

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPECTATIONS: THE VOICE OF INDIAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT:

The world these days is referred to as a “Global Village” where students have relatively easy access to education abroad. Australia’s international education has been reported to be growing continually at a steady rate (AEI, 2005b). In 2005, student enrolments from India recorded a 33.5% increase over the previous year making it the strongest growth market in Australian Higher Education followed by China (AEI, 2005c). Out of the 27,661 Indian students that were enrolled in Australian institutions in 2005, a little under half (12,936) were studying in Victorian Institutions (AEI, 2005a). This significant growth in student enrolments has made India the primary focus of the marketing efforts of various Australian Higher Education Institutions.

Previous student experience studies have identified that marketing of education has the potential to shape the expectations of the prospective student’s university experience. Furthermore, dissatisfaction resulting from a mismatch between what a student expects and what is delivered could result in withdrawal of that student in the first year. While there has been substantial research in the area of student decision-making, little is known about international student expectations of their higher education institution.

This study, set in a Victorian research intensive university, seeks to delve deeper into the Indian students’ expectations of their Australian university. Six distinct areas, namely, course curriculum, teaching staff, student life, classmates, facilities at university and support services are explored further to find out what are the Indian students’ expectations of these six attributes and how they came about expecting the same.

With Australian education gaining such popularity among Indian students, it has now become imperative for Australian universities to understand what the Indian students expect from them, so that they could then work towards providing these services to students, thus ensuring high student satisfaction.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is substantial literature to demonstrate a long history of universities and researchers who have attempted to unravel the dynamics of what influences the decision-making of students. Most studies revealed that students are highly influenced by course suitability, the institution's academic reputation, future job prospects, teaching quality and campus ambience (James, 2002a, Soutar and Turner, 2002, Kern, 2000, Lawrence, 2000).

In the many investigations that have been conducted so far on the influences on student choice, the majority of findings have revealed family, friends and peers as being fairly influential in the student decision-making process. However, the degree to which this group influences the choice of students differs from country to country (Lawrence, 2000) and age group to age group (Pimpa, 2002, Lawrence, 2000).

Information sources not only play an instrumental role in the formation of student decisions, but also lay the foundation for the kind of expectations that students have about the institutions (James, 2002b). As might be expected, the most common sources for students to access information about education abroad are word of mouth (family/ friends/ peers/ teacher/ career advisor), education agents¹, internet, school or college, university course guide, publications etc.(Lawrence, 2000, Pimpa, 2002).

Students' expectations follow a similar pattern of being influenced by varied factors, just as students' decisions on choice of institution and course are influenced by a number of factors as illustrated in the literature above. In their investigation of factors influencing initial formation of expectations and subsequent changes of Hong Kong students, Willis and Kennedy identified three key sources that actively contribute to the formation of these expectations, namely, institutional sources, marketing communication sources and personal sources (Willis and Kennedy, 2004).

James added further that effective marketing helps in the formation of realistic expectations of what the university can offer the student, without leading to unrealistic expectations or offering promises which may not be met later (James, 2002a).

¹ Education agents are companies in the student's home country that represent a number of foreign universities. Education agents or consultants, as they are sometimes called, provide students assistance with their university and visa applications.

From understanding to action

While the theories of decision making, student expectation and student satisfaction are often treated independently in the literature, they cannot be isolated from one another. A link exists between these theories that bind them together to depict the multiple dimensions of the overall experience of a student in a university.

Kennedy et al 2000 at the end of their literature review said:

None of these reports attempt to compare the expectations of one group prior to departure (for Australia) with the experiences of the same or a similar group at a later stage. A gap exists in the research to identify whether expressed expectations of Australian university education standards and facilities are met, or whether there exists a significant difference in student's actual experiences after commencing their studies in Australia. (pg. 643)(Kennedy et al., 2000)

The sections that follow attempt to address this gap by providing useful insights on what Indian students' initial expectations of their chosen Australian university are and how they are formed. They also discuss to what extent these expectations have been met and identify reasons for disappointment among some students.

METHODOLOGY

This study makes use of Qualitative methods of data collection. Semi-Structured group interviews were chosen over other types of interviews because they gave the researcher the opportunity to use the research questions to guide the direction of the interview, while at the same time enabling the questions to be adapted to the characteristics within each group and its unique students. A total of six (one hour long) interviews were conducted on the participant's university campus in order to not inconvenience any participant.

