

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Why choose South Africa? Insights from international undergraduate students

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The South African government in conjunction with its institutions of higher education has taken many deliberate measures aimed at attracting international students. This study was aimed at investigating factors that influence international students' choice of the country as their study destination. Data used in the analysis was collected using an online structure questionnaire from 88 international undergraduate students studying at the University of Witwatersrand. The results show that the most important influencing factors relate to quality of education offered, lower costs associated with studying in the country and geographical proximity of the country to home countries of most of the students hosted. Available promotional information on study opportunities in South Africa was found to have had influenced the least number of students in their decision to study in the country. The findings have wide implications on the marketing of a country as an international study destination and these have been highlighted in the paper.

**Key words:** International undergraduate students, country choice, higher education, South Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

The number of students seeking tertiary studies internationally has been growing at rapid rate over the past two decades. According to OECD (2009) there were a total of 3.0 million students studying outside their countries of origin in 2007 compared to 1.3 million in 1990. This represents an increase of over 130%. A number of factors may help explain the rapid growth in international student mobility. These include the need on the part of students to access high quality education and/or broaden their personal experiences (Mpinganjira, 2009a; Cubillo et al., 2006). For some students, studying in another country may be the only way of accessing tertiary education due to access related problems in their own countries (Alam, 2009). Common access related problems include unavailability of courses of choice in home institutions as well as inability of students to meet highly competitive entry requirements that may be in place due to supply not being able to meet demand (Mpinganjira, 2009b; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

Efforts by governments and individual universities to attract more international students to their countries and

universities have also greatly contributed to the rapid growth of international students worldwide (Alam and Khalifa). According to UNESCO (2008) economic incentives are playing a great role in driving host countries and institutions to actively recruit international students. There are many benefits that countries derive from hosting these students. Some of the benefits include offering opportunities to forge personal, institutional as well as national relationships that make it easier to do business or form business partnerships in future (Alam et al., 2009). For countries seeking skilled migrants, international education offers an easy way to recruit such skills (Austrian Government, 2005). Furthermore, international education has become a multibillion dollar industry in the world. Through International trade, education countries are able to significantly improve on their export earnings and balance of payments. For example, according to the Australian Government (2009), international education activity contributed \$17.2 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2008/2009 financial year.

The many benefits associated with hosting of international

students have resulted in increased competition on the market as many countries are taking initiatives aimed at attracting more international students to their institutions of higher learning (Alam et al., 2010). Most host countries now realize that efforts to attract international students cannot be left to institutions of higher learning alone. Many have national bodies whose primary purpose includes internationally promoting their nation's education. To achieve this, the national bodies are often involved in organizing and running educational trade fairs in targeted markets, operating advice and information centers as well as producing national guides to higher education offerings (Bourke, 2000). Examples of such bodies include the British Council for the UK, Aus Trade in Australia and the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA).

### **Problem statement and research objectives**

Efforts by countries and universities aimed at attracting more international students have resulted in stiff competition in the international students market (Maringe, 2006; Russel 2005). Just like in any competitive market, success in this market will among other factors largely depend on a country's ability to favourably position itself in the mind of the customers. This requires a good understanding of factors that influence the decision making process of the customers. Maringe and Carter (2007) noted that while significant number of publications are available to explore the notion of higher education choice and decision making in the context of home students and consumers in the developed world, much less is available which seeks to explore similar issues in the context of international students seeking to study abroad (Alam et al., 2010 b).

This study seeks to contribute to this understanding by examining factors that influence international undergraduate students to choose South Africa as their international study destination. The specific objectives include (a) to investigate the extent to which different factors influenced the decision to study in South Africa (b) to investigate if there are any significant differences in the factors that influenced choice of South Africa as an international study destination between different groups of students and (c) to highlight the implications of these findings on the marketing of South Africa as an international study destination.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Maringe and Carter (2007) as well as Mazzarol (1998) noted that the decision to study abroad is one of the most significant and expensive initiatives that students may

ever undertake. The decision thus requires a lot of deliberation on their part. The fact that higher education is a service makes the deliberation process even more complex. Services in general are characterised by four characteristics namely: Intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity and inseparability that make their marketing more complex than the marketing of physical goods (Zeithaml et al., 2006; Mudie and Pirrie, 2006). Intangibility relates to the fact that services cannot be touched, tasted or possessed. Duggirala et al. (2008), Mudie and Pirrie, (2006) further observed that the intangibility of services means that they cannot be easily exhibited or simply communicated. As a result, the decision processes of consumers are greatly influenced by indirect mechanisms of service evaluation. An example would be image of the country and/or institution in the case of international education (Cubillo et al., 2006).

