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What factors influence Vietnamese students' choice of university?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report the factors that influence Vietnamese students' choice of university in a little researched context where the effects of globalization and education reform are changing higher education.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative survey was completed by 1,124 current or recently completed university students in Vietnam. Marketing approaches are drawn upon to inform the exploration and understanding of student choice and decision making.

Findings – The factor analysed data showed the nine key factors influencing student decisions, in order of significance, as facilities and services, programme, price, offline information, opinions, online information, ways of communication, programme additions, and advertising. There are significant correlations in the Vietnamese context between the factors of price and facilities, and services and programme, and differences between genders and types of students in choosing a university.

Research limitations/implications – Whilst this paper is a starting point, more research is needed in the Vietnamese context with deeper levels of analysis including the differences between types of universities and fields/disciplines, in addition to wider sampling.

Practical implications – A greater understanding of the Vietnamese context helps to inform marketing practices in a country experiencing increasing competition in higher education.

Social implications – Findings from studies in other contexts may not be directly transferrable to Vietnamese universities suggesting the need for a contextual understanding of these factors and a suitably nuanced marketing response.

Originality/value – This paper identifies the need for cultural understanding of little researched contexts and calls for further research which does not assume all cultures and contexts will have the same underlying Vietnamese model of university choice.

Keywords Higher education, Vietnam, College choice, University choice, Marketing approaches, Student decision making

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

With increasing competition in higher education, universities face the challenge of recruiting sufficient students each year (Johnston, 2010) so understanding what influences student choice is very important to universities including those in Vietnam, though studies conducted within this specific context remain limited. This paper investigates the factors that influence Vietnamese students' choice of university in a context where the effects of globalization and education reform are changing higher education. Marketing approaches are used to explore and understand student choice and decision making. Though marketing approaches are not the only way to approach the topic, they are increasingly popular in the literature (Kotler, 1976; Ivy, 2008; Obermeit, 2012).

Recent literature about education in Vietnam has either focused on the need to develop its education system in order to sustain its rapid economic growth (Hiroso and Kitamura, 2009; London, 2010, 2011), or specifically addressed the case for higher education reform (Harman *et al.*, 2010; Postiglione, 2011). Welch (2010) outlines how the



Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has introduced “open” policies to promote educational development, especially in higher education, by encouraging public and further foreign investment through establishing new public and private universities or opening foreign collaborative programmes, in addition to many foreign organizations recruiting Vietnamese students to study overseas or establishing campuses in Vietnam itself. Institutions are required to base their awards on the core programmes issued by the Ministry (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2006). To enter a university, students must have passed the common university entrance examination set by the Ministry each July (MOET, 2006) and various newspapers work with the Ministry to organize an annual student recruitment campaign (Tuoi Tre online, 2012; Thanh Nien Online, 2012).

Prospective university students have an increasingly wide range of choices as the number of universities has increased dramatically since 1998 with 33 new institutions established and 54 existing public and private colleges gaining university status. By 2011, there were 113 public and a further 50 universities privately owned by Vietnamese or foreign proprietors (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2011). Yet the overall number of university students in Vietnam has risen only slightly each year and in 2011, there were some 1,435,887 learners of which most (87 per cent) were studying in public institutions (MOET, 2011). Perhaps as a consequence of uneven growth in higher education options and potential students, a number of universities have closed some majors and programmes due to low recruitment; for example, in 2011, the Financial banking programme at Pham Van Dong University, two majors at Da Nang University (Vnmedia, 2011), and 17 majors at Dong Thap University (Hanh, 2011). Therefore, universities in Vietnam need to understand clearly what influences the choices of university applicants in their context so they can put into place a set of marketing strategies and tools to attract the right numbers of students to sustain their operations and make strategic decisions for their longer term development as institutions, hence our decision to use marketing approaches to inform our research whilst recognizing that there are other ways to approach the topic.

