

Factors Affecting Student Decisions to Study at Asia-Pacific International University

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Abstract

This research study examines the factors affecting student decisions to study at Asia-Pacific International University (AIU), a private higher education institution located in Thailand. The effects of personal factors and service marketing mix factors on the consumer buying decision process was analyzed using survey questionnaire data collected from 156 first year undergraduate students who enrolled in AIU in the 2013/2014 academic year.

The results found that gender, religion, high school CGPA and parental monthly incomes did not have a statistically significant effect on the decision to study at AIU. The service marketing mix factors which had a significant effect on the consumer buying decision process were physical evidence (facilities), product (curriculum), process (service), pricing (tuition fees), and place (location).

Keywords: *Service Marketing Mix, Consumer Buying Decision, Asia-Pacific International University*

Introduction

Higher Education—also known as tertiary education—is a phase of learning that takes place at universities, colleges, or institutes. It possesses all the characteristics of a service business because education is “people based” (Mazzarol, 1998). Higher education institutions in Thailand are significant entities that can radically influence the development of the country. As a result, higher education institutions need to constantly develop themselves in order to be accepted by society, to play a role in improving the lives of people in the country, and to produce graduates who have potential in line with labor market needs.

In today's modern competitive environment, the success of higher education institutions in acquiring students depends on the capability of an institution to recognize the needs of the educational market. Institutions should consider ways to make themselves more competitive players in educational markets. Institutions as marketers need to understand consumer behavior and examine factors that a student considers when making a decision to study in a higher education institution.

According to the Thailand Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), in 2013, there were 171 recognized universities in the country that offered undergraduate programs in a variety of academic disciplines. The growing number of institutions in the higher education sector has generated competition among universities, especially in terms of student recruitment. It is crucial for universities to be able to identify factors that influence students in deciding their university choice. Previous studies have identified student perceptions regarding studying abroad, but the current literature does not focus much on why Thai students choose one local university over another. Therefore, exploring factors that affecting student decisions to choose an institution is an important research endeavor.

Asia-Pacific International University (AIU) is a private university that is owned and operated by the Southeast Asia Union Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SAUM), which is a non-profit religious organization that aims to foster medical, religious and other community development. AIU emphasizes harmonious, holistic development in all the dimensions of life. Virtue must precede learning, so that knowledge, skills, and technology will be wisely, conscientiously, and responsibly

used in the service of society. At present, AIU has six Faculties consisting of Arts and Humanities, Business Administration, Education and Psychology, Nursing, Religious Studies, and Science.

The researcher observed that the annual number of new students enrolling has experienced only a small increase. There are several factors that affect student decisions to choose an institution. The researcher explored factors affecting decision-making of first year undergraduate students for the 2013/2014 academic year to study a bachelor's degree at AIU. The results of this study may be used to develop university marketing strategies, improve quality of curricula, and increase management efficiency.

Problem Discussion

In order to attain a competitive advantage, higher education management needs to set up a way to highlight its strengths and give good options to students. This can be achieved by using a marketing framework which is derived from a service marketing mix theory and consumer buying decision process. Service marketing mix theory is recommended for the service sector; product, pricing, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence. The consumer buying decision process on identifying factors involved in the decision process itself. Factors that affect student decisions to study at the university were identified from several studies. Although there were numerous factors that affect students' decisions when selecting a university, these factors may have a different level of importance for each student at AIU. This will enable the university to formulate better policy and recruitment strategies for attracting students.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors affecting the decisions of undergraduate students who enrolled during the first and second semesters of the 2013/2014 academic year to study at AIU. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do personal factors affect student decisions to study at AIU?
2. How do service marketing mix factors affect student decisions to study at AIU?

Theoretical and Related Literature

The Service Marketing Mix

According to Kotler, Hayes and Bloom (2011), the service marketing mix is also known as an extended marketing mix and is an integral part of a service blueprint design. The service marketing mix consists of 7Ps as compared to the 4Ps of a product marketing mix. Simply said, the service marketing mix assumes the service as a product itself. However it adds three more Ps which is required for optimum service delivery. Hanlon (2013) has explained how to use the 7Ps service marketing mix, which are product, pricing, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence.

