

Key information sources influencing prospective students' university choice: A South African perspective

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Abstract

Universities are facing increasingly complex trends and challenges in attracting and retaining the best students. This has coaxed university marketers to embrace marketing practices and ideas in order to acquire and retain these students. The aim of this study was to understand potential students' decision-making with respect to what and who influences them when choosing a university. The research design is descriptive and self-administered questionnaires were fielded to first-year students at a comprehensive university early in the academic year. A total of 1 290 useable responses were realised. The study discovered that brochures and the students' parents are most influential in their choice. Significant differences were uncovered based upon the respondents' demographics and key information sources that influence university choice. The findings imply that university marketers should segment the prospective student market by taking into account that prospective students differ with regard to the extent of who and what influence their university choice.

Keywords: South African higher education, South African university, prospective student, university choice, key information sources, decision-making process

INTRODUCTION

South African universities opened up to the world with the end of apartheid and sanctions (MacGregor 2007) and are faced with issues of globalisation, changes in government funding, broadening access to higher education (HE), changing student profiles as well as institutional mergers, and increased competition (Akojee and Nkomo 2007; Wiese, Van Heerden and Jordaan 2010, 151). Competitiveness in the HE environment is furthermore compounded by the entry of new players, such as

private institutions and non-university competitors, into the market (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2010, 204; Read, Higgs and Taylor 2005).

During 2011, 893 024 students enrolled at the 23 public higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa (CHE 2010; Du Plessis 2005, 137; Fish 2011, 14; Mähle and Thaver 2010, 27), but these 23 public universities also compete with just over 100 private HEIs, not all of which are officially accredited (Mähle and Thaver 2010, 27). International institutions, such as St. Augustine and Monash South Africa, have also entered the local market and are offering a range of qualifications. They compete directly with the public universities. The Independent Institute of Education, Damelin and Midrand Graduate Institute and providers of advanced certificates and diplomas such as Lyceum College and City Varsity are but some of the private HEIs available to South African and international students (Fish 2011, 19).

To survive in this dynamic environment and to attract quality students, universities must offer more value to their target market than their competitors. This requires an understanding of the market in which universities operate, and their willingness to be relevant (Jordaan and Wiese 2010, 539). Understanding the prospective students' decision-making process, specifically the key information sources and level of influence, would enable a university to market itself more effectively (Johnston 2010; Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge 2001, 179; Simões and Soares 2010, 374).

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Prospective university students' decision-making process

Given the time spent, and the complexity and variety of choices involved, prospective students' university decision-making would be classified as an extensive problem-solving endeavour (Drummond 2004, 317; Litten 1982, 386; Moogan, Baron and Harris 1999, 211). Choosing a university is an important choice for prospective students to make and there is a lot of perceived risk involved in this decision (Moogan et al. 1999, 222 and 225; Vrontis, Thrassou and Melanthiou 2007, 980; Yamamoto 2006). Prospective students realise that a poor choice can lead to dissatisfaction and impact negatively on their motivation and academic success (Briggs 2006, 708). Choosing a university is furthermore a high involvement decision that can be influenced by cost, information, access, academic achievement, life and school experience to name but a few (Briggs 2006, 709; Moogan and Baron 2003; Simões and Soares 2010, 372–375).

The complex and intangible nature of the university service that has not been experienced by prospective students before, coupled with the many other factors involved, compel prospective students to go through all the stages in the consumer buying decision-making process (i.e. problem recognition, information search, evaluate alternatives, purchase (apply and enrol) and post-purchase evaluation) (Briggs 2006, 706; Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino 2006, 103; Maringe and Carter 2007, 461; Moogan et al. 1999, 213). According to Gabbott and Hogg (1994), the

decision-making process permits prospective students to break complex behaviour down into meaningful ‘chunks’ as they progresses logically through the sequence of events, in order to solve their problem. From the point of realising that they want to attend a university to further their education they will collect information to quantify (ask teachers/parents, attend open-days) the possible benefits linked with the alternatives present and then make a well-balanced decision (Moogan et al. 1999, 214; Vrontis et al. 2007, 982).