Marketing approaches to understanding student choice and decision making

A number of ways have been previously used to explore and understand why and how prospective students choose universities including those drawing on adult development theory, decision-making theory, behaviourism, and econometrics (Obermeit, 2012). However, approaches drawing upon marketing have become increasingly popular of late (Ivy, 2008; Obermeit, 2012) though the idea that marketing theory had something to contribute to the recruitment practices of higher education institutions goes back at least as far as the USA in the 1970's (Kotler, 1976). So whilst debates rage over the extent to which universities are commercial business, whether students should be seen as customers (Harvey, 2002; Göran and Greg, 2007; Lomas, 2007), and the dangers of marketisation (Newman and Jahdi, 2009; Hemsley-Brown, 2011); the idea that marketing insights can provide universities with a set of approaches and tools to attract students is an established one (McMillan and Cheney, 1996; Coates, 1998; Canterbury, 2000; Ramachandran, 2010). Transactional marketing, relationship marketing, and social marketing are three approaches identified as effective in education contexts (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011) with each approach drawing upon aspects of social and economic theories of internal

characteristics and external stimuli to understand the factors influencing student choice and, consequently, how universities might act best to attract students (Obermeit, 2012).

The transactional marketing approach, or marketing mix, with its four principles (4Ps) of product, price, place, and promotion was developed in the 1960's to help firms with branding their products, but Noble (1989) used these principles to understand the perceptions of part time university students in Canada about barriers to learning and suggest how universities could reduce or remove these barriers. Also using the 4Ps model, a qualitative analysis of Australian universities' international promotion material and advertising identified four main significant factors of academic instruction, recognition, campus life, and guidance (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999); yet an exploration of international students' perceptions about UK higher education concluded that the best tools to attract international students are "lower tuition fees, more scholarships, and better quality of care and service" (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003, p. 324).

A broader marketing mix has been advocated adding people, physical evidence, and process to make a 7Ps service marketing mix, yet Ivy (2008) found through utilizing factor analysis of questionnaire data that MBA students in South Africa were influenced by seven factors which do not map exactly with the 7Ps and he develops a "new marketing mix" by replacing product with programme and adding prominence, prospectus, and premium whilst removing place, physical evidence and process. Ivy's research indicates that the context produces different answers and highlights the danger in assuming consistency in the underlying models between universities and other service sector organizations.

Some have argued for a customer-focused model where their needs and wants replace the product factor, with convenience instead of place, customer cost instead of price, and communication instead of promotion (Lauterborn, 1990) or argued that universities are poorly served by the traditional services marketing mix because their context is very different from commercial, product-focused organizations (Newman and Jahdi, 2009; Gajić, 2012). Research identifying the differences, or mis-matches, between the choice factors important to students and the information provided by universities, as well as to whom they provide it (Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) has encouraged a view that relationship and social marketing approaches may be more suitable for higher education because, rather than seeing university choice as a matter of product (Grönroos, 2013). Universities need to consider the students' view point by understanding how they find information and make decisions, so focusing marketing activities on the development and maintenance of educational relationships with current, past, and prospective students as well as their parents, teachers, friends, and colleagues (O'Connor and Lundstrom, 2011; Klassen, 2002; Helgesen, 2008). The social marketing approach (Sensiper, 1999; Gillin, 2007) identifies social media as new influencers to be used as tools to provide information and create experiences (Johnston, 2010; Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011).

Though research is limited about the social marketing approach for higher education marketing (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011), research drawing on choice processes and adult development theory was being conducted in the infancy of online social media. Kallio (1995) found six primary factors used by US graduate students when selecting a university to be residency status, characteristics of the academic environment of the institution and its programmes, work-related

concerns, spouse considerations, financial aid, and the social environment of campus life, but she notes that choice is a complex area influenced by the context of the potential student (see also James *et al.*, 1999; Ciani *et al.*, 2008). From a marketing context with students in the USA, it has been argued that not everyone will follow all the stages in the information seeking and decision-making process and they tend to be influenced by cultural, social, and psychological factors so placing the importance of appreciating the context of the student and those that influence him or her (Kotler, 1976; Kotler and Fox, 1995).

A comparative review of research from the German and the US contexts by Obermeit (2012) draws from all three marketing approaches identifies the major factors influencing students' choice as the reputation of the institution, financial considerations, the distance from home, the curriculum offered, the type of institution, and the advice of others. High-ranked sources that prospective students use to seek information are the internet especially web sites, publications from and about universities, the students' social networks, media, and information obtained from visiting the campuses or attending open days. Obermeit (2012) argues there are gaps in the research for Germany and a failure to fully appreciate the complexity of applicants' decision-making processes in German university choice models including the differences between gender, socio-economic background, and academic abilities. Hence our research explores the factors influencing Vietnamese students' choice of university to fill a gap in this context signalling the need for further research to develop and refine Vietnamese university choice models.

