terms of choosing a university or a business school. A wide range of research was conducted regarding the factors that influence the decision of a university applicant. Also, several studies examined the third-party influence on an applicant decision, inclusive of family members, school counselors, faculty of the university, administration of the school or university, alumni members, student recruitment and others. All of the above have an impact on the final decision on admission Loewith (1998). Other research projects focus on the impact of the university admission or selection process, new media technologies, ratings, comparison tables, and reviews online, as well as a social activity. However, there are several generations which would still value a printed media, journals over online data GUERNSEY (1998). Research projects also focused on other types of factors which might have influenced a student decision and motivated one applicant to register at the specific university, which, frankly, hard to measure such as influencers, aspirations, an interest to set-up their own business, a wish to be stable financially and a tendency to follow the group decision Wenglinsky (1996). In the research conducted by three pillars of the decision were identified: Academic (the choice of a major which would be interesting to study, class size or professor to student ratio, and the availability of academic advising), Social (the total number of students attending the institution) and Personal (advice from parent or guardians). No factors from the financial scale or the location of the campus were included in the top ten items . Additionally, students tend to make a choice of the university based on the overall financial package and the marketing mix such which includes a special promotion or available study grants as argued by another research Briggs and Wilson (2007).

The following matrix will demonstrate common factors identified by various researchers and its repetition combined by groups for ease of understanding.

[Table 2 about here.]

The above table shows that across different research projects, different surveys and methods, various authors identified the priority factors differently. For instance, Quality of education is the most common factor across all the authors. However, its' average score is 30, while Cost – 55, Campus and Facilities – 51, Career Prospects – 46, Student Experience – 64, Recommendations – 48. The lower the score – the bigger the priority. Thus, the average priority would look as follows: Quality of Education followed by Career Prospects, followed by Recommendation from Family and Friends, Campus and Facilities, Cost and finally – Student Experience. In the education industry, private institutions tried to answer the question of why students choose their destination, also to understand international student flows, the decision or motivation to study abroad and the international students' choices of country and institution using push and pull model Wilkins et al. (2012) . The Push and Pull model examines the factors motivating international student choice of the host country. It describes a "push-pull" model motivating the student's desire to seek overseas education and influencing the decision process in the selection of a final study destination. Thus, several economic factors and the social environment can push the applicant to study abroad, whereas pull factors would be responsible for the final choice of the university destination Mazzarol (2002) . While the above factors are relatively important to the student choice, UAE researchers argue Wilkins and Huisman (2011) that for the local market where more than 56 different institutions are operating, the updated list of 'pull' factors should be considered and that there are different motivation factors for different nationalities. For instance, Pakistani students were most motivated by attractions in the UAE. In contrast, students from the Africa origin state more of push factors including lack of good opportunities in their home country, the quality of provided education, facilities and more. The conducted research studies also confirm that there is a difference decision-making model for students from different regions Wilkins et al. (2012) .

To summarize, and for ease of reference, the following factors were identifie

[Table 3 about here.]

Two groups of factors are completely different and barely cross, which highlights our concern of the fact that in the education industry in Dubai there might be different factors in play. The region-specific factors illustrate the diversity of student opinion on the topic.

Wilkins et al. (2012) suggest that campus location is not a pull-factor for the international students (as they are not familiar with the UAE), however for UAE-based students (born and raised), the location of the campus might play a role in a decision-making process.

To analyze the data, several methods were applied in order to facilitate the aim of this research thesis, including mean analysis, ANOVA, MANOVA (multiple ANOVA), an average of responses. The Microsoft Excel tools were used based on various recommendations and ease-of-use feature. Behavior characteristics of choice of the location (how it impacts the student decision) has a weak negative linear relationship with the location of JLT, DIP and Academic City (although the Academic city is less negative than JLT, followed by DIP), while

Knowledge Village showed a weak positive linear relationship. To understand the trend, the correlation analysis was also performed between the areas of where student residing (zones) and their preference of the campus location: This analysis does not allow to confirm that there is a correlation between student residency and choice of location for the campus. This could be due to the following reasons: a) there is no relation between university campus location and students residency zone; they did not choose the university based on the fact that it is close to home or is not; b) the population of the survey is diverse, but the number of respondents is low, and therefore it is hard to identify the pattern on a bigger scale; c) the results might not be as accurate because the current student body is settled with the idea of university location in JLT and have little to no knowledge about other areas.