Due to the initial lack of knowledge of university courses, university life in general, and the fact that the decision-making process is highly complex and involved, prospective students perceive high levels of risk. This risk perception motivates prospective students to seek out more information in order to reduce the risk (Brown, Varley and Pal 2009, 312; Moogan et al. 1999, 213). Information is gathered in the decision-making process on many factors that need to be considered when choosing a university, such as location and overall reputation, academic reputation, image, the perceived quality of the degrees, the teaching facilities, quality of teaching and availability of a desired programme. Tuition fees further complicate the search and evaluation process, as prospective students also have to consider value for money (Afful-Broni and Noi-Okwei 2011, 5; Ivy 2010, 394; Moogan et al. 1999, 225). Prospective students gather information about alternative universities and may spend a long time obtaining the relevant information and choosing a university. They also take their time appraising the alternative university brands available. They typically form a list or set of ‘alternatives’ from which a choice is made, and decision rules are applied to make a selection from the alternatives (Moogan et al. 1999, 213). Before arriving at the final decision of which university to attend, prospective students’ university choice is influenced by a wide variety of information sources and key influences, some of which are not central to the service (Chapman 1981; Simões and Soares 2010, 372).

Key information sources influencing students’ decision to enrol at university

Information search involves the process students undertake to acquire information and identify possible solutions to their problem (Simões and Soares 2010, 375). Most prospective students have little or no experience of universities and in order to make the best possible choice, they typically research the ‘educational market’ by whatever means available (Moogan et al. 2001, 180). When faced with such a complex and involved decision, prospective students tend to search for information from a variety of sources or key influences (Brown et al. 2009, 312; Simões and Soares 2010, 375). Table 1 provides an exposition of the key information sources that influence university choice as uncovered by researchers in various studies.

Table 1: Key information sources influencing students' decision to enrol at university

Authors	Key information sources
Greenbank (2011)	Lecturers Media Family Gut feel
Johnston (2010)	Family Friends Visit to the university Information from the specific faculty's staff
Brown, Varley and Pal (2009)	Current university students University staff
Ubagharaji (2008)	Parents
Briggs (2006)	University reputation University features Information available on the university University prospectus Teachers Peers
Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis (2005)	Friends Family Career officers Visit to university Open days
Goral (2002)	Parents
	Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge (2001)
Anderson (1999)	Teachers Parents
Litten (1982)	Family
Chapman (1981)	Friends Family

It is evident from Table 1 that researchers have uncovered different key information sources that influence prospective students' university choice in various settings. Based upon the literature review, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Different key information sources influence prospective university students' decision-making process when selecting a university to significantly different extents.

Prospective students do not simply accept the views of key information sources; they evaluate their relevance in relation to their own circumstances, personal objectives and values. The ability of students to evaluate information depends on how advanced they are in terms of their intellectual development (Greenbank 2011, 260) and level of education (Simões and Soares 2010, 376). Prospective students' background (Moogan et al. 2001, 180), socio-economic status and aptitude also influence their evaluation ability (Chapman 1981; Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis 2005, 283).

Parents typically put considerable pressure on prospective university students' decisions, especially if those students are from more wealthy families whose parents have experience with universities (Bonnema and Van der Walddt 2008). Prospective students from very poor backgrounds, mostly from townships, will primarily seek information from social sources as they find it intimidating to seek information directly from a specific university. They rely on media and social sources to obtain more information about universities and they will not consult direct sources. This may be because their direct sources have had limited or no exposure to universities (ibid.).

Those students who are less able to evaluate and process data will often rely on third parties to help them with the decision process, such as counsellors (Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Moogan et al. 2001, 180). Veloutsou et al. (2005, 287) also indicate that the lower performing potential students and students with limited previous contact with HE do not rate or prefer 'personal' or 'interactive' information sources. They would rather rely on promotional material and personal approaches which have to encourage trust and understanding. They value and use information from their friends more than from their parents and other family. They will also rather believe their teachers, lecturers on campus and students at the university than their parents, university league tables or career advisors.