Sample profile

This study is based at one of the research intensive universities of Victoria and has adopted purposive sampling based on criteria as described by (Patton, 1990). Being a research on Indian students, the participants for this study needed to meet the following criteria.

They needed to:

- be Indian by nationality.
- have completed a good portion of their education in India.
- be pursuing either an undergraduate or a postgraduate degree at the chosen university.
- have commenced their education in Melbourne in July 2005 or February 2006.

The sample size for this study is 21 students. According to the information gathered from the University's Marketing and Recruitment Off-Shore representative, approximately 88 students fit the sample criteria of this study. The sample size therefore represents about 23.8% of the total population of students who match the sample criteria of this research and commenced their studies in Semester 2, 2005 or Semester 1, 2006.

Analysis approach

This study adopts the grounded theory approach to analysing primary data as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The data collected via interviews was first transcribed and each of the participants was given a pseudonym to remove any identifying information from the transcripts. The interview transcripts were then content analysed. At first, a manual line-by-line open coding was undertaken, using the sentence as a unit of analysis. This involved reading, browsing, validation of codes and searching for emerging trends in the data.

The codes were then validated and statements of hypothetical relationships derived. These hypothetical relationships were confirmed, modified or discarded on the basis of conceptualisation and empirical evidence from data. Using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), themes were developed and relationships between them identified.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY: PRE- ARRIVAL STAGE

The findings of this study are divided into two stages – the Pre-Arrival stage and the Post-Arrival stage. Pre-Arrival stage deals with the different phases that students go through while they are still in their home country. Similarly, the Post-Arrival stage relates to the various phases the students go through upon arrival in Australia. The section below discusses the findings in the Pre-Arrival stage.

Decision-making criteria

A thematic analysis of the data reveals that the factors that shape the student decision-making broadly fall under the following nine categories:

- Reputation of the university
- Course content
- Location of the university
- Financial considerations
- Entry standards of the university
- Recommendation of significant others
- Career outcomes
- Ability to get international exposure
- Other considerations: Quality of teaching staff at the university, facilities available on campus, availability of scholarships, cultural diversity of Australia and the atmosphere of the university as seen on brochures and the university website.

All students were asked to point out the three most influential factors that aided their decision to study at their university of choice. Ranking and reputation of the university seemed to be the unanimous top influencing factor in all the students' decision-making criteria. The other factors mentioned by the students include; the university's research interest, course content and suitability, recommendation by family and friends, interaction with the marketing representative of the university, cost of tuition and living, location of the university and positive reaction received from people when they were told that the student had obtained admission at that particular university.

Things students research about the university

The various factors that students look at before deciding upon a university could be classified under five distinct categories, namely, university profile, course structure, current student profile, academic (teaching staff) profile and graduate outcomes.

Factors influencing decision-making

There are several dynamics that have been identified, in this study, to be at play during the student decision-making process. They are – (i) level of awareness of Australian education and the chosen university in the students' home country, (ii) channels of information, (iii) personal criteria, (iv) influence of word-of-mouth and (v) previous experience. These factors not only shape the student decision-making process, but also lead to the formation of expectations that students have about their chosen university.

INITIAL EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS

During the interviews students were asked to talk about their initial expectations (before they left their home country) of six distinct variables, namely: course curriculum, teaching staff, student life, classmates, on campus facilities and support services. It was observed the undergraduate students did not have very well thought out expectations of their chosen university and preferred to keep an open mind about their university experience. The postgraduate students, on the other hand, had commenced their higher education with well-defined expectations of their chosen university.

Course curriculum

A majority of the students expected that their course would involve a lot of hard work and be challenging. It was also found that students from different fields of study expected different things from their course. More than three quarters of the students interviewed said that they had expected their course to be of a high standard and offer them a lot of interactivity in class. A few of them stated that they had thought that their course would offer them more industry exposure which would make them

work-ready upon graduation. Others still, felt that their course would offer them in-depth knowledge of the subject and involve a lot of practical training.

Teaching staff

The Indian students' expectations of their teaching staff seemed to revolve more around the qualities of the lecturer or tutor and less on their academic achievements. Although a few students did admit anticipating their lecturers to be very knowledgeable and have strong links with the industry, most students opined that they thought their lecturers would be flexible and helpful.

