

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**CHARACTERISTICS INFLUENCING
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INFORMATION
SEARCH AND SATISFACTION ON PRIVATE
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN
MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

The intensifying mobility of international students and competition among private higher education institutions has augmented the need for understanding these students choice process. Information search as an initial stage of the choice process has been the topic of much research. A more challenging area of study is the relationship between international students' information search and satisfaction on a private higher education institution. However, literature has revealed that the study on this relationship, specifically in the Malaysian scenario, has been very scarce. Hence, this study aims to address this knowledge gap and attempts to extend previous study on information search by integrating satisfaction constructs into the framework. Data collection commenced for 2009 to 2010 and there were 187 private education institutions enrolling international students. Of that, only 32 institutions responded and participated in the study. A proportionate sampling was employed whereby international students were divided according to the population and the status of the institutions. Structured questionnaire was used and two pilot studies were administered to refine the items in the scales using SPSS version 17. For the final study, to ensure a more rigorous analysis, structural equation modeling using AMOS 18 was employed to empirically test the effects of the respective predictors on latent variables. Results indicated that out of the nine hypotheses formulated, seven hypotheses were supported at five percent significant level. A significant finding is that information characteristics (institution attributes and information accessibility) were the most important predictors of information search and information satisfaction. A major contribution to the advancement of new knowledge is that the results also emphasized that information satisfaction in turn, is a significant mediator in the relationship between student characteristics (knowledge and involvement), institution characteristics (perceived risk) and information characteristics (institution attributes and accessibility) with institution choice satisfaction. This is a timely study as the results have addressed issues on strengthening the private education services sectors in line with the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) effort. The study provides mechanisms for institutions to enhance their promotional programs and formulation of policies in improving their international students' enrolment. In addition, findings are of significance to the Government in strengthening its position to successfully transform Malaysia as the "major education centre of choice and a pivotal hub in the global education network". Findings may assist institutions and the Government in understanding the multiple influences of information search affecting international students' choice. By allocating resources to these key factors, their communication and promotional efforts can be further enhanced. This will increase students' motivation to search and eventually lead to the selection of these institutions as their preferred destination. This study also contributes to the development of an empirical basis for future study on international students' choice of institution.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Students' decision on institution choice has been the subject of much research in recent times by renowned researchers such as Afful-Broni and Noi-Okwei (2010), Briggs and Wilson (2008), Chia (2011), Cremonini, Westerheijden and Enders (2008), Kusumawati, (2011) and Vrontis, Thrassou and Melanthiou (2007). These studies have been based on numerous institution choice models that emerged from Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), Chapman (1981), Hanson and Litton (1982), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Jackson (1982). Information search being the initial stage of the decision making process is an area of particular importance. Guo (2001) and Simoes and Soares (2010) advocated that information search prior to choice-making is essential in making a wise decision. It is at this significant stage that marketers are able to provide the right incitement/ stimulation to influence their customers. However, there is limited empirical evidence on international students' information search on private higher education institution (PHEI) in Malaysia. Hence, an empirical study on the various antecedents/ characteristics influencing these students information search is essential.

In addition, study on the relationship between students' information search and satisfaction on institution choice is also crucial. Satisfaction is considered an important performance indicator (Chan & Chan, 2004; Selnes, 1993) and is linked to improvement in retention and loyalty rate (Beerli, Martin & Quitana, 2004; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). It was indicated that customers perceived different levels of satisfaction with various types of information that was sought and provided by different sources (Li, So, Fong, Lui, Lo & Lau, 2011). In searching for information regarding institutions in a foreign country, students may consider many variables that are distinctive to their own particular circumstances. It is at this important initial stage of the decision making process where PHEIs are able to inform and convince the international students. Effective marketing and well-informed communication techniques would influence students during their decision making process. This suggests that in addition to comprehending students' information