On the other hand, high performers value and use information from students at the university, teachers and parents and other family members more than that from friends, lecturers on campus, career advisors or university league tables (Veloutsou et al. 2005, 287). In Simões and Soares' (2010) study, respondents indicated the three most important information sources they used in their university selection process to be: (1) former or current university students at that particular university; (2) the university website; and (3) teachers. Prospective students with the highest academic aptitude tend to refer more to the interpersonal source 'teachers', compared to students with a medium academic aptitude who favoured the marketer-controlled source of 'university website'. It seems that the option of 'family influence' was not introduced as a chosen statement when respondents were asked about ranking the most used *information sources*. However, as soon as 'family influence' was introduced as a possible *choice factor*, it ranked more important than guidance from teachers or vocational advisors (ibid., 383). It seems that there is not always a clear distinction in the literature between information sources, key influences and choice factors, and that these terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

It should be noted that culture also plays a role when considering who/what the key information sources are influencing prospective students' university choice. For example, Taiwanese students prefer to base their decision on advice (collectivist society, seeing going to university as helping the whole family), while Norwegian students prefer to base their decision on relevance, that is, whether it is a course that they are interested in regardless of future job prospects (individualistic society) (Jian, Sandnes, Huang and Huang 2010, 148 and 152).

Based upon the literature review, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H2: Prospective university students who differ in terms of their demographic characteristics differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.

PROBLEM STATEMENT, OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES FORMULATED FOR THE STUDY

Globally universities are facing increasingly complex challenges, in particular intensifying global competition and declining funding (Anderson 1999; Jordaan and Wiese 2010, 538; Simões and Soares 2010), widening access and students facing new and many more alternative choices (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton 2004, 162). The South African HE sector is not exempt from the trends and challenges that universities globally experience and they also compete fiercely to attract the best possible students in the country and on the sub-continent (Akojee and Nkomo 2007; MacGregor 2007; Wiese, Van Heerden and Jordaan 2010, 151).

This state of affairs has coaxed marketers at South African universities into embracing marketing-related practices and ideas in order to acquire and retain good quality students throughout their HE endeavours. Universities realise that they need to understand these changes in and challenges to the market in which universities operate as it becomes challenging to universities to be sustainable and to survive (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009; Comm and Mathaisel 2003; Jordaan and Wiese 2010, 539; Read, Higgs and Taylor 2005, 31). Understanding potential students' decision-making and what and who influence this decision-making process when choosing which university to attend, can provide some insight that will aid university marketers in designing custom marketing strategies that will appeal to both prospective students and those who truly influence their choice of university (Simões and Soares 2010, 372; Veloutsou et al. 2005). The following objectives were formulated for the study:

- Develop a demographic profile of respondents taking part in the study.
- Identify the key information sources that influence prospective university students' decision-making process when selecting a university.
- Determine the extent to which these key information sources influence the decision-making process.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The different key information sources influence prospective university students' decision-making process when selecting a university to significantly different extents.

H2: Prospective university students who differ in terms of their demographic characteristics differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key

information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university. This hypothesis can furthermore be refined as follows:

- H2_a: *Male and female* prospective university students differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.
- H2_b: Prospective university students from different *population groups* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.
- H2_c: Prospective university students with different *home languages* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.
- H2_d: Prospective university students with different *overall average grade 12 marks* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.
- H2_e: Prospective university students who differ regarding whether their *parents went to university or not*, differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, descriptive research design was followed to achieve the objectives of, and test the hypotheses formulated for, the study. The target population included all first-year students who had enrolled at a comprehensive university. The sampling elements (first-year students) were selected on the basis of convenience and represent students from all faculties (sampling units).