Objectives and research methodology

This research is based on three general hypotheses arising from the literature: first, that there will be an underlying structure of marketing rated by participants in terms of the impact of marketing on choosing a university; second, that the relative importance of some factors will differ for participants related to their gender and level of study; and third, that the results will have similarities and differences in the Vietnamese context compared with research in other contexts. Data from a structured self-completion questionnaire drawing on the three approaches of transactional, relationship, and social marketing (Obermeit, 2012), were analysed using factor analysis and correlational techniques to determine the significant factors which help to predict the future behaviour of prospective students in selecting a university (Husén, 1988; Neuman, 2006).

The participants, who were either currently studying or had recently completed their studies at universities in Vietnam, were recruited through a convenience sampling strategy (Cohen *et al.*, 2007) that distributed the questionnaire through social media and e-mail or direct to hand. The sample of 1,124 completed questionnaires (see Table I) comprised undergraduate students (66.9 per cent), students studying a second undergraduate degree (5 per cent), and postgraduate students (28.1 per cent) which allowed for significant factor analysis to be undertaken (MacCallum *et al.*, 1999). The small percentage of second undergraduates were subsumed into the "postgraduate" category as all of these students had already chosen a previous degree programme and were also usually older. Most participants were studying in public universities (92.9 per cent), rather than private ones. There were a greater number of males compared to females (57.3/42.7 per cent) with most of the participants studying economics/business/administration (35.4 per cent) and engineering/technology/computer science (32.1 per cent) (see Table I).

Table I.
Questionnaire
participant profiles

	Frequency	%
<i>Type of student</i>	1,124	100
Undergraduate	752	66.9
Second graduate	56	5
Postgraduate	316	28.1
<i>Type of university</i>	1,124	100
Public	1,044	92.9
Private	80	7.1
<i>Gender</i>	1,124	100
Male	641	57
Female	477	42.5
No answer	6	0.5
<i>Field of study</i>	1,124	100
Economics/business/administration	398	35.4
Engineering/technology/computer science	361	32.1
Humanities and social science	75	6.7
Natural science	110	9.8
Health	70	6.2
Law	53	4.7
Education	22	2
Arts	33	2.9
Others	2	0.2

The questionnaire's introduction explained the research and gave instructions on entering the answers. Participants were asked not to leave their names on the questionnaire as a safeguard for maintaining anonymity. The first section contained questions related to the participant's gender, type of university, and level and field of study. The next sections asked participants to rate the extent to which various factors influenced their choice of university. The different variables were arranged in a table with the five-point Likert scale, moving from "unimportant" to "very important" with an additional "no opinion" option (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The questionnaire was piloted with five students to check the clarity of the variables, instructions, and layout.

Cronbach's α was used to test the reliability of the Likert scale of 43 variables in the questionnaire and "The grade of entrance examination" and "University ranking" were removed from the analysis as the correlations with the others was weak (a score of less than 0.30 with 0.225 and 0.254, respectively) (De Vaus, 2002). The Cronbach's α score of 0.941 for the remaining 41 variables suggested a high reliability of inter-item correlations (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Principal component analysis was then used to examine the underlying structure of marketing for Vietnamese universities and, after identifying the different factors, the importance of each was established through its mean value. Next, the Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to find any relationships between factors and the *t*-test was utilized to understand the differences in these factors between genders and level of study.

Survey results and analysis

This section outlines the nine factors influencing Vietnamese students' choices as well as the differences between genders and level of study (undergraduates and postgraduates) in choosing a university. Principal component analysis was applied

to identify the factors and an eigenvalue of 1.0 was used to determine the number of factors with those having a value greater than 1.0 being seen as significant (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 563). The relative importance of these nine factors is based on mean values (see Figure 1 for the level of importance of each factor in comparison with the others) which show that seven of the nine factors have means higher than the mid-point of the five-point Likert scale, with the two most important factors being facilities and services (mean = 3.823) and programme (mean = 3.696); followed by price (mean = 3.498), offline information (mean = 3.493), opinions (mean = 3.297), online information (mean = 3.204), and ways of communication (mean = 3.196); and finally the last two factors of programme additions and advertising had means which are a little lower than 3 (2.951 and 2.813, respectively). Each factor is discussed below in descending order of importance.

