

Indian Students' Choice of Study Destination: Reasons for Choosing Singapore

Robyn Anderson¹, Abhishek Bhati²

^{1,2} JCU Singapore

ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of Indian international students studying at Australian universities in Singapore while during the same period; there has been a corresponding decrease in the number of this group of students studying in Australia. The study aimed to understand why one current group of Indian students studying in Singapore chose to study in Singapore at an Australian tertiary institution rather than study in Australia or elsewhere in the world. While recent assaults on Indian students in Australia may have influenced Indian students' decisions to study in locations other than Australia, there may have been other influences as well. These include the increasing strength of the Australian dollar as well as a tightening of the student visa applications.

The research design employed a mixed methods approach using focus group interviews and descriptive statistics from two surveys. The study found that for most international Indian students studying in Singapore, safety, proximity to India, lower cost of living and the perception at there were better job prospects in Singapore on the completion of their degrees compared to other locations were the prime reasons they chose to study in Singapore. The study highlights future recommendations for universities in attracting and catering for students from overseas countries.

Keywords: Global education, Higher education, Indian Students, International students, Australian Universities

INTRODUCTION

As tertiary education has become more globalized, Australia has become one of the largest providers of international education in the world after the United States (18%) and the United Kingdom (10%), providing 7.0% of all international education in 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011). Since the 1980s, international education has been a viable trade commodity (Auletta, 2000; Harman, 2004) and in 2010 -11, contributed A\$16.3 billion in export income to the Australian economy (Australian Education International, 2011). However, in 2010-2011, there was a 5.1% decline in student visa applications (ABS, 2011). This decline may be the result of: adjustments to Australia's migration policy, making it more difficult for international students to gain permanent residency in Australia (Deloitte Access Economics, 2011); changes to student visa regulations requiring international students to be financially able

(Deloitte Access Economics, 2011); closures of a number of private educational providers particularly in the Vocational Education Sector (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011); the strengthening Australian dollar raising the cost of living in Australia compared with other study destinations; and the growth of overseas competitors (ABS, 2011).

Deloitte Access Economics (2011) suggest that the decline in student visa applications may also be the result of recent assaults on Indian international students in Melbourne in 2008, which received wide media coverage both in Australia (Das, 2009; Harrison, Austin and Millar, 2009), and in India (Argoon, 2010; Hatcher, 2010). While these factors may have contributed to a decline of the number of students from India studying in Australia, the decline could be related to other factors as well (OECD, 2011). By examining the discourses upon which Indian international student drew, the study sought to understand:

1. Why one group of Indian students chose to study at an Australian campus in Singapore; and
2. Whether Indian Education Agents in India influenced students' choice of study destination.

BACKGROUND

The globalization of tertiary education

The Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) suggest that as economies and societies are becoming more globalized, so is tertiary education (2011). Students are increasingly choosing overseas study destinations to broaden their understanding of different business methods and to improve their prospects of securing future employment, (OECD, 2011). The number of students enrolling in a tertiary course outside their country of citizenship has risen from 0.8 million students worldwide in 1975 to 3.7 million worldwide in 2009 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011). In viewing worldwide data, the OECD found that "the proportion of foreign students among all tertiary students grew 7% from 2000 to 2009" (2011, p. 320).

In 2009, the United States received the highest share of international students "with 18% of all foreign students worldwide, followed by the United Kingdom (10%), Australia (7%), Germany (7%) and France (7%)" (OECD, 2011, p. 321). While these countries have accounted for half of all international tertiary students, new players in the international education market may be emerging. From 2000 to 2009, the number of international students who chose the United States as their study destination fell from 23% to 18% while the United Kingdom also fell one percentage point (OECD, 2011). The share of international students who chose Australia, however, "grew by almost two percentage points" (OECD, 2011, p. 321). The most recent data shows that in Australia, 21.5% of all tertiary students are international students (OECD, 2011).