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data from respondents. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions to elicit responses from respondents, and included several sections. The questionnaire commenced with a preamble explaining the rights of respondents, contact details of the researchers and completion instructions. One section focused on determining the respondents' demographics and another section measured the extent to which possible key information sources influence respondents' decision-making process when selecting a university. The extent of the key influences' influence was measured on an unlabelled seven-point Likert-type scale from 1 ('not at all influential') to 7 ('extremely influential'). Respondents were in essence required to reflect back on the extent to which 20 possible key influences affected their choice of university.

The questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the respondents' first year attending the comprehensive university. From the 1 654 questionnaires collected, a total of 1 290 questionnaires could be included in the data analysis. These 1 290 respondents originated from 699 schools mostly from Gauteng. The data were

cleaned and this included consistency checks and treatment of missing responses. Consistency checks identified data that were out of range, or had extreme values (Malhotra 2007, 436). The data were also checked for accuracy, completeness and validity before being analysed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic profile of respondents

Table 2 provides the demographic profile of respondents.

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents

Gender	Female (43.7%); Male (56.3%)
Population group	Black (80.6%); Coloured (3.0%); Indian (4.9%); White (10%); Other (1.4%)
Home language	Afrikaans (7.3%); English (16.3%); Nguni (31.5%); Sotho (28.4%); TshiVenda/XiTsonga (12.9%); Other (3.6%)
Overall average Grade 12 marks	A (80–100%) (10.6%); B (70–79%) (36.2%); C (60–69%) (41.1%); D (50–59%) (10.5%); E (40–49%) (1.1%); F (34–39%) (0.6%)
University attendance of respondents' parents	Yes (40.3%); No (59.7%)

Although the majority of the respondents were male (56.3%), the genders were fairly equally represented in the sample. The majority of respondents were black (80.6%) with Nguni (31.5%) and Sotho (28.4%) as the home languages of the majority of respondents. The majority of respondents had an overall average Grade 12 mark of between 60 and 79% (77.3%) and the majority's parents did not attend university (59.7%).

Key information sources that influence prospective students' decision-making process when selecting a university

Table 3 provides the count, standard deviation and mean (on a scale of 1 to 7) for all 20 key information sources that influence prospective students' decision-making process when selecting a university. The key information sources are presented in order of influence, with the most influential information source appearing at the top of the table.

Table 3: Key information sources that influence prospective students' decision-making process when selecting a university

Key information sources	Count (n)	Standard deviation	Mean
Reading the university's brochures*	1 112	2.178	4.62
Parents/guardians*	1 153	2.260	4.51
Talking to other people about universities*	1 113	2.204	4.10
Searching information on the university on the university website*	1 102	2.306	3.84
Current or past students of the university (they are not family)*	1 103	2.433	3.79
Brother or sister or other family (not including parents)*	1 109	2.473	3.75
Friends at school*	1 135	2.241	3.73
Reading information on the university on other websites*	1 092	2.307	3.70
A close friend, but not attending the same school	1 118	2.293	3.23
Reading free publications distributed at schools	1 077	2.201	3.01
A teacher at school	1 144	2.213	2.96
The university information found in social media (Facebook, twitter or blogs)	1 077	2.196	2.81
The university advertisements on billboards	1 087	2.085	2.78
A visit from the university to the school (a university representative)	1 032	2.166	2.74
A visit to the university's open day/career day	1 040	2.328	2.64
The university advertisements in newspapers	1 090	2.057	2.62
The university advertisements/information received via a cellphone (sms or mixit, etc.)	1 093	2.084	2.53
The university advertisements in magazines	1 090	1.927	2.40
The university advertisements on radio	1 090	1.924	2.38
The school's visit to a university (campus tour) only if applicable	946	2.096	2.33

* Represents the key information sources that realised a mean of equal to or higher than the mid-point of the scale (3.50)

It is evident from Table 3 that parents or guardians, other family members and friends as well as the university website and brochures are more influential on prospective students' decision-making process when selecting a university than advertisements, information emanating from other sources (other publications and social media), teachers and all school marketing efforts undertaken by the university. 'Reading the university's brochures' (mean = 4.62) and 'Parents or guardians' (mean = 4.51) proved to be most influential, while, 'The university advertisements on radio' (mean = 2.38) and 'The school's visit to a university (campus tour) only if applicable' (mean = 2.33) proved to be the least influential on prospective students' decision-making process when selecting a university.