Consumer Buying Decision Process

Ravikumar (2011) has explained about five stages of consumer buying decision process that people decide whether to buy a product or not; need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post purchase behavior. A better understanding of consumer buying habits can help organizations to reach consumers more effectively. Thus, universities need to clearly understand which factors are important to prospective students and parents, and how they commonly go about the process of selecting a higher education institution.

Related Literature

The related research has divided Thai universities into three groups according to the type of institution; Public Universities, Rajabhat Universities, which formerly specialized mainly in teacher training, and Private Universities. The factors affecting student decisions to enroll in Public Universities were field of study, parent average monthly incomes, curriculum, and faculty and staff. Gender, field of study, curriculum, tuition fees, location, faculty and staff, services, and facilities affected student decision to enroll in Rajabhat Universities. Moreover, gender, field of study, curriculum, location, faculty and staff, and services affected student decisions to enroll in Private Universities.

Conceptual Framework

This study examined the impact of personal factors and service marketing mix factors on the decisions of freshmen students to study at AIU. The personal factors that were considered consisted of gender, religion, high school Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), parental monthly income, field of study, and university recognition. The service marketing mix factors consisted of product (curriculum), pricing (tuition fees), place (location), promotion (advertising), people (faculty and staff), process (service), and physical evidence (facilities). The consumer buying decision process focused on four steps of the enrolment decision process including information search, evaluation of alternatives, decision making, and behavior after decision making. The conceptual framework shown below in Figure 1 identifies factors that may affect student decisions to study at AIU.

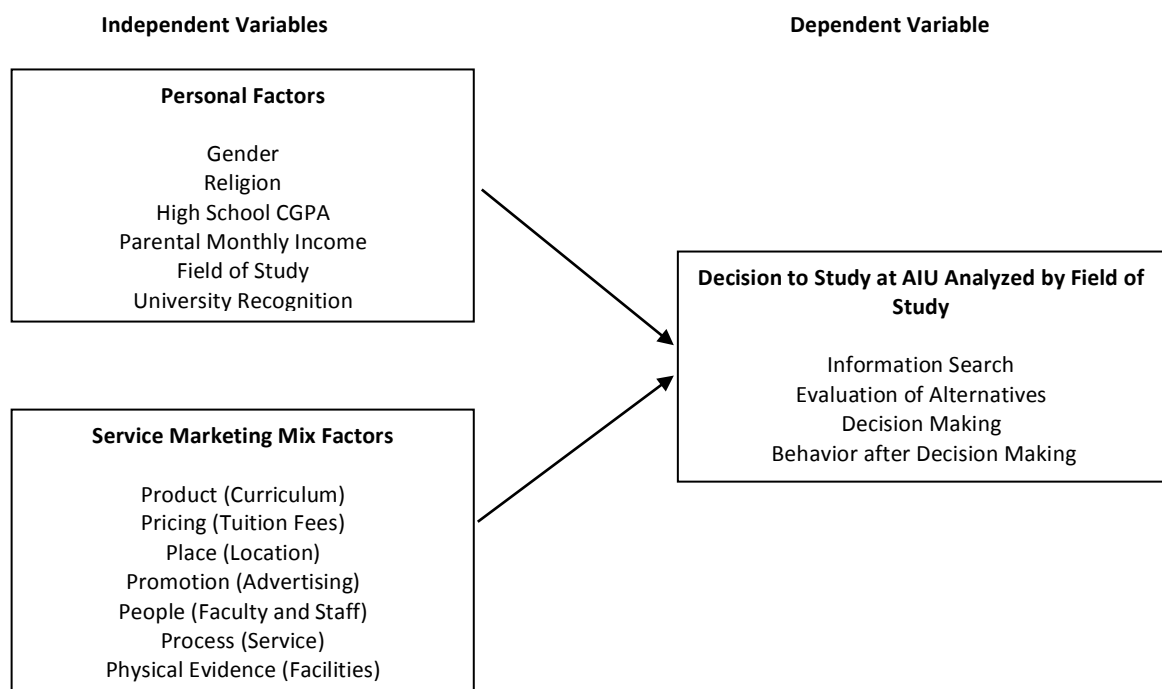


Figure 1. Personal and service marketing mix factors and student enrolment decisions