Factors influencing international students' choice of study destinations

In considering the countries of choice for international students (United States, United Kingdom and Australia), English-speaking countries appear to be the countries of choice. This reflects "the progressive adoption of English as a global language" (OECD, 2011, p. 322). The OECD suggest that "it may also be because students intending to study abroad are likely to have learned English in their home country and/or wish to improve their English language skills through immersion in a native English-speaking context" (2011, p. 322).

Quality of education is an important factor for international students in their choice of study destination and students' choices may be influenced by the reputation and information about the institution (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). According to the OECD, students' choices are more often "based on the quality of education offered, as perceived from a wide array of information on and rankings of higher education programmes now available, both in print and online" (OECD, 2011, p. 322). The emergence of university rankings and the attention given to it by many universities reflect the perception that the quality of the institutions is important for students.

Another factor for consideration for international students is immigration policies. According to the OECD, "several OECD countries have eased their immigration policies to encourage the temporary or permanent immigration of international students" (OECD, 2011, p. 325). Australia has made it easier for international students who have studied in Australia to become permanent residents by giving them "additional points in an immigration point system" (OECD, 2011, p. 328).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) argue that international students' choice of study destination is influenced by the relative costs. Education and living costs are likely to play a role in international students' choice of study destination. In the context of competitive markets for international tertiary education of similar quality, lower cost study destinations are more likely to attract international students. The deterioration of international enrolments in the United States and the United Kingdom may account for this choice.

The OECD has suggested that a range of other factors may influence international students' choice of study destination. These factors include "the flexibility of programmes in counting time spent abroad towards degree requirements; recognition of foreign degrees; the limitations of tertiary education in the home country; restrictive university admission policies at home; geographical, trade or historical links between countries; future job opportunities; (and) cultural aspirations" (OECD, 2011, p. 325).

Australia has made international education an explicit part of its socio-economic development strategy (OECD, 2011). After coal and iron ore, international education has become Australia's third largest industry (Australian Education International, 2011).

METHOD

The qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) employed a constructivist research paradigm to understand why Indian international students chose to study at an Australian campus in Singapore. A focus group interview and two surveys were used. Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton and Oakes argue that a constructivist research paradigm supports a more "tentative, inductive, and interpretive form of data collection and analysis" (2000, p. 332). Ethics Approval for the study was formally sought and received through James Cook University Australia.

A focus group recruitment of participants included seven Indian international students studying at an Australian campus in Singapore, JCU Singapore. There was one student female and six were male students; one student was enrolled in a bachelors degree and six were enrolled in masters degrees. The question, "Why did you choose to study at an Australian university in Singapore" related to the research questions, set the course of the interview. In this way, no "p priori categories" limited their constructions of the topic. The focus group interview was 40 minutes in length, was recorded and transcribed by a Research Assistant for later analysis. The transcript was returned to the researchers and made available to participants to verify its authentication. Analysis of the transcript data focused on themes and categories constructed from the discourses on which the participants drew.

The findings of the focus group assisted in the construction of two surveys, one of Indian students studying at Australian universities in Singapore and another of Indian Education Agents working from India. Indian Education Agents recruit students on behalf of tertiary education and training institutions outside of India, such as Australia and Singapore (Australian Education International, n.d.) and disseminate information to prospective students about possible study destinations and institutions. The first survey examined the views and profiles of Indian students studying in Singapore. A second survey, which examined the views and profiles of Indian Education Agents in India, was employed primarily to crosscheck the influence of Indian Education Agents on Indian students' choice of study destination. The surveys were offered online using SurveyMonkey to every fifth Indian international students listed as studying at Australian universities in Singapore and to 18 Indian Education Agents working in India.

This process of systematic selection was designed to replicate the international Indian student population studying at Australian institutions in Singapore. The survey included both closed-end and open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics and graphical illustrations were calculated from the closed-end questions and used in the interpretation of results. The analysis of the open-ended questions focused on identifying themes and categories constructed from the discourses on which the participants drew. Over a four-month period, 236 online student responses were received, representing a 39% response rate. The findings of the focus group interview and surveys are presented in next section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Focus Group Interview: Discourses in International Education

The focus group interview was analysed using the concept of discourse to understand why Indian international students chose to study at an Australian university in Singapore. Discourse defines ways of thinking within societies and cultures, demarking boundaries of possible truths in language and in social practices (Strega, 2005). Within international tertiary education there are a range of competing and contradictory discourses influenced by the wider society. The focus group interview revealed that students drew upon a range of discourses available particularly through the media and internet, including discourses of international exposure, safety/racism/familiar culture, financial hubs and job prospects, and study costs. Each will be discussed in turn.