A total of eight key information sources realised a mean of equal to or higher than the midpoint of the scale (3.50). The remaining 12 key information sources are less influential on prospective students' decision-making process when selecting a university.

Results obtained with respect to H1

Paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences between the extent to which the eight different key information sources with a mean equal to or higher than the mid-point of the scale (3.50) influence university choice. For the purposes of hypothesis testing, the researchers relied on a 95 per cent confidence level, and a subsequent significance level of 5 per cent (p -value = 0.05) to interpret the results of the hypothesis testing. Table 4 provides the results obtained with regard to H1.

With regard to H1, whether different key information sources influence prospective university students' university choice to significantly different extents, the following findings were revealed:

'Reading the university's brochures' and 'Parents or guardians' influence prospective university students' university choice significantly more than any other key influences (most influential key influences).

This is followed by 'Talking to other people about universities' that influences prospective university students' university choice significantly more than the other key influences (influential key influence).

'Searching information on the university on the university website'; 'Current or past students of the university (they are not family)'; 'Brother or sister or other family (not including parents)'; and 'Friends at school' (less influential) influence prospective university students' university choice significantly less than the other key information sources mentioned above (less influential key information sources). Lastly, 'Searching information on the university on the university website' influences prospective university students' university choice significantly more than 'Reading information on the university on other websites', making the latter key information source significantly less influential (least influential). 'Current or past students of the university (they are not family)'; 'Brother or sister or other family (not including parents)'; 'Friends at school'; and 'Reading information on the university on other websites', which form part of the 'less influential' grouping are, however, not significantly more influential than 'Reading information on the university on other websites'. Therefore, the third grouping (less influential) and the fourth grouping (least influential) are collapsed into the 'less to least influential' key information sources.

Therefore, H1, that different key information sources influence prospective university students' university choice to significantly different extents can be supported, since the eight key information sources can be grouped into three groups with respect to the extent to which they influence university choice, namely key

information sources that are ‘most influential’, ‘influential’, ‘less influential to least influential’.

Table 4: Significant differences in the extent to which different key information sources influence university choice

	Reading the university's brochures	My parents or guardians	Talking to other people about universities	Searching information on the university website	Current or past students of the university (they are not family)	My brother or sister or other family (not including your parents)	My friends at school	Reading information on the university on other websites
	Mean	4.62	4.51	3.84	3.79	3.75	3.73	3.70
Reading the university's brochures	4.62	0.221	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*
My parents or guardians	4.51		0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*
Talking to other people about universities	4.10			0.003*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*
Searching information on the university on the university website	3.84				0.708	0.289	0.156	0.010*
Current or past students of the university (they are not family)	3.79					0.579	0.418	0.170
My brother or sister or other family (not including your parents)	3.75						0.707	0.609
My friends at school	3.73							0.925

* Indicates significant differences between the means of the pairs of key information sources (p-value ≤ 0.05)

Results obtained with respect to H2

With regard to H2, that prospective university students who differ in terms of their demographic characteristics differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university, several findings were uncovered with respect to each of the refined hypothesis (H2_a to H2_e). Independent samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs were conducted to test H2_a to H2_e.

H2_a

With regard to H2_a, that *male and female* prospective university students differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university, the following finding was made:

The parents or guardians of female prospective university students (mean = 4.72) influence the decision-making process when selecting a university significantly more than the parents or guardians of male prospective university students (mean = 4.37; *p*-value = 0.008).

Therefore, H2_a that *male and female* prospective university students differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university can be supported as far as it involves the influence of 'parents or guardians'.

