

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT PREFERENCES FOR UNIVERSITY CHOICE IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the principal higher education (HE) branding factors in Zambia. These include factors students consider when choosing higher education institutions (HEIs), and sources of competitive advantage in the Zambian HE sector. Other branding factors are influencers of student choice of HEIs and sources of information students consult when making HE related decisions. The study was qualitative in approach. Purposive sampling was applied in sample selection. Data were collected through three focus group discussions with first year students and 20 semi-structured interviews with marketing executives in 13 of the country's 20 universities. Thematic analysis and content analysis were then used to process and analyze the data. The study revealed that the top five most considered HE branding factors in Zambia are teaching quality, fees, course availability, facilities, and employability. Recognition and credibility were found to be more prominent branding elements of private HEIs in Zambia than elsewhere because most of these institutions are still in their infancy. To enhance their reputation, private HEIs could benefit from fostering strong relationships with the government, long established foreign and local universities, professional bodies and employers. With regard to competitive advantage, course availability, teaching quality, and facilities emerged as the top three sources. The study also revealed that the most consulted information sources about universities are print media, friends, education expos and electronic media, while the most prolific influencers of student choice are friends, parents and self.

INTRODUCTION

Universities world-wide have been facing increasing competition for students due to reduced government spending on higher education (HE) and globalization of the HE marketplace (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Roper & Davies, 2007; UNESCO-UIS, 2012; Whisman, 2009). In order to gain a competitive advantage, universities must become more brand oriented to increase their visibility, differentiation and market share (Baumgarth, 2010).

A review of the marketing and brand management literature has shown that although there is a reasonable body of work on marketing in higher education, there is a relative paucity of published empirical studies on HE branding (Chapleo, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008). In Africa, for example, the few studies carried out have focused on students' choice of either South Africa or foreign universities; branding issues relevant to the African HEI have received little attention. In Zambia, in particular, no published empirical research has yet been carried out on higher education branding; hence the country's higher education institutions (HEIs) may be ill-equipped to compete successfully both locally and internationally.

The aim of this study was to identify the principal higher education (HE) branding factors in Zambia. These include factors students consider when choosing higher education institutions (HEIs) and sources of competitive advantage in the Zambian HE sector. Other branding factors are influencers of student choice of HEIs and sources of information students consult when making HE related decisions. Accordingly, the research question designed to guide this study was: *How can a higher education brand be identified and used for competitive positioning?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on branding factors relevant to positioning HEIs. It covers competitive advantages of HE brands, the factors students consider when choosing higher education institutions, sources of information students consult when making HE related decisions, and influencers of student choice of HEIs.

Branding Higher Education

Although some writers have questioned the role and practice of branding in HE, there is general agreement that branding is beneficial to this sector (Chapleo, 2010; Jevons, 2006; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008). For instance, Roper and Davies (2007) and Whisman (2009) argue that branding is as relevant in HE as it is in commercial organizations. However, as Chapleo (2011) observes, university branding is yet to receive significant scrutiny among academics. This is particularly the case in Africa where published HE research hardly exists. Factors relevant to branding HEIs are thus discussed in the following sections.

Competitive advantages of higher education brands

A brand's competitive advantage arises from two sources, namely cost leadership and differentiation (De Chernatony, McDonald, & Wallace, 2011; Dibb, Simkin, Pride, & Ferrell, 2006; Porter, 1985). These two sources are not mutually exclusive and can be applied to entire

markets or focused on market niches. Cost leadership creates value for consumers because it costs them less to buy the brand than competing brands offering similar benefits, while differentiation creates unique benefits for consumers (De Chernatony et al., 2011).

Several conceptual and empirical studies have been carried out to identify competitive advantages of HEIs. In the international HE environment, Mazzarol and Soutar (1999) conceptualized that the variables that strengthen the competitive advantage of an education institution could include the institution's quality of image, market profile, coalition formation and degree of forward integration into the export channel. The other variables they proposed are organizational expertise, quality of staff, possession of a client oriented/innovative culture and effective use of information technology.

More recently, Morrisha and Leeb (2011) investigated country of origin effects as a source of competitive advantage. Although based on a small sample of Chinese parents and students, this study identified language, social (safety, lifestyle and enjoyment), environmental (clean and beautiful), legal (visa and work permit), and economic (fees and financial assistance) as the country of origin factors that can be exploited to gain competitive advantage in the international HE market.

In the United Kingdom, Lynch and Baines (2004) used the resource-based view (RBV) approach to strategy development (a commonly used method of identifying competitive advantages) to identify the bundles of resources that give HEIs a competitive advantage. Their preliminary findings suggested relationships/partnerships, innovation, reputation, knowledge base, and particular core competencies as possible sources of competitive advantage for universities.

Other studies have suggested implementing ERP systems (Soliman & Karia, 2015), strategic leadership capabilities (Stukalina, 2015), and intercultural environment (Galkin, Pogukaeva, Ageeva, & Nikolaeva, 2015) as sources of competitive advantage in HE. Huang's (2012) study found five types of internal resources that drive the strategy and the competitive advantage of higher technical and vocational education institutions in Taiwan. These were human resources (deemed to be the most important), marketing capabilities, curriculum, financial resources, and R&D capabilities.