International/global exposure

The OECD (2011) argues that as economies, societies and education becomes more globalized, students are more likely to increase their competitiveness in the job market if they gain international experience and exposure during their studies. The ConfluenceEdu website (2012) reinforces this discourse of global/international exposure to prospective Indian international students affirming that study in Singapore will ensure that they gain "international exposure and (a) global outlook" (p. 1). When asked why they chose to study outside of India, four of the seven students interviewed revealed that they had clearly taken up this discourse:

To get more of a global 'exposure' (Shawn, 10, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

Probably to get more international 'exposure' (Frank, 9, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

Get more exposure (Rose, 14, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

The added advantage was the 'exposure', which we are getting (Max, 51, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

As all seven students in the focus group interview were studying business degrees, it may have been even more imperative that they broaden their understanding of overseas business methods to strengthen their future job prospects and careers. The survey of Indian students confirmed that many Indian international students (69.5%) have taken up this discourse. The OECD (2011) argues that it is one of the main reasons students travel abroad.

Safety/ racism

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) argue that safety is a prime consideration in choosing a study destination for most international students (2002). Some students in the Focus Group clearly took up this discourse often drawn from media advice (Kulkarni, 2008):

The central government of India made an advice to the students of India that ... an advice not to travel Australia and they didn't put any bar. You can travel but there was an advice not to travel because of (the) racism factor and everyday there is a flash news going on about things happening in Australia. So, it will tend people not to choose Australia (Robert, 47, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

I was willing to go to Australia but because of the problem ... I selected Singapore to do my Australian degree in Singapore. It's because of racism over there in Australia (Rose, 35, 15, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

I was actually moving to another university in Australia, but it was a bad time you know the situations were not too favourable for Indians out there and coming from an extremely orthodox family; my parents were not ready to take the step and I had to stop all the procedures of getting a loan and everything, moving to Australia and so basically it was more of the racist issue which were happening out there that you know my parents did not allow me to move to Australia (Shawn, 50, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh's (2011) study of international students in Singapore found that 58.9% of students surveyed mentioned that Singapore's reputation as a safe environment was one reason they chose Singapore. While it is often understood by international students that 'safety' means freedom from harm, violence and racism in an overseas study environment, one student in the focus group interview constructed 'safety' as including freedom from a drug-influenced environment:

I actually had one of my relatives who went to Australia to study and he definitely did not have a good experience in terms of like the drug problems over there. Like the teenagers, and like students and colleges ... they are actually really involved in things like those (drugs). So, Singapore on the other hand is extremely strict, you know, in terms of those (drugs). It was definitely like something that my parents wanted me to go to like a safer place (Slash, 48, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

The survey of Indian international students studying at Australian universities in Singapore showed that 71.3% considered safety in choosing a study destination and 69.2% chose Singapore over Australia because of safety and security. Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh's study (2011) found that 58.9% of all international students studying in Singapore stated that Singapore's reputation as a safe environment was one reason they chose Singapore. The higher percentage of Indian international students in the survey (71.3%) compared to a lower percentage of international students generally (58.9%) in Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh's

(2011) study, may indicate a greater concern for safety by Indian international students than international students generally. This concern may have been precipitated by the 2008 assaults on Indian international students in Australia. Deloitte Access Economics' (2011) have suggested that the 2008 violent attacks on Indian students may have damaged Australia's reputation as a safe study destination. Both the Focus Group interviews and the Indian Student Survey in the current study appear to confirm Deloitte Access Economics' suggestion (2011).