Methodology

A quantitative approach was chosen as the main data collection method. The sample used in this study was 156 respondents from 6 faculties who were selected by means of convenience sampling. The researcher attended the freshmen class meeting and collected data by passing out a questionnaire survey. The survey consisted of three parts. Personal information was collected with closed-end questions, while information about factors affecting the decision to study at AIU and the consumer buying decision process was gathered with items that used a five-point Likert scale. The Item Objective Congruency Index (IOC) was employed to validate the questions. Items with an IOC index higher than 0.50 were accepted and used in the questionnaire. Their reliability was analyzed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which showed a confidence value of 0.98. This study was completed in accordance with the descriptive analytical approach so that factors affecting student decisions could be ranked in order of importance.

The personal factors were summarized with descriptive statistics such as raw frequencies and percentages. The service marketing mix and the consumer buying decision process were summarized using means and standard deviations. Other statistical analysis included T-Test, F-Test, and Fisher's LSD (Least Significant Difference) test, which was utilized to determine differences in pair-wise comparisons of the means of respondents from various fields of study.

Furthermore, the relationship between each service marketing mix factor on the consumer buying decision process was analyzed using multiple regression.

Results

Personal Factors

The personal characteristics of respondents are reported below in Table 1. For each personal factor, the largest group of respondents were female (76.9%), Buddhist (49.4%), had high school CGPAs of 3.00 or higher (55.8%), came from families with incomes of 15,001 to 20,000 Baht per month (30.1%), and were studying in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities (44.9%). Furthermore, most respondents had learnt about AIU from their parents or relatives. The three most frequently mentioned reasons that affected student decisions to study at AIU were that their siblings or relatives had studied at AIU (47 students), quality of curriculum (46 students), and reputation of the University (18 students). The results are shown in Table 1.

	Factors	Number (156)	Percentage
Gender	• Male	36	23.1
	• Female	120	76.9
Religion	• Buddhist	77	49.4
	• Other Christian	24	15.4
	• SDA	55	35.2
High School CGPA	• 2.00 to 2.49	20	12.8
	• 2.50 to 2.99	49	31.4
	• 3.00 and above	87	55.8
Parental Monthly Incomes	• Less than 5,000	25	16.0
	• 5,001 to 10,000	38	24.4
	• 10,001 to 15,000	37	23.7
	• 15,001 to 20,000	47	30.1
	• 20,000 and above	9	5.8

Table 1 (Continued)

Field of Study	• Arts and Humanities	70	44.9
	• Business Administration	18	11.5
	• Education and Psychology	16	10.3
	• Nursing	45	28.8
	• Religious Studies	3	1.9
	• Science	4	2.6

Table 1. Personal factors of respondents

Service Marketing Mix Factors

When service marketing mix factors were considered, it was found that product, people, process, and physical evidence all highly affected enrollment decisions. The other three factors had a medium level of effect, and the overall influence of all marketing mix factors on enrolment decisions was high as shown in Table 2.

Factors		\bar{X}	SD	Significance
Product	(Curriculum)	3.84	0.63	High
Pricing	(Tuition Fees)	3.40	0.68	Medium
Place	(Location)	3.22	0.78	Medium
Promotion	(Advertising)	3.32	0.85	Medium
People	(Faculty and Staff)	3.74	0.74	High
Process	(Service)	3.64	0.77	High
Physical Evidence	(Facilities)	3.66	0.77	High
Average Scores		3.54	0.74	High

Table 2. Effect of service marketing mix factors on enrolment decisions

Consumer Buying Decision Process

The four steps of the consumer buying decision process which were studied all had a high level of effect on enrolment decisions, as shown in Table 3.

Steps	\bar{X}	SD	Significance
Information Search	3.57	0.74	High
Evaluation of Alternatives	3.75	0.70	High
Decision Making	3.76	0.77	High
Behavior after Decision Making	3.70	0.80	High
Average Scores	3.69	0.75	High

Table 3. Relative importance of consumer buying decision process steps

Personal Factors and Consumer Buying Decision Process

The study found that neither gender, religion, high school CGPA nor parental monthly income had a statistically significant effect on the consumer decision buying process between respondents of different genders, religion, high school CGPA and parental monthly incomes.