It is worth mentioning here that as Kotler and Keller (2012) posited, most competitive advantages are not sustainable. Instead, competitive advantages should be leveraged to create new advantages and should also be converted into customer advantages.

Elements of a university brand

Several studies have been carried out world-wide in the recent past to identify the elements of a university brand. In their study of UK and Malaysian HE branding, Carter and Yeo (2009) found that out of thirty-one possibilities of influence for students' choice of a university, the eight most important reasons were cited by more than 40% of both UK and Malaysian students. These are: cost of programs and living expenses, reputation of courses, reputation of the university for employability after graduation, location, quality of course information/learning materials, safety in country, the international reputation of the institution, and relevance of coursework. Despite this study being limited to only one HEI in each country, the findings were echoed by similar studies in other parts of the world in terms of the factors considered by students in their choice of a HEI. Table 1 summarizes the principle HE brand elements identified in the literature from different parts of the world.

It is evident from the literature reviewed that although some HE branding elements seem to be considered by students in most instances, such as employment prospects and the quality of education, none are ranked as the most important all the time. This is in line with Kusumawati's (2010), Vrontis, Thrassou, and Melanthiou's (2007) and Wiese et al.'s (2009) research findings, which found there are differences in student choice of HEIs (and the consequent marketing/branding implications) between developed and developing countries due to contextual differences.

Table 1 Elements of a University Brand

SL/No.	Brand element	Author/researcher
1	Ambiance or campus environment – aura, climate, general feel of university e.g. welcoming, friendly, ingenuity.	Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav (2014); Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt (2014); Kusumawati (2011); Al-Fattal (2010); Ali-Choudhury, Bennet, & Savani (2009); Carter & Yeo (2009); Ancheh, Krishnan, & Nurtjahja (2007); Soutar & Turner (2002).
2	Location convenience – proximity from home; city or rural location, proximity to bus or train station.	Khanna <i>et al.</i> (2014); Kusumawati (2011); Al-Fattal (2010); Beneke & Human (2010); Songan <i>et al.</i> (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Carter & Yeo (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009); Moogan, Baron, & Bainbridge (2001); Hooley & Lynch (1981).
3	Physical attractiveness	Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Nam (2008).
4	Safety and security – associated with diversity of student body.	Beneke & Human (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Carter & Yeo (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009).
5	Employability/job prospects – career prospects, links with employers and vocational skills.	Khanna <i>et al.</i> (2014); Pinar <i>et al.</i> (2014); Kusumawati (2011); Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei (2010); Songan <i>et al.</i> (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Carter & Yeo (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009); Ancheh <i>et al.</i> (2007); Soutar & Turner (2002).
6	Course suitability - content, structure, method of assessment of the degree program and availability.	Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei (2010); Songan <i>et al.</i> (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Carter & Yeo (2009); Soutar & Turner (2002); Moogan <i>et al.</i> (2001); Hooley & Lynch (1981).
7	Diversity of student body – ethnicity, educational backgrounds, interest and personal development needs.	Al-Fattal (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009).
8	Easy of entry	Beneke & Human (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009)
9	Level of difficulty of courses – challenges presented by course.	Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009).
10	Community links – associations with national or ethnic groups, links with industry.	Gromark & Melin (2011); Pinar <i>et al.</i> (2011); Weisnewski (2011); Songan <i>et al.</i> (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009); Urde (2003).

11	Visual imagery – use of color, style and feel of photography, choice of font, tone of voice, energy level, architecture.	Weisnewski (2011); Celly & Knepper (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Curtis, Abratt, & Minor (2009); Nam (2008).
12	Reputation – international status, recognition of qualification, name or department, league tables, local and foreign accreditations.	Pinar <i>et al.</i> (2014); Kusumawati (2011); Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei (2010); Al-Fattal (2010); Beneke & Human (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Carter & Yeo (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009); Soutar & Turner (2002); Moogan <i>et al.</i> (2001); Hooley & Lynch (1981).
13	Teaching quality - staff qualification, medium of instruction, reputation, and image of tutors, up-to-date course-books and modern teaching methods and academic advising.	Khanna <i>et al.</i> (2014); Pinar <i>et al.</i> (2014; 2011); Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei (2010); Al-Fattal (2010); Songan <i>et al.</i> (2010); Whisman (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009); Ancheh, Krishnan, & Nurtjahja (2007); Soutar & Turner (2002).
14	Sports, social and other facilities - campus facilities, and student accommodation.	Pinar <i>et al.</i> (2014; 2011); Al-Fattal (2010); Songan <i>et al.</i> (2010); Ali-Choudhury <i>et al.</i> (2009); Curtis <i>et al.</i> (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009).
15	Cost of course and living expenses – tuition fees, accommodation, food, discounts, scholarships, student loans.	Khanna <i>et al.</i> (2014); Kusumawati (2011); Al-Fattal (2010); Beneke & Human (2010); Carter & Yeo (2009); Wiese <i>et al.</i> (2009).