Facilities and services

Facilities and services was the highest ranked factor comprising seven variables which were library facilities, computer laboratories, entertainment facilities, health services, access to lecturers through the internet, on-campus accommodation, and career guidance (see Appendix for each variable's factor loading). The findings of this study that this factor is the most important one (mean = 3.823) differs from some research in other contexts which indicated that campus facilities are relatively unimportant (James *et al.*, 1999; BMRB, 1998; cited in Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003) though variables making up the facilities and services factor were important (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Interestingly, this factor also emerged as the most important one from another study in the Vietnam context which investigated the parents' perspective (FTA Research & Consultant, 2012).

Programme

Consistent with the findings in other contexts (Ivy, 2008; James *et al.*, 1999), the programme factor is ranked as the second most important influence (mean = 3.696). Similar to other studies, the four variables making up this factor are content, duration, total number of credits, and the choice of majors within the programme (Kallio, 1995; Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; Price *et al.*, 2003; FTA Research & Consultant, 2012).

Price

This study reaches the same conclusion as previous research that the price is one of the most significant factors influencing students (Kallio, 1995; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Ivy, 2008; FTA Research & Consultant, 2012). The price factor includes the flexibility of payment time of tuition fees, the flexible tuition approach, availability of financial aid, programme tuition fees, and scholarship opportunities. Whilst the availability of financial aid and scholarships may not directly relate to the price, they provide opportunities for reducing the cost of studying.

Offline information

Information provided for prospective students can be divided into online and offline categories with the latter formed from personal contact with alumni, opportunities to visit the university, events attended, face-to-face recruitment advice, and the recruitment consultant handbook. This study rates this factor as being of average importance (fourth of nine factors) in line with previous findings in other contexts (Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Ivy, 2008) and the factor's variables (except for the

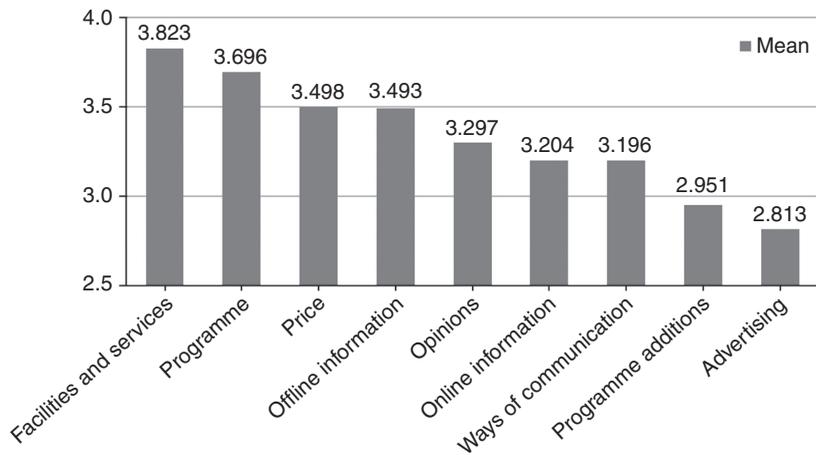


Figure 1.
Importance of each
factor

recruitment consultant handbook) are found in Ivy's (2008) people factor whilst Hesketh and Knight (1999) claim that potential students want contact with departments as well as other students in order to make decisions about choosing a programme.

Opinions

The opinions factor is dominated by five variables related to opinions of those people who influence students' choice of university which, in the order of reducing factor loading, are the opinions of siblings, other family members, teachers, parents, and friends or colleagues. These items connect strongly to relationship marketing but are often ranked higher than in this study (fifth of nine) (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Johnston, 2010).