H2_b

With regard to H2_b, that prospective university students from different *population groups* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university, the following findings were made:

'Friends at school' influence the decision-making process of black prospective university students (mean = 3.85) when selecting a university significantly more than they influence white prospective university students (mean = 2.96; *p*-value < 0.0005).

'Current or past students of the university' influence the decision-making process of black prospective university students (mean = 3.90) when selecting a university significantly more than they influence white prospective university students (mean = 2.97; *p*-value = 0.001).

'Talking to other people about universities' influences the decision-making process of black prospective university students (mean = 4.22) when selecting a university significantly more than they influence white prospective university students (mean = 3.52; *p*-value = 0.011).

'Reading information on the university on other websites' influences the decision-making process of black prospective university students (mean = 3.91) when selecting a university significantly more than it influences prospective white (mean = 3.05) and Indian university students (mean = 2.33; *p*-value < 0.0005).

‘Reading the university’s brochures’ influences the decision-making process of black prospective university students (mean = 4.81) when selecting a university significantly more than it influences prospective white (mean = 3.97) and Indian university students (mean = 3.74; p -value < 0.0005).

Therefore, H2_b, that prospective university students from different *population groups* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university can be supported as far as it involves ‘Friends at school’; ‘Current or past students of the university’; ‘Talking to other people about universities’; ‘Reading information on the university on other websites’; and ‘Reading the university’s brochures’.

H2_c

With regard to H2_c, that prospective university students with different *home languages* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university, the following findings were made:

‘Friends at school’ influence the decision-making process of Nguni (mean = 3.89), Sotho (mean = 3.86) and TshiVenda and XiTsonga (mean = 3.87) speaking prospective university students when selecting a university significantly more than they influence Afrikaans-speaking prospective university students (mean = 2.96; p -value = 0.003).

‘A brother, sister or family member (not including parents)’ influences the decision-making process of Nguni (mean = 3.75), Sotho (mean = 3.85) and TshiVenda and XiTsonga (mean = 4.00) speaking prospective university students when selecting a university significantly more than they influence Afrikaans-speaking prospective university students (mean = 2.79; p -value = 0.030).

‘Talking to other people about universities’ influences the decision-making process of Nguni (mean = 4.31) and TshiVenda and XiTsonga (mean = 4.38) speaking prospective university students when selecting a university significantly more than they influence Afrikaans-speaking prospective university students (mean = 3.42; p -value = 0.004).

‘Reading information on the university on other websites’ influences the decision-making process of Nguni (mean = 3.87), Sotho (mean = 3.94) and TshiVenda and XiTsonga (mean = 4.34) speaking prospective university students when selecting a university significantly more than they influence Afrikaans (mean = 2.92) and English-speaking prospective university students (mean = 2.93; p -value < 0.0005).

‘Reading the university’s brochures’ influences the decision-making process of Nguni (mean = 4.98) speaking prospective university students when selecting a university significantly more than they influence prospective Afrikaans university students (mean = 4.02) and reading the university’s brochures influences the decision-making process of Nguni (mean = 4.98), Sotho (mean = 4.83) and TshiVenda and XiTsonga (mean = 4.90) speaking prospective university students when selecting

a university significantly more than they influence prospective English-speaking university students (mean = 3.85; p -value < 0.0005).

Therefore, $H2_c$, that prospective university students with different *home languages* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university can be supported as far as it involves 'Friends at school'; 'A brother, sister or family member (not including parents)'; 'Talking to other people about universities'; 'Reading information on the university on other websites'; and 'Reading the university's brochures'.

$H2_d$

With regard to $H2_d$, that prospective university students with different *overall average Grade 12 marks* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university, the following finding was made:

Prospective university students who differ in terms of their *overall average Grade 12 marks* do not differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university.

Therefore, $H2_d$ can be rejected.

$H2_e$

With regard to $H2_e$, that prospective university students who differ regarding whether their *parents went to university or not* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university, the following findings were made:

'Parents or guardians' who did go to university (mean = 4.69) influence the decision-making process of prospective university students when selecting a university significantly more than parents or guardians who did not go to university (mean = 4.39; p -value = 0.029).