Indeed, even amongst and within developed and developing countries, differences exist in the branding elements considered and/or their importance in the decision-making process regarding choice of university. For example, HE branding elements relevant in a Ghanaian university may not be relevant to a university in South Africa. A comparison of Afful-Broni and Noi-Okwei (2010) against Ivy (2008) illustrates this point. Even within the same country there are differences between branding a public university and a private one (Goi, Goib, & Wong, 2014).

The literature suggests it is essential for marketing strategists to identify the specific brand elements considered in a particular recruitment market. Such knowledge could be used for effective marketing purposes, the recruitment and retention of potential students, and the repositioning of the HEI (Carter & Yeo, 2009).

Sources of information about HEIs

Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke, and Sims (1995) observed that potential students engage in information search (such as the various courses offered, fees and entry requirements of the university) to aid the decision making process. The literature reviewed shows that the four most commonly used information sources by potential students are internet and friends (Al-Fattal, 2010; Carter & Yeo, 2009; Jaafar, 2014; Songan *et al.*, 2010; Yang & Mutum, 2015), visit or open days at university and print media (Ali & Miller, 2007; Carter & Yeo, 2009; Gray, Fam, & Llanes, 2003; Johnston, 2010). Other information sources identified include educational exhibitions/fairs, family, and prospectuses (Carter & Yeo, 2009).

However, none of the studies above have addressed the information needs of potential HE students in Zambia. As Carter and Yeo (2009) recommended, image and recruitment marketing efforts should be intensified and re-focused on providing sufficient and relevant information that is informed by choice criteria factors from empirical research.

Influencers of student choice of HEI

Influencers of student choice of HEI can be considered to be persons or parties who play a role in the HEI choice decision making process by swaying or persuading the student to choose a particular HEI. Knowing who the influencers of student HE choice are can be crucial to brand or recruitment strategists as they can target brand and other marketing information at them, in the hope that the information is used to influence the potential student's choice.

There are at least ten studies that identified parents as influencers of student choice (Hooley & Lynch, 1981; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Morrisha & Leeb, 2011). Other common influencers identified in various studies globally include students themselves, friends, college teachers and university agents (Al-Fattal, 2010; Ali & Miller, 20017; Johnston, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002;).

The empirical studies cited above indicate that self and parents are the two most prolific influencers of student choice of a HEI. However, there is variability in who the influencers are, as well as their influence in the studies carried out due to contextual differences (Ali & Miller, 2007; Gray et al., 2003). Identifying the appropriate influencers of a HEI choice in a particular recruitment market can be a goldmine for university marketing managers.

Gaps in the HE branding literature

The literature review has revealed that even though some studies have been carried out on HE branding in Africa (Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei, 2010; Beneke & Human, 2010; Ivy, 2008; Mpinganjira, 2012, 2011; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Wiese et al., 2009), most of these have focused on international students' choice of universities overseas or in South Africa. HE branding research relevant to African HEIs is therefore still at a rudimentary level on the continent and it is hoped that this study contributes to the growing literature relevant to the African HEI.

The literature review has also revealed that no published research to-date has been carried out on HE branding in Zambia. In particular no one has published research that attempts to conceptualize or operationalize the following HE brand orientation dimensions in the country:

1. The elements of a Zambian HE brand considered by local students when choosing HEIs and their preference rating.
2. The influencers of student choice in Zambia and their relative degree of influence.
3. The sources of information consulted during the decision making process and their relative importance.
4. The sources of sustainable competitive advantage in the Zambian HE sector.

The current study takes a step in filling this literary gap by answering the following question:

R1: How can a higher education brand be identified and used for competitive positioning?

METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative in approach. The case study strategy, involving focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, was chosen for this research study. Thematic and content analysis techniques were adopted in analyzing the data. These methodological choices are discussed in detail below.

Case Study Strategy

Robson (2002, p.178) defined a case study as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.” Bryman and Bell (2011) and Saunders, Thornhill, and Lewis (2009) stated that the case study method can be applied to multiple cases. In this particular investigation, the case study method was applied to 13 HEIs in Zambia.

The case study strategy was chosen because it enabled the researcher to gain detailed and comprehensive insights and understandings of the issue in its real context (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Saunders et al., 2009). As Cohen et al. (2007, p.258) discussed, this includes offering the researcher “an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people.”

The case study strategy has been used in several branding research studies in education settings (Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei, 2010; Al-Fattal, 2010; Carter & Yeo, 2009; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008; Whisman, 2009). In this investigation, the case study method was used initially as an exploratory study, primarily using focus group discussions with students and individual semi-structured interviews with HEI employees. According to Saunders et al. (2009, pp.139–140), the purpose of an exploratory study is to “clarify your understanding of a problem, such as if you are unsure of the precise nature of the problem.” In the context of this research, the purpose of the exploratory study was to facilitate the identification and understanding of the principal brand orientation components that comprise the Zambian HE brand model.