Inseparability relates to the fact that services are often sold and consumed at the same time. Often times, service provision requires the producer and the consumer to interact in order for the consumer to derive the benefits and this makes it difficult for a prospective customer to objectively evaluate a service before service delivery (Hoffman and Bateson, 2006; Srikanthoo and Gnoth, 2002). Related to inseparability is perishability. Mudie and Pirrie (2006) noted that because services are performances, they cannot be stored, inventoried or returned. Heterogeneity, on the other hand, relates to the fact that services are less standardised than goods. The fact that services are performed by humans makes it difficult to ensure that different people provide exactly the same service quality. The service quality provided by the same individual is also likely to vary from day to day or even from one customer encounter to another.

The inherent characteristics of services make their marketing more challenging than when dealing with physical products. The characteristics also add more complexity on the part of customers when making purchase decisions. For students looking for international study opportunities, the primary service they are looking for is international education. The quality of education services provided can thus have a significant impact on purchase decision. Maringe and Carter (2007) as well as Binsardi and Ekwulogo (2003) found that most international students who go to study in the UK do so mainly because of the high quality of education offered by the country. Yang (2007) as well as Lawley and Perry (1998) further noted that students are more likely to favour getting qualifications from countries offering qualifications that are well recognized by employers in their home countries.

Cubillo et al. (2006) observed that much as the primary service sought by international students is international education, there are a host of secondary services considered in the choice of study destination. They noted

that prospective students consider various aspects related to living in the host country including issues of safety, quality of life, cultural activities, visa and other entry requirements. Factors related to costs, geographic proximity and social links have also been found to significantly impact on study destination choice. The costs of studying abroad include both financial and social related costs. Financial related costs include tuition fees, living expenses, and travel expenses. Maringe and Carter (2007) found that opportunities to work part time can also have an impact on financial costs associated with international study. Social costs on the other hand relate to such factors as crime, racial discrimination and presence of students from home country (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Yang (2007) found that Chinese students consider the lower levels of crime and discrimination associated with Australia as an important factor that positively influenced them to choose it as their international study destination.

The presence of family or friends living in the potential destination, opportunities to migrate, language of instruction as well as referrals or personal recommendations can all influence study destination choice. Yang (2007) as well as Baas (2005) found that many Chinese students prefer Australia as an international study destination because of its migration policy, which allows students to migrate or work in the country after graduating from their studies (Alam and Hoque, 2010).

There are thus many potential factors that can influence country choice in the decision to study abroad. Arambawela et al. (2006) noted that factors influencing the choice of study destination vary in terms of importance between different groups of students. Soutar and Turner (2002) observed that in order to determine their preferences, prospective students consider what is important to them, and then make trade-offs among the important attributes.

## METHODOLOGY

Data used in this study was collected from international undergraduate students studying at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. An online structured questionnaire looking at various issues to do with international study was the main instrument used to collect the data. All registered international students were individually invited to participate in the online survey using an e-mail sent through the international students' office. The e-mail had on it a link to the on-line survey site.

A five point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree, was used to measure the extent to which various factors influenced the choice of South Africa as a study destination. A total of 24 factors were included in the questionnaire. The factors were identified through use of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and a review on literature. A total of two focus group discussions, each consisting of 8 international students and taking about 1 h, were conducted. In-depth interviews, each lasting for 30 min, were

conducted with other 15 international students. These were aimed at getting a deeper insight into issues relating to individual students at an individual level. The sampling technique used to select students for both the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews was non-probability convenience sampling. The participants were mixed in terms of gender, age, nationality as well as program of study. This was mainly done to ensure that diversity of opinions based on differences in background characteristics was captured. Both the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed on papers before being subjected to thematic analysis. Triangulation of the findings from the focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and review of literature results in 24 items relating to country choice being identified. These were then used in the structured questionnaire.

