

How Do Rural Students Choose Their Higher Education Institutions? Two Regional Australian Cases

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to compare two groups of undergraduate students at regional university campuses and the factors they considered in their choice of university. The respondents were attending campuses in two rural locations: the Glenormiston campus of the University of Melbourne and the Whyalla campus of the University of South Australia. The major factor considered in their choice of university by both groups was career preparation. Following this factor, students at Whyalla campus placed importance on factors such as distance from home and the size of the campus. Students, however, at Glenormiston placed more emphasis on access to accommodation and the opportunity to do research. The students' main sources of information were the respective State tertiary admission centre guides, school sources and their peer group. The authors recommend that university administrators use these findings to develop more effective marketing programs.

Introduction

Recent media reports have highlighted the increased competition for students between tertiary education institutions in Australia. The lowering of university scores by universities is one measure used by these institutions to "attract" students. However, such short sighted responses in some quarters has brought into question the overall strategic marketing efforts of higher education institutions. As Australia experiences the first signs of a hiccup in the expansion of higher education sector in the post-Dawkins era, more and more university administrators have turned their attention to the question of how they can attract new students, and retain those they already have. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the rural and regional areas of Australia which historically produce fewer matriculants per thousand head of population than urban areas (DEET, 1993). How rural based universities respond to the challenge will have an impact on their future role and effectiveness, It will be important to know the factors students consider in their choice of a university campus and which information sources are used in this decision process.

This paper discusses the factors that first year, first-time students considered in their choice of university at two rural-based sites. The second aim was to identify their sources of information. The study was undertaken at Glenormiston campus (University of Melbourne) and Whyalla campus (University of South Australia). Glenormiston campus is 250 kilometres from Melbourne. It offers programs in rural management, equine management, and horticulture, The campus has an enrolment of approximately 600 in undergraduate and technical courses, 180 of these are full-time students. In 1996 it had an intake of 106 new enrolments in full-time study. The Whyalla campus of the University of South Australia is situated in the north-west of South Australia on the Eyre Peninsula some 370 kilometres from Adelaide. The campus also has approximately 600 enrolments covering accountancy, business, computing, engineering, applied science, nursing and social work.

Literature Review

For some time researchers in the higher education sector have urged the adoption market research paradigms to improve student enrolment practices (Kotler, 1979; Litten, 1980; Kotler and Murphy, 1981). Indeed, within the broader aegis of market research, researchers have attempted to refine models of the enrolment process of colleges and universities (Chapman, 1981; Litten, Sullivan and Brodigan, 1983; Zemsky, 1983; Hossler and Stage, 1984). This move has drawn attention to the image that higher education

institutions hold in the community and how those images are perceived by various stakeholders (Smith and Cavusgill, 1984; Chapman, 1983; Litten, 1983; Krukowski, 1985). Universities and colleges in Australia and North America disseminate large amounts of information to prospective students in order to persuade them to include their respective institution in the students' choice set.

Pickford (1992) discusses an undergraduate survey that indicates *Careers advisors*, *Campus visit* and *Tertiary information* as being the most important primary sources of information about the respondents' tertiary institution. Meanwhile, a study by Hesketh and Whitely (1995) showed that matriculants believed that the most useful source of information was the *University Guide* followed by *Parents* and *Careers advisors*. In contrast, *All school sources*, including *School* generally and *Teachers* were ranked highly in a study commissioned by the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET, 1994). In this study *University sources*, *Parents*, *Books and pamphlets*, *Friends*, and *All media sources* were ranked in descending importance, the latter receiving few responses. A study to gauge the impact of the student counsellor on college choice reported that nearly 70 per cent of the incoming students to a large midwestern university in the USA said that they had used human resources comprising college students, friends, and high school counsellors (Johnson *et al*, 1991). The authors are not aware of any cross-campus comparisons in Australia, hence the heightened interest in this study.

Methodology

Data were derived from a self-administered questionnaire given to first-year, first-time undergraduates at the campuses at Whyalla and Glenormiston. The questionnaire contained a number of questions which sought details of how students found out about the university, some biographical information, and the importance of criteria they considered in their choice of university. The questionnaire sought responses on a Likert-type scale ranging from 5 = Very Important to 1 = Not Important. The questions were derived from focus groups of students and a search of the international literature. The study is limited by its retrospective nature,

Results

Seventy-three useable questionnaires were received at the University of South Australia Whyalla campus which represented eighty-five per cent of the first-year first-time cohort. Sixty-one per cent of the respondent group was female and twenty-two per cent nominated their home address as being more than 30 kilometres (km) away from the university campus. Eighty-five useable questionnaires received at the University of Melbourne Glenormiston campus which represented eighty per cent of the first year full-time cohort. Fifty-two per cent of the sample were male. Eighty-six per cent of those surveyed nominated their home address as being more than thirty kilometres away from the university campus. A preliminary data analysis showed that the average age of the respondent students at Whyalla was 23.3 and for Glenormiston it was 19.5 years. Students at both campuses were enrolled in a range of courses shown below (Table 1).

Table 1: Course Enrolments of Population Surveyed

University of South Australia - Whyalla		University of Melbourne - Glenormiston	
Courses	Surveyed (Number)	Courses	Surveyed (Number)
Accountancy	21	Rural Management	44
Nursing Studies	19	Equine Management	41
Engineering/Applied Science	9	Total	n = 85
Social Work/Counselling	22		
Other	2		
Total	n = 73		

Factors Considered in University Choice

The following two tables show the factors considered in University choice for the students at the two institutions. Means of the responses on the Likert scales were used to produce the rankings of the elements.