Sampling Frame and Sample Size

The sampling frame for this study comprised HE institutions in Zambia. For practical purposes, the relevant HE institutions considered were universities and colleges that offer a minimum of first degree courses and/or degree equivalent professional courses. At the time of the study, there were 20 such institutions in Zambia, of which six were public institutions and 14 were private universities.

Of these 20 HEIs, 13 were purposively selected to ensure that rich information was generated from a broad range of the population (Lee & Lings, 2013). Accordingly, four HEIs were selected to represent six public HEIs (about 67%), while the remainder represented 14 of the private universities in the country (about 64%). In terms of geographical spread, there were seven from the north of the country (about 43%), eight in central Zambia (about 73%), and two in the south of the country (100%).

Although not every university participated in the study, the three focus group discussions and 20 interviews that were conducted in 13 of the 20 fully operational HEIs in the country were considered adequate to reach data saturation, given the sample homogeneity. Data saturation is considered to be the stage beyond which additional data collected provides few, if any, new insights (Saunders et al., 2009). According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), data saturation is achieved sooner when participants in a sample are similar in their experiences with respect to the research domain. The interview sample for this study was undoubtedly homogenous as it was made up of marketing/brand management experts in universities in Zambia.

Data Collection

Data were collected by the researcher using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The use of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews was informed by other university branding studies such as Ancheh *et al.* (2007), Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009), Chapleo (2011), Maringe and Carter (2007), Mpinganjira (2012), Waeraas and Solbakk (2008), and Yang and Mutum (2015). Three focus group discussions were held with students in one HEI. The three focus groups of five or six students represented distinct student categories in the sector, namely, those undertaking professional courses, those pursuing academic degree programs, and evening/part-time students. Grouping participants according to their status and experiences is likely to increase their participation in the discussions (Saunders et al., 2009, p.344).

Additionally, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with business development and brand management executives in 13 HEIs. Staff and expert perceptions of HEI brand attributes were taken as the unit of measurement. University marketing executives rather than other administrators were selected for the interviews because they are critical decision makers who direct and control HEI's marketing communications, influence university management regarding branding matters, and play a pivotal role in the recruitment of students. This approach of focusing interviews on university marketing experts was informed by similar studies (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2009; Chapleo, 2010).

Data Processing

The focus group discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Atlas.ti software was then used to code the data, create quotations, memos, families and networks and retrieve the data to aid content analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions.

Codes or themes used in data processing and analysis were identified from a synthesis of the thematic analysis of the research data and the brand orientation components identified in the literature review. The thematic analysis involved reviewing the focus group discussions and interviews for repetitive themes that indicate factors students consider when making higher education choices, sources of competitive advantage for HEIs, information sources that students consult, and influencers of student choice. The emerging themes or codes were then compared and integrated with those identified in the literature review. Subsequently, these codes or branding elements were used to categorize the data collected for content analysis purposes.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability during data collection was enhanced by employing various techniques. These included the use of focus group and interview guides to eliminate observer error (Saunders et al., 2009) and providing participants with interview schedules prior to the event. Additionally, notes were taken during the interview/discussion and existing interview questions were adapted from Ali-Choudhury et al. (2009).

Furthermore, triangulation was employed to enhance reliability and validity of the research findings. According to Lee and Lings (2013) and Sekaran and Bougie (2013), triangulation can be achieved by using multiple data collection techniques and data sources. In this study, data were collected from different sources such as students and marketing executives using multiple techniques such as focus group discussions and interviews.

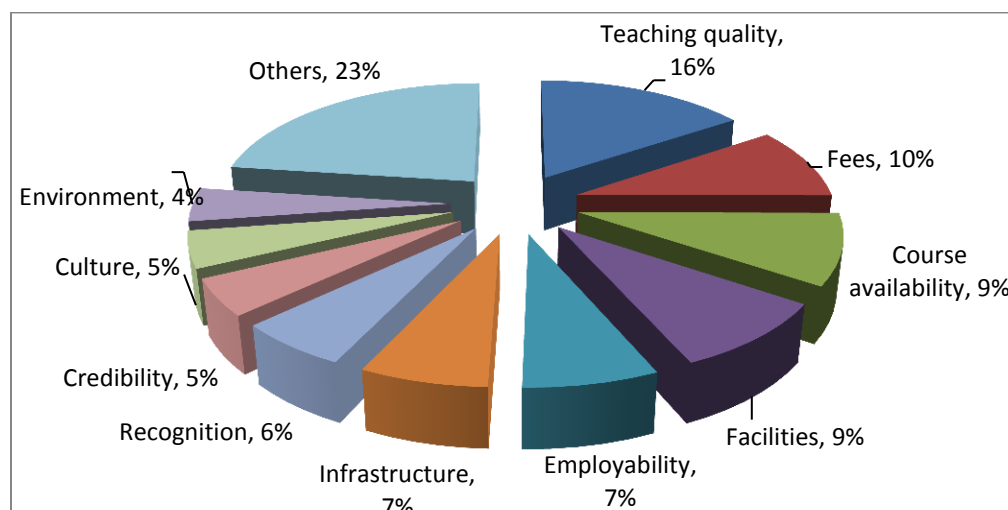
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the aim of this study was to identify the principal higher education (HE) branding factors in Zambia. These include factors students consider when choosing higher education institutions (HEIs) and sources of competitive advantage in the Zambian HE sector. Other branding factors are influencers of student choice of HEIs and sources of information students consult when making HE related decisions. The research findings and analysis are therefore presented on the basis of these HE branding dimensions.