The first draft of the structured questionnaire was pretested on a convenience sample of 16 students before coming up with the final version that was posted on-line. The pre-testing was primarily aimed at ensuring that the questions were understandable by respondents. A total of 88 usable responses were obtained from undergraduate students at the end of the data collection phase. 47 (53.4%) of the students were male and 41 (46.6%) were female. Most of the students (68 representing 77.3%) were from the SADC region. Version 18 of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. Means, factor analysis and independent sample t-test were the main statistical tools used in the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents were asked to indicate their first country of choice in their decision to study abroad. Table 1 presents the results of this investigation. According to the findings, the majority of students (53 representing 60.2% of the respondents) had South Africa as their first country of choice. The other preferred countries of choice included in order of popularity; the United Kingdom, Australia, United States and Canada. The 'other' category included Netherlands and France, which were indicated by a single respondent each. From the results, it is clear that the major competitors to South Africa are mostly countries from the developed world. No single respondent indicated another African country or developing country other than South Africa as a preferred study destination.

Table 2 shows the findings relating to factors that influenced the students' decision to choose South Africa as their international study destination. The results have been presented in rank order using overall mean values. As a five point scale was used, mean values of 4.5 and above were considered to denote strong levels of agreement, mean values of 4 or to the nearest of 4 denote agreement; mean values of 3 or to the nearest of 3 denote neutrality (do not agree nor disagree), mean values of 2 or to the nearest of 2 denote disagreement, while those less than 1.5 denote strong disagreement. According to the results, the most important factor that influenced the decision to study in South Africa was the fact that South African qualifications are respected in the students' home country. This agrees with the observation

**Table 1.** First choice country.

Country	Frequency	Percentage
South Africa	53	60.2
United States	6	6.8
Canada	4	4.5
United Kingdom	13	14.8
Australia	10	11.4
Other	2	2.3
Total	88	100.0

by Yang (2007) who indicated that students are more likely to favor getting qualifications from countries offering qualifications that are well recognized by employers in their home countries. The second important influencing factor was found to be modern and technologically advanced facilities associated with studying in South Africa. This can be explained by the fact that the respondents in this study are largely students coming from other countries in the continent and the fact that South Africa is considered the most developed country in Africa (Menon, 2009).

In general, the findings according to the mean values show that only 7 factors can be considered to have played a much greater role in influencing the decision to study in South Africa. In addition to the fact that South African qualifications are respected in the students' home countries and the modern and technologically advanced facilities associated with the country, the other important factors include location – being closer to home country, high reputation of South African qualifications internationally, use of English medium as language of instruction, lower cost of courses, and lower cost of living. These seven factors had mean values of 3.5 and above.

Eight factors were found to have exerted little influence (mean values of less than 2.5 or to the nearest 2.5). These include, in order of least influence, information from South African high commission/embassy on studying opportunities in South Africa, opportunities to work part-time, while studying, advertising/promotion by South African institutions/representatives in home country, reputation that South Africa is a friendly society, 'Study South Africa' publications, inability to get a study place in preferred study country(ies) and belief that studying in S. Africa can improve chances of immigrating. The least influencing factors mostly relate to perceptions relating to the general environment of South Africa as a country as well as those relating to promotion of South Africa as an international study destination. Cubillo et al. (2006) observed that prospective international students consider various aspects related to living in a prospective host country including issues of safety.

Yang (2007) found that lower levels of crime and discrimination associated with Australia positively influences international students to choose it as preferred international study destination. It is important to note that South Africa in general is associated with high levels of crime (Silber and Getten, 2009). Its history of racial discrimination and the recently widely publicized incidences of xenophobia, all add to increase unfavorable perceptions of the country as a welcoming place for international students. This is coupled with the low influence of promotion information of the country as an international study destination, which is likely to be due to prospective students not accessing such information, and is likely to work against the country's efforts to position itself as a country of choice in international education. Promotion efforts would help address some of the concerns that people may have towards studying in the country.