'Reading the university's brochures' influences the decision-making process of prospective university students whose parent(s) did not go to university (mean = 4.80) when selecting a university significantly more than it influences prospective university students whose parent(s) did go to university (mean = 4.38; p -value = 0.002).

Therefore, $H2_e$, that prospective university students who differ regarding whether their *parents went to university or not*, differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university can be supported as far as it involves 'Parents or guardians' and 'Reading the university's brochures'.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the results that different key information sources influence prospective university students' choice of university to significantly different extents. The top source of influence is brochures, followed by parents and talking to others. The university that is considered by the prospective student's website followed in the fourth place, while talking to past and current students, family (not parents) and friends were all considered as key influencers. It seems though, that apart from brochures and information found on specific websites regarding the specific university, the top ten influencing sources include various people. This finding highlights the importance of brand awareness and perceived reputation in the market place, as positive word-of-mouth goes a long way in influencing prospective students in South Africa.

Prospective students differ based upon their demographic characteristics, to the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university. Females are influenced to a greater extent by advice from their parents regarding the choice of which university to attend than male students. Prospective university students from different *population groups* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university. Black students are influenced significantly more by friends at school; by current or past students of the university; by talking to other people about universities; by reading information on the university on other websites; and by reading university's brochures than other population groups. As equity is a concern for most South African universities, these results suggest that universities should ensure that they have marketing material such as brochures and website information that is updated, easily available, accessible and consumer friendly. Friends, past students and other people should be made aware of the particular university and this is where brand building through various media will play an important role.

Not only should population groups be considered, when segmenting and targeting the market, but home language also. Prospective university students with different *home languages* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university as far as it involves friends at school; a brother, sister or family member (not including parents); talking to other people about universities; reading information on the university on other websites; and reading the university's brochures. Nguni-speaking prospective students are influenced to a greater extent by all these mentioned sources, more so when compared to the other home language groups. On the other hand, Afrikaans-speaking respondents are not really influenced by friends at school; by a brother, sister or family member; by talking to other people; or by reading information on the university on other websites. However, Afrikaans-speaking respondents are influenced a little bit more by reading the university's brochures than English-speaking respondents. This does not mean

that other language groups are not influenced by these mentioned sources; on the contrary, it means that targeting Nguni-speaking prospective students will involve using all these mentioned information sources and again influencing friends, family and other people by awareness campaigns and by building the particular university's reputation. Afrikaans-speaking prospective students though, seem to be influenced to a greater extent by their parents and searching the particular university's website. Thus, updated, easily accessible websites are necessary and brand building will be important to influence Afrikaans-speaking respondents' parents.

The findings have further revealed that prospective university students who differ regarding whether their *parents went to university or not* differ significantly in terms of the extent to which different key information sources influence their decision-making process when selecting a university. Those parents who have attended university or some sort of post-school education influence their children's (second-generation students) decisions of which university to attend to a greater extent than the first-generation students whose parents have not attended any post-school education. Almost 60 per cent of the sample indicated that they are first-generation students and that they are influenced to a greater extent by university brochures, talking to others and by teachers, than second-generation students. Although teachers played a small role as an influencer, they played a greater role in influencing first-generation students than second-generation students.

It can be concluded from this discussion that university marketers should not view their market as one, but they need to differentiate on demographic needs, segment their market accordingly, and develop tailored marketing communication plans to meet these different groups' needs. First-generation students rely more on brochures, talking to others and teachers than second-generation students, and therefore these brochures need to be produced, be updated and distributed to reach these students well before they make the decision on which university to attend. Because their parents are not aware and do not have the first-hand experience of HE, information about university life and how it works needs to reach them early in the process, while they are in fourth, seventh and eleventh grade (Horwedel 2008, 10/1). As teachers and other people and students also influence these students, building a strong brand in the market place will be essential.