Elements of a HEI Brand

A synthesis of the literature review and thematic analysis of the research data identified 19 factors that potential students take into account when making higher education choices in Zambia. Using content analysis, the 10 most considered HE branding factors in Zambia in order of importance were teaching quality, fees, course availability, facilities, employability, infrastructure, recognition, credibility, culture and environment (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Frequency of top ten referred to HEI factors in Zambia



Other factors identified that may have some impact on the HE decision in Zambia are reputation, location, timely completion/course duration, collaborations, learning materials, and safety and security.

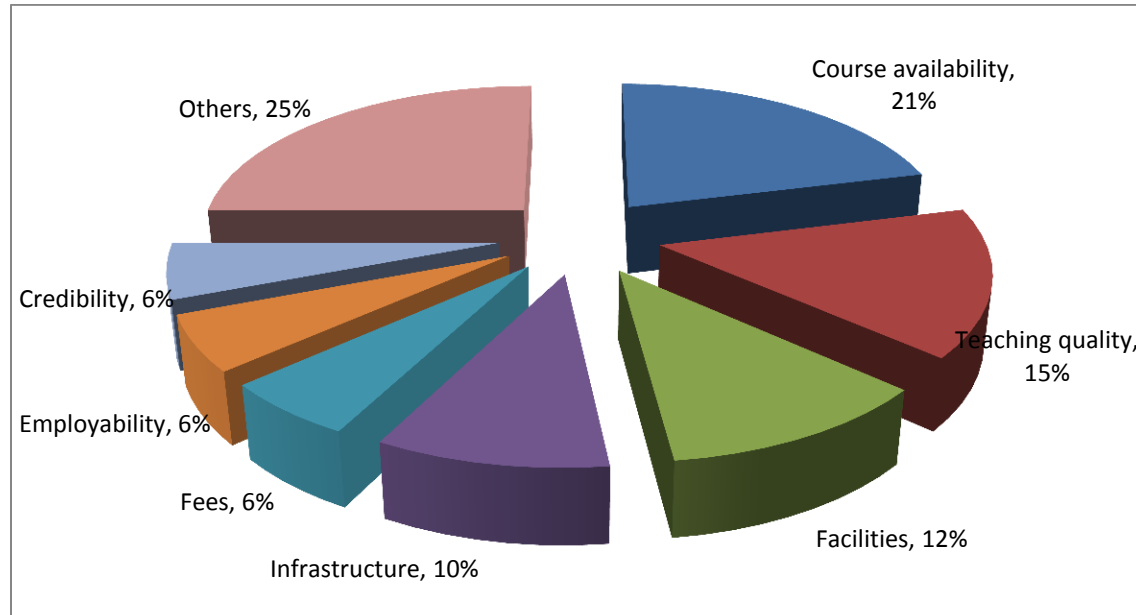
Most of the Zambian HE branding elements that have been unveiled in this study are comparable to other empirical research findings world-wide. Of particular interest is perhaps the similarity with Kusumawati's (2010) literature review findings and associated study regarding university choice criteria in developing countries. This review revealed that the most important choice criteria used were institutional factors such as location, reputation of institution, job prospects, campus safety, prestige, infrastructure, library and computer facilities. Others were quality of the curricula, scientific research quality, administrative support, proximity to home, cost of study, financial aid extra-curricular factors, and exchange program with foreign universities.

Of the top 10 Zambian HE branding elements, recognition and credibility did not seem to feature very prominently in other developing countries. The importance of these elements may be more prominent in Zambia than elsewhere because most of the Zambian HE sector is still in its infancy (for example, only two of the universities in the population were more than twenty years old). In particular, recognition and credibility are issues that concern private universities in the country because most of these institutions are newly established, which may not be the case elsewhere. The continued establishment of new universities by the government and private sector implies that recognition and credibility are likely to remain as significant branding factors in the short to medium term in Zambia.

Another factor identified in the current research that was not evident in Kusumawati's (2010) developing country HE literature review findings is timely completion/course duration. This can be attributed to the fact that publicly funded universities in Zambia are subject to political interference, which occasionally disrupts the academic calendar. This situation may be peculiar to Zambia and is likely to persist as more government-funded universities are being set up.