Table 2: Factors Considered in University Choice - Whyalla

Factor	Ranking	Mean	Standard deviation
Career preparation	1	4.04	1.30
Distance from home	2	3.54	1.79
Specific academic program	3	3.10	1.60
Academic reputation	4	2.79	1.64
Library resources	5	2.67	1.48
Costs	6	2.64	1.70
Size of campus	7	2.63	1.67
Access to accommodation	8	2.56	1.77
Social life	9	2.46	1.49
Opportunity to do research	10	2.45	1.50
Consulting profile of university	11	2.18	1.41
Student support programs	12	2.15	1.31
Other university students/friends	13	2.09	1.29
Parent's preference	14	1.66	1.23

Table 3: Factors Considered in University Choice - Glenormiston

Factor	Ranking	Mean	Standard deviation
Career preparation	1	4.59	0.675
Specific academic program	2	3.81	1.239
Costs	3	3.57	1.304
Access to accommodation	4	3.51	1.335
Academic reputation	5	3.47	1.306
Opportunity to do research	6	2.93	1.252
Library resources	7	2.79	1.193
Distance from home	8	2.78	1.577
Consulting profile of university	9	2.73	1.267
Social life	10	2.56	1.298
Size of campus	11	2.33	1.267
Student support programs	12	2.33	1.090
Parent's preference	13	2.19	1.277
Other university students/friends	14	2.05	1.272

The questionnaire sought data on whether a respondent's home was more than 30 kilometres from the university. For those who lived more than 30 kilometres away, the following factors became more important in their choice of university: *Social life*; *Parent's preference*; and *Other university students and friends*.

Sources of Information

In response to the question "Please indicate important sources of information about the university," the respondent groups answered as shown in Table 4. In this question students could indicate more than one choice.

The prominence given to the *SATAC* and *VTAC Guides* would appear uncontroversial given that the *Guide* is circulated to all Year 12 school students and contains the necessary application form for tertiary institution admission. These results show that for the Glenormiston campus the tertiary study guide by VTAC is not the most important source of information, as it is for students enrolling at Whyalla. For Glenormiston students, the influence of the peer group *Other university students and friends*, is marginally more important than the *VTAC Guide*.

Table 4: Relative Importance of Information Sources

Source	Whyalla (n = 70)		Glenormiston (n = 86)	
	Responses %	Relative importance	Responses %	Relative importance
SATAC* Guide	28	1	-	-
VTAC# Guide	-	-	21	2
High School or College	19	2	16	3
Other university students/friends	17	3	24	1
University staff visit to school	9	4	2	10
University Open Day	8	5	13	4
Press/TV advertising	6	6	4	8
Other (various)	5	7	6	6
School Counsellor	4	8	4	9
Parents	2	9	7	5
Austrade/Education Expo.	1	10	5	7

* South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre

Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre

Discussion

For the students at both universities, *Career preparation* was the factor most strongly associated with university choice. This is different from the findings in the American studies of Astin (1992) and Chapman (1981). After this similarity the two respondent groups show different responses in the importance given to other factors. *Distance from home* was a more important factor for students in Whyalla than for students at Glenormiston. *Access to accommodation*, however, was more important for Glenormiston students. Since both universities provide on-campus accommodation this is an interesting difference and may be explained by the catchment area of Whyalla campus. The majority of Whyalla's students live in the City of Whyalla and do not to move away from home to undertake study, whilst Glenormiston draws mainly from outside their 30 km radius. The "closeness" of the campus for the Whyalla students could probably be interpreted as a surrogate for lower cost. Both respondent groups also placed high importance on the *Specific academic program* they undertook, which can be seen as being a complementary factor to career choice. Similarly both groups placed more importance on the factors of *Academic reputation*, *Costs* and *Library resources*.

While there are similarities in the selected information sources used, the most prominent position of the *SATAC* and *VTAC Guide* is unlike the findings from a DEET study of Year 12 students in New South Wales (ANOP, 1994). This may be accounted for by the timing of this research. As students move closer to a decision on university, then it would appear that the guide becomes more important. The position of *Other University students and friends* suggests the rather large influence of the peer group as a source of information. The relative position of the high school as a important source of information would also appear uncontroversial and is supported by the DEET study.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to compare two groups of undergraduate students attending university campuses in two rural locations with regard to factors considered in their university choice and the information sources that students used. Both respondent groups have shown an instrumental view of higher education in identifying career choice as their most important factor. Minor differences between the groups were found in the factors in *Distance from home* and *Size of campus* for Whyalla students. Glenormiston students placed more importance on *Access to accommodation* and *Opportunity to do research*.

It is noteworthy that students at the University of Melbourne and the University of South Australia have placed importance on many common factors. Those administrators involved in the marketing of their campus need to be fully informed on the perceptions of prospective students in order to effectively communicate with these clients. The sources of information identified by this study show the importance of the respective state universities admission guides, high schools and colleges, and the role of the peer

group. Less influential were effects by the universities themselves, such as open days, school visits or press advertisements. These results suggest that university administrators should evaluate the effectiveness of their current marketing programs and the channels of information they use to implement their strategies.

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