Also presented in Table 2 are percentage of respondents who strongly disagreed or disagreed, those who were neutral, and those who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the factors. The results using percentages show that 10 factors had more than 50% of the respondents indicating that they influenced their decision to study abroad. This is despite having only 7 factors with overall means values of 3.5 and above. The factors included all those with mean values of 3.5 and above as well as the influence of people one knows who are studying/have studied in South Africa, recommendations by friends/ family at home, recommendations by friends/family members living in South Africa. It is important to note that although the mean values put the fact that South African qualifications are respected at home as the most important factors, in terms of percentage, location – being closer to home had the highest percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed to this factor influencing the decision to chose the country as their study destination. In terms of factors influencing less people percentage wise, a total of 11 factors had more that 50% of the students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they influenced their decision to study in South Africa. These included the 8 factors with mean values of less than 2.5 or to the nearest 2.5 as well as 'having a scholarship to study in South Africa', 'ease of university admission entry requirements' and 'ease of getting a visa/study permit'.

After individually analysing the mean values of each variable, exploratory factor analysis was undertaken. The factor analysis was aimed at identifying the underlying dimensions in the data to be used in testing for group differences. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis. According to the results, 7 underlying dimensions with Eigen values of at least 1 were identified from the original 24 variables. Together, the dimensions accounted for 70.6% of the total variance. Only items loading 0.5 and above were used to come up with components of each

**Table 2.** Factors influencing choice of South Africa as a study destination.

	SD/D (%)	N (%)	A/SA (%)	Mean
South African Qualifications respected at home	8.0	20.5	71.5	3.84
Modern and technologically advanced facilities	10.2	17.0	72.8	3.80
Location – being closer to home country	18.2	5.7	76.1	3.77
High reputation of South African qualifications Internationally	12.5	25.0	62.5	3.68
Use of English medium	15.9	17.0	67.1	3.63
Lower cost of courses	19.3	15.9	54.8	3.56
Lower cost of living	20.5	14.8	64.7	3.53
People you know who are studying/have studied in South Africa	29.5	9.1	61.4	3.40
Recommendations by friends/family at home.	30.6	8.0	61.4	3.34
Recommendations by friends/family members living in South Africa.	36.4	9.1	54.5	3.19
Having friends and/or family in South Africa.	35.2	15.9	48.9	3.10
The fact that South Africa is a multicultural society.	27.3	30.6	42.1	3.05
Having many people from your home country living/studying in S.A.	36.4	23.8	39.8	2.97
Ease of getting a visa/study permit.	53.4	18.2	28.4	2.49
Ease of university admission entry requirements.	54.5	19.3	26.2	2.47
Having a scholarship to study in South Africa.	56.8	14.8	28.4	2.47
Belief that studying in S. Africa can improve chances of immigrating.	59.1	10.2	30.7	2.41
Inability to get a study place in preferred study country(ies).	61.4	14.8	23.8	2.35
Positive information about South Africa in the mass media.	56.8	28.4	14.8	2.30
'Study South Africa' publications	71.6	6.8	21.6	2.28
Reputation that South Africa is a friendly society.	54.5	29.6	15.9	2.28
Adverting/promotion by S African institutions/ reps in home country.	76.1	2.3	21.6	2.18
Opportunities to work part-time while studying.	64.8	18.2	17	2.14
Information from SA high commission/embassy on studying opportunities in SA	77.3	4.5	18.2	2.10

various factors influenced the decision to choose underlying dimension. Only one item namely 'opportunities to work part-time while studying' did not load on any of the dimensions.