Because education beyond high school is new to many first-generation university students and their families, specific information about the process is necessary. Without a family tradition or experience in HE, students may need direct guidance and assistance in the post-school educational planning process. Financial assistance is one of the concerns to many of the first-generation university students and they need information regarding scholarships and possible bursaries (Kern 2000, 492/3). Universities need to target teachers and provide them with sufficient support and information so that they can assist these first-generation students in their university selection process.

Second-generation students, and to a greater extent the Afrikaans-speaking students, rely much more on their parents' advice, and parents will tell their children

what they know and what they perceive as being the best advice. If parents are not aware of the particular university, or have limited and incorrect information regarding a particular university, they will pass it on to their children. Universities need to address this issue by consistently building a strong brand and promoting their positive reputation in media that will reach parents too. Parents are also an important stakeholder and have great influence on decision-making. Universities should further be cautioned not only to focus all their marketing and recruitment efforts on first-generation students as they can alienate second-generation students, and vice versa. Universities do need a proportion of second-generation students to attend their universities, as generally they have a better chance of obtaining their degree in a shorter time than first-generation students and a good balance of both first- and second-generation students is necessary for positive outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Firstly, the study was limited to a static view of respondents' perceptions of who and what they think influence them, and to what extent, when choosing which university to enrol at and it prohibited a longitudinal view of possible changing perceptions over time. Secondly, the research was conducted with first-year students at one comprehensive university, and it is suggested that more than one university should be included and more than one type of university in order to determine differences. It is also suggested that Grade 11 and 12 scholars should be targeted when they are in the process of choosing a university when the information sources are dominant in their minds, although practically, approval has to be obtained from the Department of Education before embarking on this type of research.

It should further be noted that the sample consisted of a small proportion of Afrikaans-speaking students, although representative of the particular university under research, the picture will most probably look a little bit different if a larger Afrikaans-speaking population is included in the sample. Although 20 key information sources have been included in the study, this list should be extended to include staff and faculty members working at a particular university and process-type sources such as, how long it takes for a university to respond to a request, and how efficient the application process is. Friendly and helpful service can influence prospective students' view of a particular university and should also be regarded.

CONCLUSION

Prospective students' decision-making is a complex process and they are exposed to choice (Briggs and Wilson 2007, 58). They are better informed to make judgements about a range of potential preferred suppliers at home and abroad, forcing them to become extremely critical and analytical when choosing their university (Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003, 319–320). Thus, it becomes necessary for universities to communicate information to these students whom they want and value (Baldwin

and James 2000). As parents are key influencers, they should also be targeted with relevant brand messages. Universities should gain an understanding of their target market and its various information sources and apply marketing-related practices to positively influence prospective students' choice of university. It is also the university that should assist prospective students in making the 'right' decision (Briggs 2006, 707; Brown et al. 2009, 311; Ubagharaji 2008, A–20).

In the South African context this will result in universities deciding whom they want to target and to influence these potential students by communicating to them through appropriate messages and sources. The results of the current study have indicated that, in general, students are mostly influenced by information they obtain from: (1) brochures; (2) their parents; (3) talking to other people; (4) searching information on the university of interest's website; (5) current or past students of the university; (6) other family like brothers or sisters (not including parents); (7) friends at school; and (8) reading information on the university of interest on other websites. Thus, by knowing which factors influence prospective students' university choice and who the main influencers of these students are, it is necessary for universities to have updated, well informed brochures and updated, easy to navigate websites to provide instant information.

The results have also revealed that the reputation of the university is very important, and this is where branding plays an important role. Building a strong brand with a healthy positive reputation is important to any university in order to influence parents, teachers, friends at school, brothers and sisters, especially, who in turn will influence the prospective students. If all these 'other influencers' do not know of the university (or know too little), they will not relate positive information to the prospective student.

University marketers also have to realise that South Africa is unique in that it still has a large first-generation student base that will rely less on advice from parents than second-generation students. To reach second-generation students, marketing efforts have to be steered towards parents too, as they have great influence on these students' choice.

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