Proximity to home

The OECD (2011) note that international students more often choose study destinations in close geographical proximity to their own country. Websites such as ConfluenceEdu (2002) also highlight this benefit to potential Indian international students stating that the "proximity of Singapore to India reduces travel costs" (p. 1). Some students took up this discourse of proximity or closeness to their home country:

Proximity to home was one of the biggest factors (Max, 79, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

Basically it was just a place which was quite nearby to my home and ... it's a little bit closer than to go to Australia (Frank, 49, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

It's closer to India, so I can go back at holidays. (Max, 80, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

More than half (57.3%) of the students in the survey said that Singapore's proximity to India was one of the reasons they chose Singapore over Australia. This is similar to Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh's (2011) finding that international students prefer study destinations that are in close proximity to their home country.

Familiar culture

The OECD suggest that "trade or historical links between countries" may influence international students' choice of study destinations (2011, p. 325). Since the founding of modern Singapore by the British in 1819, the mass migration of Indians to Singapore to seek work has resulted in Singapore having one of the largest overseas Indian populations (Wikipedia, n.d.). ConfluenceEdu promotes Singapore as being "similar to that in India" (2012). Some students agreed:

The Asian culture is something more I think, I can relate to since I am an Indian, so I thought that Singapore ... the culture is very similar to what we have in India (Bruce, 16, 18, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

I am sure I would have had to face more problems adapting in Australia than in Singapore, because you still have quite a major Indian community in Singapore, so you still have the familiarity (Max, 80, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

In the survey of Indian international students, 24.5% of students survey said that familiarity with their own culture in Singapore was one of the reasons they chose to study in Singapore rather than Australia.

Costs

International students' choice of study destination is more often influenced by relative costs of education (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In the context of competitive markets for international tertiary education of similar quality, lower educational costs including the cost of living, are more likely to attract international student as some students in the focus group indicated:

UK cost of living is quite high when compared to Australia. So, like I selected Australia University, so, which is available here so ... I came here (Singapore) (Rose, 37, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

So Singapore, like I said earlier, is cheaper as compared to Australia and other places that I researched. The course was offering fast track, so I can finish sooner (Slash, 80, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

Mazzrol and Soutar (2002) suggest that the fast-tracking of courses is an attractive option for students as it reduces the length of time spent overseas and therefore the cost of living in another country and overall cost of education as one student indicated. In the survey of Indian international students, 54.9% of the students said that they chose to study at an Australian university in Singapore because it fast-tracked courses. In the survey, 84.6% of Indian international students said that they chose to study in Singapore rather Australia because of the cost of living in Australia. As study and living costs are important factors for international students, Australia may see a further reduction in international student numbers if the Australian dollar continues to strengthen.

Job opportunities/educational/ financial hub in Singapore

Singapore has positioned itself as an educational hub for higher education (Chan & Ng, 2008; Sidhu, Ho, & Yeoh, 2011). ConfluencEdu (2002) states that Singapore's "policy of government-funded institutions makes it mandatory for foreign students to stay and work in Singapore for three years after graduation. This means immediate job opportunity after the completion of degree course, and ensuring their stay in Singapore (p. 1)". The attraction of securing work either in Singapore on completion of their degree would be a magnet for most students, as students indicated:

I didn't want to go into any of the British Universities because my friends after finishing their masters were not getting a lot of employment opportunities (Shawn, 32, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

I was more interested into the finance sector and what I heard was Singapore was actually the financial hub in the world and so that was one reason why I chose Singapore over Australia (Frank, 25, Focus Group Interviews, June 2, 2011).

In the survey of Indian international students, 53.8% of students said that they chose to study in Singapore rather Australia because they believed that they had better job prospects in Singapore after completing their degree.