After the factors analysis, new composite variables were computed using the summated average of the variables loading on each underlying dimensions. The composite variables were given names reflecting the items loading on each. The first dimension had 3 items loading on it and was named 'promotion/information on study opportunities in South Africa'. The second and third dimensions had 4 items each loading on them and were named 'entry related conditions' and 'perception of South Africa and migration plans,' respectively. The fourth, fifth and sixth dimensions had three items loading on each and were named 'social influencers', 'language and social links', and 'quality of education' respectively. The last dimension had two items loading on it and was named 'cost factors'.

Table 4 presents results of a rank order analysis of the dimensions. According to the results, 'quality of education' and 'lower costs' were the main dimensions that greatly influenced the decision to study in South Africa.

The factor that exerted the least influence on the decision was 'promotion/information on study opportunities in South Africa'.

A further analysis of mean values of different groups of students according to country of first choice (South Africa versus Other countries) resulted in largely similar results (Table 5). Both groups indicated education quality and lower cost as the main factors that influenced their decision to study in South Africa. Both indicated 'promotion/information on study opportunities in South Africa' as the factor that exerted the least influence on their decision. It is however, important to note that for all the seven factors except one, namely, 'entry related conditions', students who indicated South Africa as their first country of choice had higher means than those who had other countries as their first choice in the decision to study abroad.

An independent sample t-test was undertaken in order to find out if the mean differences between the two groups were statistically significant. Table 5 presents the results of this analysis. The results show that there are no statistically significant differences in the extent to which the South Africa as their international study destination.

**Table 3.** Factor analysis – Rotated component matrix (a).

	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The high reputation of South African qualifications internationally.						0.858	
SA's qualifications are respected at home.						0.866	
Lower cost of courses.							0.941
Lower cost of living							0.931
Location - being closer to your home country.					0.818		
Use of English language					0.678		
Reputation that S.A. is a friendly society			0.809				
The fact that SA is a multicultural society			0.817				
Modern and technologically advanced facilities						0.626	
Having a scholarship to study in South Africa		0.698					
Having friends and/or family in South Africa					0.637		
Having many people from your home country living/studying in South Africa.					0.755		
Inability to get a study place in preferred study country(ies).		0.636					
Opportunities to work part-time while studying.							
Ease of university admission entry requirements.		0.806					
Ease of getting a visa/study permit.		0.719					
The belief that studying in South Africa can improve chances of migrating.			0.572				
Positive information about South Africa in the mass media.			0.629				
Adverting/promotion by South African institutions/representatives in your home country.	0.887						
Information from South African high commission/embassy on studying Opportunities in South Africa.	0.842						
Recommendations by friends/family members living in South Africa.				0.907			
Recommendations by friends/family at home.				0.885			
'Study South Africa' publications	0.866						
People you know who are studying or have studied in South Africa.				0.879			
Eigen values	6.73	2.52	2.04	1.96	1.80	1.33	1.29
Percentage variance explained	26.9	10.1	8.2	7.8	7.2	5.3	5.1
Cumulative percentage	26.9	36.9	45.1	52.9	60.1	65.5	70.6

SA = South Africa; Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. A rotation converged in 7 iterations.

## Conclusion

The paper was aimed at understanding the factors that influenced international undergraduate students in their choice of South Africa as their international study destination. From the results, it is clear that there are a wide range of factors that influence the decision to study abroad. The factors that exerted most influence include those relating to quality of education offered by South

Africa as well as the lower cost both in terms of tuition and living expenses associated with studying in the country. In terms of quality of education, students are attracted by the fact that South Africa offers qualifications that are respected in their home countries as well as internationally and by its modern and technologically advanced facilities. It is important to note that well recognized qualifications make it easy for students to find employment at the end of their studies. The qualifications

**Table 4.** Rank order – Factors.

Factors	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Quality of education	88	3.76	0.90
Lower costs	88	3.55	1.07
Language and social links	88	3.37	0.96
Social Influencers	88	3.31	1.23
Perception of South Africa and migration plans	88	2.51	0.93
Entry related conditions	88	2.44	0.92
Promotion/information on study opportunities in South Africa	88	2.19	1.20