Online information

The online information factor includes information on web sites, the university's web site, social networks, and forums. The latter two variables are major components of social marketing. There seem to be both similarities and differences between the literature and our results for this factor. The contributing items are also found in Johnston (2010) and James *et al.* (1999), who do not grade highly the importance of these items, which supports the result of this study. Online information is only an item in the prominence factor in Ivy's (2008) research which is ranked second compared with our study that ranked it in sixth position. However, the reliability of the information, especially on Vietnamese social networks or forums has been questioned which may explain this context-specific finding, therefore, whilst there has been a considerable increase in the use of the internet for seeking information on Vietnamese universities, they should concentrate on improving their online marketing but not to the detriment of the use of other media.

Ways of communication

The ways of communication factor is important in the promotion element of the marketing mix and the results show that this factor contains e-mails, phone calls, direct

mail, and other messages from a university. Previous research identifies these ways of communication as having a little or no influence on the process of potential students choosing a university (James *et al.*, 1999; Ivy, 2008; Johnston, 2010), which is similar to the seventh place ranking for this research.

Programme additions

The programme element of the marketing mix is found in two different factors of core and additional values. Similar to this study (eighth of nine factors), existing research suggests the programme additions factor is one of the least important influence upon students' choice. The factor is made up of five variables that are seen to add value to the programme factor (see the second factor above), namely size of the class, the diversity of the students in the programme, availability of distance-learning programme, class timetable, and international student exchange opportunities. Gatfield *et al.* (1999) place these components within the academic instruction factor whilst Ivy (2008) gives this factor a different name of "premium".

Advertising

For the participants, the advertising factor includes advertising on television, in newspapers and magazines as well as university brochures and leaflets. Advertising is important within the promotion element of the marketing mix yet the low ranking of this factor in our study is supported by Ivy (2008), though Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) suggest that promotional media, like television, are the best ways to promote a UK university to international students.

Correlations between factors

The Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to find any relationships between the nine examined factors making up the underlying marketing structure for Vietnamese universities. Using the lower correlation coefficients common in social science compared to physical science (De Vaus, 2002) where a correlation greater than 0.5 is strong, 0.5-0.3 is moderate, 0.3-0.1 is weak, and lower than 0.1 is insubstantial; this study produced a considerable number of correlations (33 of 72 correlations > 0.450) around 0.5, and all of these correlations are positive and significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed) (see tables).

The online and offline information factors have a strong correlation (0.516) implying that students who rate one highly tend to also highly rate the other. Relationships were also found between ways of communication and the three factors of online information (strong correlation of 0.512), offline information (strong correlation of 0.566), and advertising (moderate correlation of 0.465). These results might reflect that all four factors are closely related to the promotion element of the marketing mix.

New findings in this study are the price factor relationships with facilities and services (strong correlation of 0.575), programme (moderate correlation of 0.451), and programme additions (a border line strong correlation of 0.496). Perhaps if universities want to attract students for high-price programmes, they should have good facilities and services, and programme quality, as well as many programme additions. The facilities and services factor also has strong relationships with offline (correlation of 0.597) and online information (correlation of 0.499) so facilities and services should be marketed to potential students equally through offline and online information.

Differences between genders and types of students when choosing a university

An independent-samples *t*-test with a significance level of 0.05 was applied to analyse the differences in responses between genders and types of student (undergraduates and postgraduates). The results indicate significant differences between the genders in most of the factors, particularly facilities and services ($t = 2.38$, $df = 1,074.1$, $p(0.05)$), price ($t = 2.09$, $df = 1,085.6$, $p(0.05)$), opinions ($t = 4.62$, $df = 1,100.3$, $p(0.05)$), advertising ($t = 2.29$, $df = 1,067.6$, $p(0.05)$), online information ($t = 3.13$, $df = 1,085.3$, $p(0.05)$), offline information ($t = 3.35$, $df = 1,058.8$, $p(0.05)$), and ways of communication ($t = 2.60$, $df = 1,112$, $p(0.05)$). Female students rate all seven factors as more important than males (see mean values in Table II) so would seem to be influenced more than males by most of the factors. In contrast, the two remaining factors of programme and programme additions are not statistically significant indicating they affect male and female students to the same level suggesting that Vietnamese university marketing tools involving programme need not differ according to gender in line with Bacila (2008).