Sources of Competitive Advantage in Zambia

The top four factors identified as sources of competitive advantage in the Zambian HE environment, in order of importance, were course availability, teaching quality, facilities and infrastructure (see Figure 2 below). Fees, employability and credibility were tied in fifth place. It is worth mentioning here that, as observed by Kotler and Keller (2012), most competitive advantages are not sustainable in the long term. Instead, competitive advantages should be leveraged to create new advantages and used to benefit customers i.e. converted into customer advantages. This was echoed by one private university interviewee who said 'You know the thing that is happening right now is that every day, every day people are creating competitive advantages every day, and everyday people are copying what other people are doing.'

Figure 2: Sources of competitive advantage in the HE sector in Zambia

Apart from employability, the other sources of competitive advantage are similar to those found in the other few empirical studies carried out in other countries, even though the order of importance is different for contextual reasons. For example, Lynch and Baines' (2004) UK study identified bundles of resources which give HEIs competitive advantage. Some of these could be linked to similar findings from the current research e.g. innovation (course availability), reputation (reputation and credibility), knowledge base (teaching quality) and particular core competence (teaching quality).

Similarly, some of Huang's (2012) five types of internal resources (i.e. human resources, marketing capabilities, curriculum, financial resources and R&D capabilities) that drive the strategy and the competitive advantage of higher technical and vocational education institutions in Taiwan were also identified in the current research. These are human resources (teaching quality in current research), curriculum (course availability) and financial resources (infrastructure, facilities and fees).

The disparities in the HE sources of competitive advantage and their importance can be attributed to the different HE environments in which the studies referred to above were carried out. For example, being a developing country, Zambia is likely to have a much higher unemployment rate than the UK and Taiwan. This implies that whilst facilitating employment opportunities for graduates can be used as a competitive advantage in Zambia, this may not apply to the same extent in other jurisdictions.

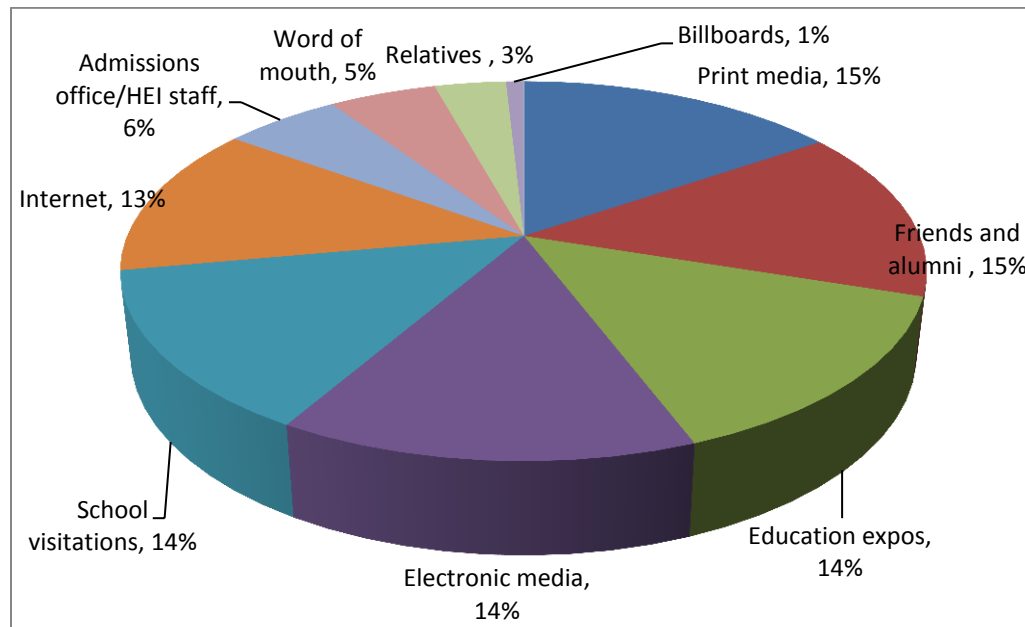
Information sources

This research identified, in order of importance, print media (mostly newspapers), friends and alumni (i.e. current and former students of the HEI), education expos, electronic media (mostly radio and TV), school visitations and internet – each with between 13% and 15% of the references – as the most frequently consulted information sources by potential

Zambian students seeking information about the HE sector (see Figure 3 below). These information sources are similar to those identified by researchers in other parts of the world.

Four of the information sources mentioned above – i.e. internet, friends and alumni (friends in literature review), education expos (visit or open days at university in literature review) and print media – are also the four most commonly used information sources by potential students elsewhere in the world. Of these four information sources, only the internet is not a top four source in Zambia. This could be because, being a developing country, Zambia's ICT infrastructure is not very developed to enable universal internet access. In addition, many universities may be struggling to update and maintain their websites in a serviceable state.