**Table 5.** Independent sample t-test.

Variable	Mean	T-Test for equality of means						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% CI of the Mean		
						Lower	Upper	
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Country choice</b>								
-Education quality related	RSA	3.87	1.515	86	0.133	0.293	-0.091	0.678
	Other	3.58						
-Lower Cost	RSA	3.61	0.728	86	0.468	0.170	-0.295	0.635
	Other	3.44						
-Language and social links	RSA	3.36	-0.096	86	0.924	-0.020	-0.437	0.397
	Other	3.37						
-Social Influencers	RSA	3.43	1.163	86	0.248	0.310	-0.220	0.841
	Other	3.12						
-Perception of RSA and migration plans	RSA	2.52	0.128	86	0.896	0.026	-0.378	0.430
	Other	2.49						
-Entry related conditions	RSA	2.40	-0.526	86	0.600	-0.106	-.508	0.295
	Other	2.51						
-Promotion/ information on study opportunities in RSA	RSA	2.27	0.779	86	0.438	0.204	-0.317	0.724
	Other	2.07						

also help make it easy for those intending to pursue further studies to be accepted wherever they may apply.

The findings also show that geographical proximity of the country to home countries of the students hosted, works to its advantage. The highest percentage of students agreed or strongly agreed that location- 'being closer to home country' influenced their decision to study in South Africa. Despite efforts by the country aimed at selling South Africa as an international study destination of choice, promotion/information on study opportunities in South Africa was found to have the least influence on the students' choice of the country. This is more likely due to

the fact that most students did not have access to such information.

From the findings it is clear that the major competitors to South Africa, in its efforts to attract more or the quality of international students it may want, are all countries from the developed world. The results show that there are no significant differences in the factors that influenced choice of South Africa as an international study destination between students who indicated South Africa as their first country of choice in their decision to study abroad and those that indicated other countries. The extent to which the various factors influenced the

decision was also found not be statistically significant.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have wide implications on the marketing of South Africa as an international study destination. The country in conjunction with its institutions of higher education has taken deliberate measures aimed at attracting international students. The ability of the country to attract more students and the quality of students it wants will depend on how well it is able to compete on the market. From the results, it is clear that the country's major competitors are from the developed world and can therefore, fare well on most of the factors that may attract international students to a country. The fact that South Africa is considered a country that offers qualifications that are internationally recognized is something to be capitalized on and safeguarded in its efforts to favorably position itself on the international student market. This will require close cooperation between government and the higher education sector aimed at ensuring that the best international service quality standards are practiced and maintained.

While major host countries from the developed world would be expected to fare well on many of the factors associated with attracting international students, there are some factors that may be unique to the country and can easily capitalize on to its advantage. These include lower education costs in terms of both tuition fees and living costs. It is difficult for developed countries to compete with South Africa on this as their tuition fees as well as the cost of living tends to be high. For inter-national students coming from Africa especially countries south of the Sahara, South Africa also offers the advantage of being closer to home. This can affect the cost of travel especially when there is need to keep in touch with what is going on at home.

It is important for those invested with the responsibilities of marketing the country and its institutions of higher education to critically look at the issue of making information on study opportunities widely available. As noted before, major international student host countries often have national bodies whose aims include promoting their countries' educational offer in targeted markets. Although South Africa has such a body, its publication 'Study South Africa' was not found to have had an influence on most students. Neither was information received from South African Embassies and High Commissions abroad as well as advertising/promotions by South African institutions of higher learning or their representatives. While it may difficult to promote the country's educational offerings in every country, measures should be found to take advantage of the extensive diplomatic relations the country has with many

countries of the world and use such offices to sell its higher education services. Sensitizing employees in such offices of the need to promote the country's education offer and providing them with promotional materials to assist in this would be one way of managing this in a cost effective manner.

In order for the promotional materials to have much impact, it is important that they address issues that may be of concern to students and their families. Highlighting the international standing of the qualifications offer would be important. Apart from this, prospective students and their families are likely to also be concerned with general issues associated with living in South Africa, in particular safety issues. Providing detailed information especially on the part of individual institutions of higher learning on measures in place to ensure the safety and general well being of international students would go a long way in positively influencing the decision to choose the country as a preferred international study destination.

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