There are differences types of student in choosing a university in the Vietnamese context as statistically significant differences were found in the factors of advertising ($t = 2.95$, $df = 1,120$, $p(0.05)$) and programme ($t = 6.21$, $df = 794.1$, $p(0.05)$). In particular that advertising seems to influence undergraduates more than it does postgraduates (mean of undergraduate = 2.87 > mean of postgraduate = 2.7) does not seem to appear in earlier studies. Conversely, postgraduates rank programme higher than undergraduates (3.88 > 3.61) (see Table III). Though Price *et al.* (2003) found that facilities, especially accommodation, are very important for UK-based undergraduate students, a difference for the facilities and services factor between undergraduates and postgraduates is not found in this study.

Differences between the levels of study within the opinions and price factors might be expected as most undergraduates have just completed high school so rely on their family for financial support, whilst postgraduates may be or have been working so have their own money for living and studying. In relation to the opinions factor, the result which indicates that undergraduates are influenced more by parents and siblings whereas postgraduates are affected more by teachers and friends/colleagues does not seem to be found in the literature. Four of the five items of the opinions factor

Table II.
Differences between genders and types of student when choosing a university

Factor	Male	Mean Compare	Female	Significant value
Facilities and service	3.78	<	3.89	0.017
Opinions	3.20	<	3.43	0.000
Offline information	3.43	<	3.59	0.001
Price	3.46	<	3.56	0.037
Advertising	2.76	<	2.89	0.022
Ways of communication	3.13	<	3.29	0.009
Online information	3.14	<	3.29	0.002

Table III.
Differences between types of student when choosing a university

Factor	Undergraduate	Mean Compare	Postgraduate	Significant value
Advertising	2.87	>	2.70	0.003
Programme	3.61	<	3.88	0.000

have differences significantly between the types of student, especially the influence of the opinions of parents ($t = 5.41$, $df = 1,121$, $p(0.05)$), siblings ($t = 2.60$, $df = 1,122$, $p(0.05)$), teachers ($t = 2.33$, $df = 1,122$, $p(0.05)$), and friends/colleagues ($t = 2.45$, $df = 1,119$, $p(0.05)$). While undergraduates are influenced more by their parents' opinions ($3.72 > 3.35$) and those of their siblings ($3.36 > 3.19$), postgraduates are affected more by the opinions of teachers ($3.46 > 3.30$) and friends or colleagues ($3.38 > 3.22$) (see Table IV).

There seems to be no mention in the literature of the differences between types of student over the items of the price factor. Yet significant differences were found in the four items of programme tuition fees ($t = 2.03$, $df = 829.5$, $p(0.05)$), the flexibility of fee payment periods ($t = 2.48$, $df = 841.6$, $p(0.05)$), the flexible tuition approach ($t = 2.67$, $df = 1,120$, $p(0.05)$), and the availability of financial aid ($t = 2.92$, $df = 1,120$, $p(0.05)$). Undergraduates rated the first three items as less important and the last as more important than postgraduates ($3.79 < 3.91$, $3.33 < 3.49$, $3.13 < 3.32$, $3.41 > 3.19$, respectively) (see Table V).

Additionally, postgraduates have a greater sensitive to tuition fees, the flexibility of payment time, and payment method. While undergraduates are influenced more by the opinions of parents and siblings, postgraduates are affected more by the opinions of teachers and friends/colleagues. These results suggest that universities wanting to attract undergraduates should concentrate on advertising and family influencers such as parents and siblings. In contrast, universities wishing to attract postgraduates, should focus on programme, non-family influencers such as teachers and friends or colleagues, and price such as tuition fees, the flexibility of payment time, and method.

Our findings imply that all nine factors should be considered carefully in order to attract potential students in the Vietnamese context but that marketing could be improved by focusing on facilities and services; diversifying programmes, providing detailed and accurate programme information; offering more scholarships and providing more information related to price such as the flexibility of payment time and payment approach in marketing documents; the re-allocating of advertising costs; and holding offline events at companies in which prospective postgraduates may work.