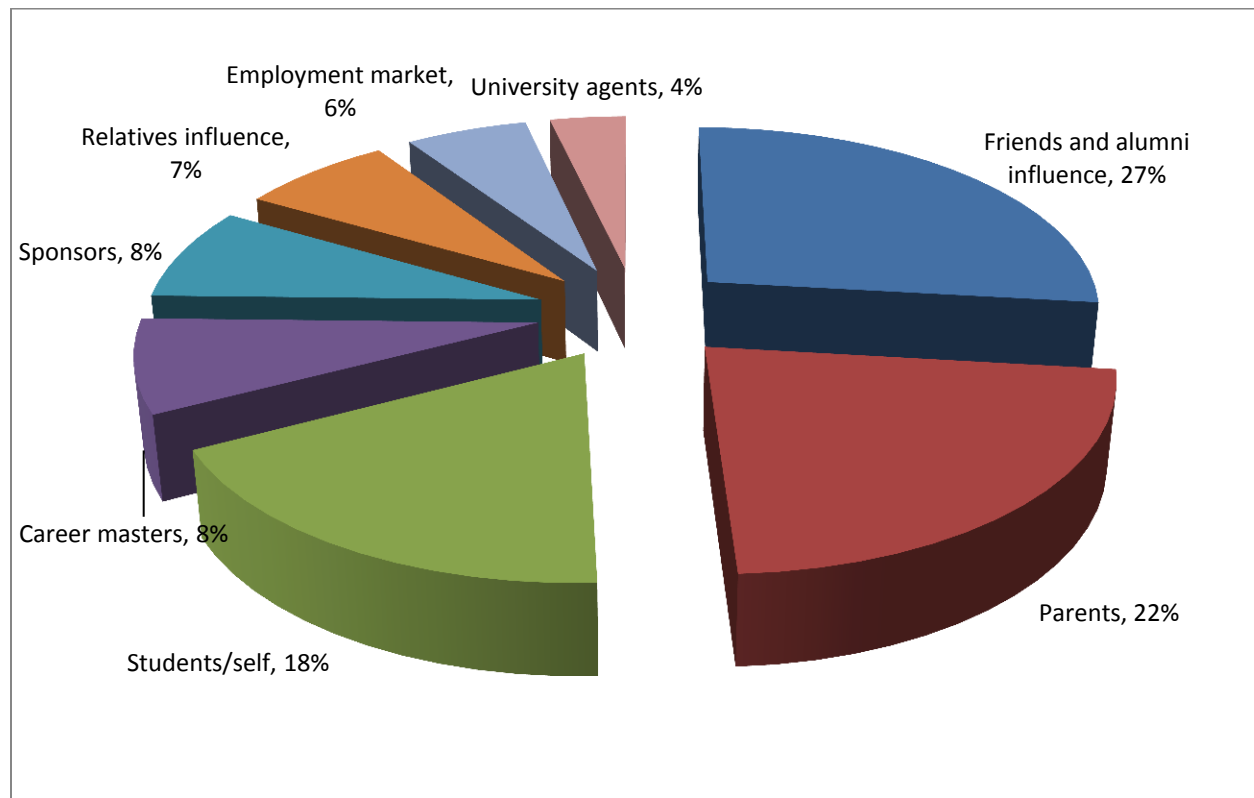
Figure 3: Frequency of information sources in interview and focus group transcripts



The other two important information sources in Zambia, i.e. electronic media and school visitations, seem to be less relevant in HE markets outside Zambia as they were hardly mentioned in the literature review. The reason for this could be that in more advanced economies, universities are using better technologies such as the internet to reach potential students instead of these traditional marketing communications media.

Influencers of student choice

Using content analysis, the most prolific influencers in order of importance (each with between 18% and 27% of the total quotations) were friends, parents and self (see Figure 4 below). Other influencers with relatively much less influence were sponsors, career masters, relatives, employment market and agents.

Figure 4 Frequency of influencers in interview and focus group transcripts

The three most assertive influencers of student HE choice in Zambia identified in the current research (i.e. friends, parents and self) are also the top three identified by other researchers in other jurisdictions. As more fully discussed in the literature review, the common influencers identified in various studies globally include students themselves, parents, friends, college teachers and university agents, with the first three being the most prolific influencers of student choice of HEI.

The most peculiar influencer in Zambia as unveiled by the current research is employers. There is no mention of employers being influencers of student choice in the literature reviewed. This is probably because most of the published research on influencers of student choice has been carried out in developed countries where the rate of unemployment is generally low. In such circumstances, the wishes or demands of prospective employers may not have a significant impact on student choice. In Zambia, however, the unemployment rate is high, particularly among the youth where it currently stands at 31% (Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis and Research, 2015); hence many employers may not only be interested in the prospective employee's qualifications, but also the HEI where those qualifications were obtained from. Prospective students may therefore be influenced to choose HEIs that are considered credible by potential employers.

Implications of the research

This section compares the current research findings with other literatures to date in Sub-section 5.1. Sub-section 5.2 gives practical advice to Zambian HEIs in terms of their marketing, positioning and student recruitment policies.