In the average impact method, the average calculation of the values will be used, to represent the idea of a trend (if some of them exist and can be identified). Zone 1 to 7 – residence locations of the students who answered the survey. It is important to note that the data split is not equal for all 7 zones, however, based on the obtained results, the conclusion can be made that students value location, transportability and university characteristics differently. For example, providing transportation to students less critical from students from zone 6 and 7 – it is natural, since the students who reside in those zones do not have access to public transport (even to come to the current campus location), therefore, one of the conclusions can be made that those students have their vehicle or their family members drop them off to the university for studies. Alternatively, it could be their preference to utilize available public transport in the form of the shuttle bus, public bus, metro, taxis. Although, an additional factor of transportation expense will create a significant impact on their decision if this decision is based on a total cost and expenses for obtaining a degree. The average impact of other factors is an essential insight for further study. The nine shortlisted factors can provide an overview of student preference when it comes to decision making. Those factors are equally and more important than location or student residence. For each zone of residence, different factors considered to be important and less important. This justifies this research' hypothesis, confirming that student from different locations in Dubai itself might have different preferences in choosing the university. In the below figures, the confirmation of the hypothesis can be found. Based on the accumulated data, the following conclusions were made: · On average, Location of the campus (close to home) is somewhat relevant to the student but does not affect the final decision as much as the ability of the university to provide job placements and recognition of the degree; · On average, Academic City is the least likable zone for students to consider campus of the university (this can be explained by the fact that students prefer modern, dynamic environment, easy transport access for their university campus); · On average, JLT is a preferred destination for existing students; · On average, Knowledge Village is a favorite destination for existing students; · On average, DIP

is a neutral destination. (This can be explained by the fact that not many students are aware of the developments in that area); · The nationality split, curriculum data, and school data are very diverse. It is not possible to identify the prevailing trend in those factors with the existing pool of respondents; · Other factors (excluding location and residence of the student) are quite important to consider for further analysis; · Internships & Job Opportunities, Degree Recognition and Academic Excellence, are extremely important for existing students in all the Zones, while the existence of a Dormitory is not; · Tuition Fees are very important to students who reside in Zone 3 and less important to students who reside in Zone 1; · Rich Student Life is considerably important to residents of Zone 5; · Practical Approach is quite important for students from all the Zones. For potential students, three groups or the updated population samples were formed: 1) Group A (sample size n=73) – relatively close to the campus 2) Group B (sample size n=73) – reasonably close to the campus and 3) Group C (sample size n=73) – quite far from the campus. The ANOVA analysis was performed. Few important outcomes of the provided analysis include the following statements: · Location is not considered an important factor for students' choice; · Prospect students consider JLT and Knowledge Village as the more trendy location for studies compare to Academic City; · The DIP area is the last in their choice of university location; · Majority of the students consider Degree Recognition as the most important aspect of their education, followed by Job Opportunities after graduation, Academic Excellence and practical approach to teaching; · Importance of Academic Excellence showcased on an average response 4.52 for Group A, 4.47 for Group B and 4.43 for Group C (on a scale of 5). It is a very high result confirming the choice of the majority of the students to be based on the academic qualification of the institution;

· Tuition Fees are rated from 4.2 to 4.4 across all the zones. While it seems to be less important, there is an important factor to consider the influence of the fees, as the respondents (potential students) might not be familiar with the family's financial situation (as more likely they will be sponsored by the parents) and might not take fees as a serious factor;

· Rich Student Life was rated 3.2 or Group C and 3.7 for Group A, which illustrates the trend that the students can sacrifice the fun part of the study period and concentrate on the actual curriculum.

· Rotation and Exchange programmes are reasonably important to all Groups. One of the explanations of this fact might be the desire of the locally-raised student to explore the world.

· A practical approach to teaching is very important for a student from Group A. One of the possible explanations could be the fact of the residential areas in Group A – business centers, free-zones, advanced infrastructure, etc.;

· The programme duration is less likely to affect the final decision of the students from Group C.

The communication framework of Integrated Marketing communications includes the following marketing platforms:

Advertising, Sales Promotion, Events & Experiences, PR & Publicity, Online & Social Media Marketing, Mobile Marketing, Direct & Database Marketing and Personal Selling. An interview with the deputy head of the marketing department of MODUL University Dubai was conducted to receive the most accurate data.

The admissions campaign in Summer 2018 was divided into four theme weeks. Each week had its' own objectives and was concluded by the open day (open house) in the end. Throughout the week the following messages were communicated:

· Join Internationally accredited University, ranked amongst top-25 universities for citations in publications worldwide;

· Select from Hospitality, Business, Sustainability degree majors for your future;

· Spend a day at MODUL;

· Study Grants and Academic Scholarships;

· Visit MODUL University for the Open Day;

· Student Testimonials – what MODUL means to me.

There were two main objectives of this campaign: brand awareness and footfall for the open days. As traditionally, August is the last month to apply for admissions, MODUL brand took full leverage across different marketing channels and used a creative approach to support the final push for the enrollment cycle. Based on the observations and strategic vision of the brand, the following recommendations can be given to MODUL University Dubai to enhance the Integrated Marketing Communication practices across the academic year and to reach out to the niche market:

· Conventional Advertising: include in marketing budget additional channels like build boards in neighborhood areas to the campus (JLT, Dubai Marina); radio coverage in the peak time on favorite local radio channels and in different languages.

· Digital Marketing: MODUL's current strategy has a good performance rate. Focus on International markets in the GCC, Europe, Asia would contribute to the ongoing success.