Item	Mean		Postgraduate	Significant value
	Undergraduate	Compare		
Parents' opinions	3.72	>	3.35	0.000
Brothers and sisters' opinions	3.36	>	3.19	0.009
Teachers' opinions	3.30	<	3.46	0.020
Friends/colleagues' opinions	3.22	<	3.38	0.015

Table IV.
Differences between types of student in the items forming the opinions factor

Item	Mean		Postgraduate	Significant value
	Undergraduate	Compare		
Tuition fees of the programme	3.79	<	3.91	0.042
The flexibility of payment time of tuition fees	3.33	<	3.49	0.013
The flexible tuition approach	3.13	<	3.32	0.008
Availability of financial aid	3.41	>	3.19	0.004

Table V.
Differences between types of students in the items forming the price factor

While some of these actions such as programme diversification are encouraged by the MOET, other strategies such as improving facilities and services present financial challenges especially for public universities which may seek to generate revenue through collaborative programmes with foreign universities as well as attracting students by providing more choices for them.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study has been to identify the factors which influence Vietnamese students when they make a choice about which university to attend. Marketing approaches have been drawn upon to inform the exploration and understanding of the topic whilst recognizing there are other approaches what can be used and that these marketing approaches are often themselves drawing upon economic, psychological and sociological theories of choice and decision making. Our findings suggest an underlying Vietnamese university choice model; that the relative importance to participants of some factors differ related to participant's gender and level of study, and there are some differences as well as similarities in findings between the Vietnamese context and other contexts suggesting that findings from studies in other contexts may not be directly transferrable to Vietnamese universities so there needs to be a contextual understanding of these factors and a suitably nuanced marketing response (Kallio, 1995; Kotler and Fox, 1995). In the light of these findings, universities need to consider carefully before selecting marketing insights to attract prospective students, yet it can be tempting for developing countries to take findings from other countries and contexts and misapply them, and individual institutions can make the mistake of assuming what goes for another university in the same country also applies to them.

There are limitations to this study and further research is needed. The analysis ranked and rated the factors, conducted a factor analysis, and considered the differences between male/female and undergraduate/postgraduate students, but it could go further by measuring and testing associations between these factors (as independent variables) and an actual choice (dependent variable). A particularly important difference that needs analysis is that of students' choice of university in relation to fields of study and types of university, for example, public and private universities, and arts, humanities or science subjects. The sampling implications of using social media as a form of distribution are that participants are self-selecting (Dewaele, 2007) so the use of random sampling to seek a balance of different types of participants may lead to more insights. By recruiting current and recent students as participants, their reflections come after the choice event when the marketing strategies used by their universities have been successful in terms of the participants taking up a place of study (though why they may have done so is something that our study helps to illuminate) but it would be interesting to survey the views of prospective students (see Bacila, 2008).

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

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	Factor loading
<i>Facilities and services</i>	
Library facilities	0.730
Computer laboratories	0.724
Entertainment facilities	0.722
Access to lecturers through the internet	0.687
On-campus accommodation	0.670
Career guidance	0.628
Health services	0.598
<i>Programme</i>	
Programme content	0.733
Duration of the programme	0.703
Total number of credits for the degree	0.554
The choice of majors in the programme	0.449
<i>Price</i>	
The flexibility of payment time	0.782
The flexible tuition approach	0.719
Availability of financial aid	0.663
Tuition fees of the programme	0.643
Scholarship opportunities	0.532
<i>Offline information</i>	
Personal contact with alumni	0.768
Opportunity to visit to university	0.722
Events attended	0.691
Face-to-face recruitment advice where I live	0.635
Recruitment consultant handbook	0.440
<i>Opinions</i>	
Brothers and sisters' opinions	0.849
Other family members' opinions	0.831
Teachers' opinions	0.788
Parents' opinions	0.768
Friends, colleagues' opinions	0.718
<i>Online information</i>	
Information on other web sites	0.732
Information on social networks	0.681
Information on forums	0.665
Information on the university web site	0.515
<i>Ways of communication</i>	
E-mail from university	0.798
Phone call, message from university	0.772
Direct mail from university	0.769

Table AI.
Loadings of
variables from each
of the nine factors

(continued)

<i>Programme additions</i>	
Size of the class	0.736
The diversity of the students in the programme	0.676
Availability of distance-learning programme	0.625
Class timetable	0.573
International student exchange opportunities	0.475
<i>Advertising</i>	
Advertising on television	0.795
Advertising in newspapers, magazines	0.755
University brochure, leaflet	0.675

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Table AI.

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