Survey: Indian international students' choice of study destination

Students in the survey were asked to rate on a seven-point scale from 'not at all important' to 'extremely important', the level of importance they gave to different considerations in choosing a tertiary institution. Students rated only five considerations as extremely important. These included: Employment opportunities (51.7%), Quality of student life on campus (45.8%), Safety and security (44.1%), Cost of education (33.3%) and Government support to start a business (22.9%). Employment opportunities, safety and security, and cost of education were also the main reasons many Indian international students in the focus group chose to study in Singapore. The quality of life on campus was extremely important to 45.8% of students surveyed and was not mentioned by any of the students in

the focus group interview. It may be due that most of the students surveyed were young (98.6% were aged 30 years or less) and wanted to experience university campus life in Singapore in the same way as students in Australia and countries do. Another 22.9% of students surveyed said that it was extremely important that they were offered support by the government of the country to start a business upon graduation. This unique finding has not been highlighted in other research.

Survey: Indian Education Agents

Students both in the Focus group and the Student Survey were asked what type of information Indian Education Agents offered them. Several students in the Focus Group and 73.3% of students in the Student survey said they consulted an Indian Education Agent. The information the agents gave them included information about visa requirements, the program duration, and the processing of their application to study at a university and accommodation. Although 26.2% of students surveyed said that the Indian Education Agents did influence their choice of study destination, most of the information given by the agents was limited to why one university might be more suitable for the student than another, rather than which country might be a better choice. Because Indian Education Agents are bound by a Code of Ethics of Australian Education International to only guide students' choice of study course and assist with visa applications and enrolments (n.d.), agents appeared to abide by these guidelines. The agents noted that most students had already determined what they wanted to study and where they wanted to study before they as agents were consulted, mainly because much of the information about universities and the course they offer are available online.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As economies, societies and tertiary education becomes more globalized, international student enrolments worldwide are likely to increase. International education contributes significantly to the Australian economy and society, and as such, further research in this area is needed to increase international student enrolments in Australia, particularly among Indian international students. Research might focus on the experience of international students studying in Australian campuses and how that could be improved. It was clear for 45.8% of the students surveyed that the quality of life on campus was extremely important. Further research into what aspects of student life on campus international students consider important may be beneficial. Australian government have undertaken initiatives to improve the experience of international students through the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) International Students Strategy for Australia (2010–2014) (ABS, 2011) and changes to the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000 (Johnson & Kumar, 2010). The experiences of international students might be continually improved by further research, leading to policy changes and improvements to strengthen one of Australia's largest export industries, international education.

A further recommendation to remedy the fall in the international students from India might include the setting up of offshore Australian tertiary institutions in India or in Singapore. Ross (2008) argues that the establishment of branch campuses in Asian nations has been effective in franchising brand name universities from traditional study destinations such as Australia. There are currently many successful offshore Australian university campuses in Singapore, including James Cook University.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to understand why Indian international students chose to study in Singapore at an Australian tertiary institution. Using the concept of discourse to analyse a focus group interview, the study found that students drew on a range of discourses including international and global exposure, cultural experiences, safety and racism, familiar culture, financial hubs and job prospects, and study costs in choosing a study destination.

The survey of Indian international students revealed that students chose to study outside of India because of the quality of education offered in overseas campuses, to gain international experience and to strengthen their future employment opportunities. The study may be limited by its large student sample mainly from one institution. However, the imbalance of different Australian institutions represented is unlikely to affect overall findings as the key questions focused on why students chose an Australian institution and why they chose Singapore, not which Australian institution they chose. Students chose Singapore over Australia mainly because of safety concerns, the proximity of Singapore to India and the lower cost of living in Singapore compared to Australia. Australian universities in Singapore were chosen because their courses were fast-tracked, reducing the overall cost of study. For these reasons, Singapore appears to be emerging as a viable study destination for Indian international students as Kularni (2008) argues, and as the study suggests.

A number of students in the Focus Group interview and the Student Survey indicated that they chose not to study in Australia because they did not consider it a safe study destination. Indian High Commissioner, Sajatha Singh believes that while the Australian government has taken steps to restore Australia's reputation in India, it may take more time and work to change Indian perceptions of how Australia welcomes its international students (Middleton, 2012). Further research to assist Australian Government initiatives to improve the experience of international students in Australian campuses would be beneficial to support Australia's third largest industry, international education.

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