A majority of the students wanted their lecturers to have a lot of teaching experience. They expected the teaching staff to possess the ability to make the class interesting and intellectually stimulating. A handful of students believed that the teaching staff would also be involved in their own research. A few of them expressed their disappointment about the fact that they were being taught by students (in tutorials) and not by qualified professors or lecturers.

Student life

Virtually every student interviewed expected student life to be a lot of fun. However, the expectations of undergraduate students were noted to be particularly different from the postgraduate students in this respect. The former anticipated a lot more partying, meeting new people and late nights than did the postgraduate counterparts. The latter (especially the students who were returning to university after having worked in the industry for a few years) expected student life to be a difficult transition from being a working professional to a student again. Nevertheless, they were looking forward to returning to a carefree life of casual clothing and minimal responsibilities.

Classmates

A common consensus among most of the students interviewed was that they had expected their classmates to be of the same calibre as themselves if not higher. This was particularly the case with postgraduate students who were returning to university after having worked for a few years. Although a large number of students said that they expected their classmates to possess a similar bend of mind as themselves, they did expect to encounter a few "snobbish"², "unfriendly" and "racist" students in their class. Intelligence, smartness and maturity were some of the other qualities that students had expected to see in their classmates, so much so, that they thought they would have to put in an extra effort to keep pace with their fellow classmates.

² Words under quotes are those used by students to describe certain aspects or people during interviews. These, when integrated into sentences, have been put under quotes to distinguish them from the researchers own words.

On-campus facilities and support services

Facilities and support services have been grouped into a single heading because most students did not have too many expectations of these variables. None of the students interviewed said they had any expectations of support services, on the contrary, quite a few said they had not really thought about this issue. The expectations associated with on-campus facilities were that they would be top of the line and of high quality. Many students had not expected to pay for basic facilities like printing and photocopying. Moreover, they had expected substantial subsidy in the cost of sporting and other recreational facilities.

Reasons for initial expectations

Most students believed that the information they gathered from various sources helped shape their expectations of their chosen university. A small number of students believed that they had realistic expectations of the university because they had researched about the university and its course well and knew exactly what lay ahead of them. It was observed that most students were particularly influenced by their interaction with others who had studied or lived abroad and had experienced education abroad first hand. A few students disclosed that the information they received from marketing representatives of their chosen university, in some way, contributed towards shaping their expectations of that university.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY: POST- ARRIVAL STAGE

In the post arrival stage, the students start consuming the services of their university and have an opportunity to experience first hand what their university is like. They are in the process of adjusting to a new way of life away from home and loved ones. This is also the time when students interviewed said that they were trying to make new friendships. The section that follows elaborates on the realities of the university in relation to course curriculum, teaching staff, student life, facilities and support services at the student's chosen university. The extent to which the students' expectations in these areas were met is also discussed.

Realities of the university

The interview data revealed that upon commencing their studies at the university, students begin to make comparisons between what they expected and what was finally delivered (reality). These realities as reported by students are mentioned below.

Course Curriculum

A majority of students said that they found their course to be relatively similar to what they had expected. Some of the comments that students made about their course curriculum were that their course offered good industry exposure and was up-to-date. Although a few students said that they found their course to be easier than they had expected, they did admit that they found the curriculum "challenging". The few who disclosed that their course curriculum did not meet their expectations attributed this to the fact that they found that their course was not of as high a standard as they had expected. A few postgraduate students thought that their course was repetitive, in that, it merely repeated what they had learned in their undergraduate degree.

Teaching staff

The comments received from majority of the students about realities of teaching staff were positive. Many students said that they found their lecturers to be very friendly and felt that they made an effort to ensure that the students understood the concepts well. A few students thought that the lecturer-

student relationship at their university was great and their lecturers were very helpful, knowledgeable and approachable. Other students pointed out that they liked the fact that their lecturers were also involved in their own research and were therefore very up-to-date with the latest in their field. Nearly all the students who were disappointed with the teaching staff mentioned that they did not like the fact that their lecturers simply read off their text books and slides without adding much substance in their talks. As noted earlier, a couple of undergraduate students did not like the fact that they were being taught by students in their tutorials and had expected their tutorials to be taught by qualified academic staff.