· Event & Experience: MODUL's events are always the gold standard of quality. To enhance the experience, a new way of attracting more significant footfall through additional marketing channels should be found. Word-of-mouth and student referral would increase its performance and will bring new and diverse student body.

· PR: current publicity in local and international magazines and journals can be increased through education/hospitality/business-dedicated journals.

· Economic characteristic of the campaign can be improved by eliminating poor performing channels.

· To increase the effectiveness of the campaigns and brand awareness, more Unique Selling Points should be identified to distinguish the brand from the fierce competition.

It was also observed, that current marketing strategy focuses on important factors like Location, Degree Recognition, Tuition Fees, Rotation and Exchange programmes, and addition to those – a "less important ones" Programme Duration and Rich Student Life. Future campaigns can shift focus only on those factors which are more relevant to the students.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing and forecasting student choice factors enables a university to take the right strategy, position on the market. In the UAE, where the market has tremendous competition, the universities should focus on distinguishing themselves by the criteria which locally based students find essential.

The objective of this research was focused on identifying a trend or the most valuable factors in light with the decision-making process of a student (be it an existing student or potential applicant).

Majority of the students consider Degree Recognition as the most important aspect of their education, followed by Job Opportunities after graduation, Academic Excellence and practical approach to teaching.

Findings also confirm that there is no direct correlation between the location of the campus (with a choice of 4 areas) and willingness of the student to study at the university, or it is fragile for students who already enrolled at a university.

However, for potential students (school students), while the location is not considered as an extremely important factor for the choice of university, they more likely to choose JLT and Knowledge Village for their studies followed by the Academic City and lastly – DIP.

According to the findings of the complacency, MODUL's marketing strategy corresponds to the market requirements in the video messages across the marketing channels, specifically on the factors like Location, Degree Recognition, Tuition Fees, Rotation and Exchange programmes. The marketing strategy also focuses on two factors which have a very limited influence on student decision – Programme Duration and Rich Student Life.

One of the limiting factors of this research can be considered the diverse sample of respondents (nationality, previous education background, residency location). Unlike in other conducted research papers, the sample size in this research corresponds to the diverse nature of Dubai and UAE.

The future research of this topic should include a literature review on consumer behavior of customers in Dubai as it is a unique region and some universal rules might not apply for the population due to the extreme diversity of background, nationalities, lifestyles. It can also discover new ways of conventional and digital advertising to increase the efficiency of the campaigns as well as to identify the main reasons for customer behavior; a niche-market customer survey to identify most and least performing channels for customer purchase as well as if cross-channel marketing affects their final decision.

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LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 |

Demographics & Intel	Behavior	Preference
1. Timestamp	1. Academic Excellence	1. University Campus is located in Jumeirah Lakes Towers
2. Gender Age	2. Tuition Fees & Scholarships	2. - in Dubai Investment Park
3. Nationality	3. Location (close to home)	3. - in Academic City
4. Location in Dubai	4. Public Transport access	4. - in Knowledge Village
5. Employment Status	5. Rich Student Life	5. University will consist of 3 blocks: campus, training hotel and dormitory
6. Latest grade at school	6. Internships & Job Placements	6. University will provide transportation for students who live far from the campus
7. Curriculum	7. Degree Recognition	
8. Name of the School	8. Rotation / Exchange programmes	
9. Estimate Percentage (out of 100)	9. A practical approach to teaching	
10. Most Favorite Subject in School	10. Duration of the programme	
11. Least Favorite Subject in School	11. Dormitory	

TABLE 2 | List of Common Factors

Author / Factors	Cost	Qualit y of Educatio n	Campus and Facilities	Career Prospects	Student Experience	Recomm endations
(Joseph, 2000)	4	1	2	6	3	6
(Mazzarol, The Push and Pull Factors for the University Choice, 2002)	3	4	2	6	6	1
(Binsardi, 2003)	3	1	6	2	4	6
(Pimpa, 2005)	6	1	3	2	6	6
(Shanka, 2005)	3	2	1	5	6	4
(Gatfield, 2006)	4	3	6	2	6	1
(Li, 2007)	3	1	6	4	2	6
(Maringe, 2007)	6	1	6	2	6	6
(Chen, 2008)	6	2	1	3	4	-
(Bodycott, 2009)	6	6	2	1	3	4
(Abubakar, 2010)	2	1	4	6	6	3
(Padlee, 2010)	3	1	6	6	6	2
(Wilkins S. &., 2011)	6	6	6	1	6	6

TABLE 3 | Factors Which Matters to Students (Internationally and Locally)

Factors which matters to students Internationally Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) Maringe and Carter (2007) Chen (2008)	Factors which matters to students in the UAE Wilkins et al. (2012)
a) quality of education b) the reputation of the country c) the reputation of the institution d) quality of professors e) university/department rankings f) teaching and learning environment g) gaining international experience	a) Origin country-specific advantages b) Convenience c) Foreign universities have the best reputation in UAE d) Better employment opportunities in the national and regional markets e) Comfortable lifestyle