Conceptual framework

The study has revealed that using content analysis, the 10 most considered HE branding factors in Zambia in order of importance were teaching quality, fees, course availability, facilities, employability, infrastructure, recognition, credibility, culture and environment. Of these, the top four factors identified as sources of competitive advantage in the Zambian HE environment, in order of importance, were: course availability, teaching quality, facilities and infrastructure. Furthermore, the most consulted information sources were print media (mostly newspapers), friends, education expos, electronic media (mostly radio and TV), school visitations and internet; while the most prolific influencers identified were friends, parents and self.

Most of these findings are similar to those in the extant literature in the field. However, the Zambian HE brand model has some peculiar elements probably because the HE sector is still in its infancy and also due to the high levels of unemployment in the country. For example, recognition, credibility and course duration/timely completion were considered to be more important branding issues in Zambia than elsewhere in the extant literature; while facilitating employment opportunities for graduates is a source of competitive advantage atypical to the Zambian HE sector. Additionally, the internet is not as widely used as a source of information about HEIs in Zambia as it is elsewhere, probably due to inadequate infrastructure in this developing country; while employers seem to have more influence on student HE choices in Zambia than elsewhere.

Practical implications

The findings from the current study have strengthened the conclusions made in the literature review to the effect that there are differences in the significance of student choice criteria of HEIs (and the consequent marketing/branding implications) between developed and developing countries and even amongst and within developed and developing countries due to contextual differences. It is therefore essential for marketing strategists to identify the specific brand elements considered in the Zambian recruitment market and develop relevant marketing strategies. Some suggestions are outlined in Sub-sections 5.2.1 – 5.2.4 below.

Elements of a HEI brand

As discussed above, recognition and credibility are more prominent branding elements of private HEIs in Zambia than elsewhere because most of these institutions are still in their infancy. To enhance their reputation, private HEIs need to go further than simply registering with statutory regulatory bodies. The HEIs could benefit from fostering strong relationships with the government, long established foreign and local universities, professional bodies, and employers. Areas covered in such cooperation could include curriculum development, accreditation of prior learning agreements, student internships, scholarship agreements, staff exchange arrangements and sponsorship of some academic calendar events.

Sources of competitive advantage

According to De Chernatony, McDonald, and Wallace (2011), Dibb *et al.* (2006) and Porter (1985), a brand's competitive advantage arises from two sources, namely cost leadership and differentiation. Cost leadership creates value for consumers because it costs them less to buy the brand than competing brands offering similar benefits, while differentiation creates unique benefits for consumers. An application of these definitions to the top four sources of competitive advantage in the Zambian HE sector (i.e. course availability, teaching quality, facilities and infrastructure) suggests that Zambian universities use more differentiation strategies than cost leadership approaches. This means that, at least in the short to medium term, Zambian HEIs may find more sustainable competitive advantages in terms of managing their costs better than competitors.

Sources of information

Of the four most commonly used information sources by potential students worldwide (i.e. internet, friends, education expos and print media), only the internet is not a top four information source in Zambia. This could be attributed to inadequate ICT infrastructure and/or HEIs failure to maintain their websites in a serviceable state.

As internet access and the use of social media increases, many potential students are likely to turn to the internet as a source of information about HEIs in Zambia. For example, a recent study of Taiwanese students and potential students by Yang and Mutum (2015) suggested that electronic word of mouth or internet was the most widely consulted information source for university selection in that country. Zambian HEIs are therefore encouraged to improve their websites. This could be achieved through provision of up-to-date information by using message boards, chat rooms, blogs and virtual brand communities. The HEIs may also benefit from making their websites more interactive e.g. by enabling online student enrolment, payment and registration.

Influencers of student choice

As discussed above, the most peculiar influencers in Zambia as unveiled by the current research are employers. Zambian HEIs, especially private universities that grapple with recognition of their qualifications, are therefore encouraged to engage employers in various activities such as curriculum development and apprenticeship schemes for their students.

Limitations and implications for future research

There are a number of shortcomings to the current study, which restrict generalizing the findings to the entire HE sector in Zambia. These limitations provide opportunities for further research. Firstly, the research was carried out largely in universities and included one college only. Additionally, the study combined public and private universities as if they were one type of HEI. As Kusumwati (2011) asserts, colleges are a different type of higher education institution from universities. By implication, publicly funded universities are also a different type of institution in comparison to private universities. For example, Ancheh *et al.* (2007) and Songan *et al.* (2010) identified different brand attributes and their significance in student HE choice between public and private universities in Malaysia. Research that focuses on college education, public universities and private universities as having distinct recruitment markets could therefore reveal different brand models that could be used to strengthen the competitiveness of these HE sub sectors.

Secondly, postgraduate students were not included in the study. Branding factors relevant to this category of higher education may be different from undergraduate students. For example, employability or job prospects may not be an important consideration for prospective postgraduate students because most, if not all of them, are already in employment. For the same reason, facilitating employment opportunities may not be a significant source of competitive advantage in relation to this category of students. Therefore, research that focuses on the postgraduate market could help marketing executives develop more tailored marketing strategies, plans and tactics for this market segment.

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