Student life

Students gave mixed reactions when asked about the realities of student life. Some said that life as a student in their Australian university was great and they were thoroughly enjoying themselves while others said that it was not as good as they had expected it to be. Many pointed out that they would have had a better time if their spending was not constrained by a limited or tight budget. Socially, a third of the students said that they were having difficulty making friends. Although most students agreed that they found Australians to be very friendly, they also stated that their interaction was limited to a small group of people. They indicated that they neither fit in with the Australians nor with the Indians born in Australia because of the difference in culture and upbringing.

Classmates

Despite the challenges identified with respect to making friends, most students found their classmates to be friendly and cooperative. The general consensus about classmates was that they were very smart and intelligent. A few students said that they found that some of their classmates did not engage much during lectures, while others were extremely interactive and contributed positively towards an interactive learning experience. Quite a few students said that they had not expected to see such a huge domination of the “Asian community” in their class and city in general. They had wanted their class to be more multicultural but were disappointed to find large number of students that seemed to be of a single nationality in their lectures.

Facilities and support services

Although expensive, most students said that they found the facilities, on their university campus, were very impressive and exceeded their expectations. Students were impressed by the sporting facilities and liked the fact that they could find answers to all their queries online on their university’s website. Most students positively commented about the learning management system and the fact that they could access their lecture notes, slides and key readings online even if they had missed a class. A majority of the students pointed out that they had not used the support services and therefore did not know what they were like.

Comparisons students make

This study revealed that comparisons that students make are multifaceted and not a one-step process, that is, a simple comparison between what students expected and what was finally delivered. Listed below are some of the most prominent comparisons that students said they made:

- Marketing information and approaches between their chosen university and other universities: The most common comparison that students interviewed said they make is between what was communicated to them by the university before they left India and what they finally received on commencing their course.
- Lifestyle: They compare the lifestyle that they are now leading in Australia with that life that they lead back home.

- Education institutions and systems: Students reported to making quite a few comparisons between how education institutions are in India and other countries with the reality of Australian universities.

Difficulties faced by Indian students

Although a majority of the students interviewed said that they were happy with their life in Australia, just about every student stated that they had faced some difficulty transitioning into the new lifestyle in Australia. These difficulties are listed below:

- Difficulties coping with a new education system
- Social challenges and difficulty with making friends
- Financial constraints and difficulties with managing a tight budget
- Difficulty coping with culture shock

Implications

This study raises several important issues and implications, both, for universities and their staff that recruit students from India and for the university staff who directly deal with international students. From a marketing perspective, it is very important for universities to effectively and realistically promote (James, 2002a) their services and manage their promises well (Parasuraman et al., 1991). We already know, through previous research, that marketing communication has the ability to shape student expectations (James, 2002a). Furthermore, the students interviewed in this study admitted that their decision to choose an Australian university was influenced by the information they gathered from university sources (marketing representatives, university brochures, leaflets and university website).

In light of the above, it is therefore essential that universities are honest about the services they have to offer. Making false claims about their standards, facilities and support services would only lead to a mismatch between what the students will expect of their university and what the university will eventually deliver. Universities, in dealing with students from different cultures, need to acknowledge the fact that systems followed (requirements of completion of specific formalities before commencing certain courses) in other countries may not be the same as those that are followed in Australia. Educating prospective students on what is expected of them (both in terms of the procedures that need to be followed and how the university expects students to conduct themselves academically) would help give students a clearer picture of what lies ahead.

Furthermore, there would be merit in also acknowledging that international students may have difficulties coping with a new system of education. Some of the difficulties faced by the Indian students are highlighted in the findings of this research, which include difficulty in coping with a new system of education, social challenges and financial constraints. Sharing these issues with the university staff and providing appropriate professional development for those who directly deal with the international students and building upon the already prevalent support services, would better equip the university to provide the extra backing that some international students need to cope with the new system.

This study has brought forth the expectations that Indian students have in six distinct areas – course curriculum, teaching staff, student life, classmates, facilities and support services. It is important that the universities understand these expectations in light of the knowledge that this study provides on why these expectations were formed. It is also important to understand recognize the possibility that, at times, students may have unrealistic expectations. However, if these (unrealistic expectations) are not addressed directly by the universities, it may lead to dissatisfaction or disengagement on the part of the student.

While it is essential to know what students expect of their universities, it is understandable that universities may not be able to meet all the demands that students have. It is therefore suggested that universities, to effectively manage student expectations, clearly communicate what they can offer to the students and why they cannot offer some of the things that the students would like to have. This would open up the channels of communication between students and their universities and help improve transparency in the universities operations.

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