There were statistically significant level differences at the 0.05 level between field of study and the consumer buying decision process in two steps; decision making ($F=6.690$, $p=0.000$), and behavior after decision making ($F=3.902$, $p=0.010^*$) as shown in Table 4.

Steps	F	P
Information Search	1.533	0.208
Evaluation of Alternatives	2.582	0.056
Decision Making	6.690*	0.000
Behavior after Decision Making	3.902*	0.010

Table 4. Decision process steps compared by field of study

These differences were analyzed using the LSD method, and it was found that there were significant differences at the 0.05 level for the decision making step in four different groups:

1. Arts and Humanities and Business Administration (mean difference=0.471, p=0.011)
2. Nursing and Arts and Humanities (mean difference=0.269, p=0.044)
3. Education and Psychology and Business Administration (mean difference=0.822, p=0.003)
4. Nursing and Business Administration (mean difference=0.740, p=0.000)

When considered to the significant differences in behavior after decision making step were three different groups:

1. Arts and Humanities and Business Administration (mean difference=0.550, p=0.006)
2. Education and Psychology and Business Administration (mean difference=0.740, p=0.013)
3. Nursing and Business Administration (mean difference=0.597, p=0.002)

This means that Business Administration respondents made their enrolment decisions in a way that was different from other respondents. These results can be interpreted to imply that students who enrolled in Business Administration Programs were determined to enroll at AIU. Therefore, their decisions were easy and uncomplicated, and it was not necessary for them to reevaluate their choices after making this decision.

Service Marketing Mix and Consumer Buying Decision Process

The study of relationships between each service marketing mix factor on the consumer buying decision process found that five factors affected student decisions at the 0.05 level: namely product, pricing, place, process, and physical evidence. To facilitate entering these factors into a step-wise multiple regression equation (shown below as Equation 1), physical evidence (facilities) was referred to as X_1 , product (curriculum) was referred to as X_2 , process (services) was referred to as X_3 , pricing (tuition fees) was referred to as X_4 , and place (location) was referred to as X_5 ; a standardized version of this is shown as Equation 2.

1. Sample Equation $Y = 0.173 + 0.314X_1 + 0.250X_2 + 0.201X_3 + 0.121X_4 + 0.087X_5$
2. Standardized Equation $Z_r = 0.360Z_1 + 0.235Z_2 + 0.230Z_3 + 0.122Z_4 + 0.101Z_5$

The Multiple Correlation Coefficients (R) and Coefficients of Multiple Determination (R Square) increased when additional factors were added to the equation. When the facilities factor was added to the equation, R was equal to 0.815 and R Square was equal to 0.663, which means that this factor was able to explain 66.3% of decision behavior. When four additional factors (product, process, pricing, and place) were added to the equation, the correlation levels for these factors were 0.855, 0.869, 0.876 and 0.880 respectively. The ability of these factors to explain decision behavior was 73.1%, 75.5%, 76.7%, and 77.4% respectively. The results are shown below in Table 5.

Model	R	R Square	Adjust R Square	b	Std. Error of the Estimate	β	t	Sig
Facilities	0.815	0.663	0.661	0.314	0.064	0.360	4.891*	0.000
Curriculum	0.855	0.731	0.727	0.250	0.052	0.235	4.812*	0.000
Services	0.869	0.755	0.751	0.201	0.066	0.230	3.061*	0.003
Tuition	0.876	0.767	0.761	0.121	0.056	0.122	2.164*	0.032
Place	0.880	0.774	0.766	0.087	0.043	0.101	2.040*	0.043
a=0.173, SE_{est} = 0.32464								

*Statistically significant level of 0.05

Table 5. Relationship between service marketing mix factors and consumer buying decision process

It should be noted that the service marketing mix factors are listed in order of significance, with facilities having the most substantial impact on enrolment decisions, followed by curriculum, services, tuition, and place respectively.

Discussion

The first year 2013-2014 undergraduate students primarily chose to study at AIU because of the University's curricular programs of study, faculty and staff, and facilities. Study results showed that students believe that the programs of study meet their personal requirements and will be useful for their careers, value the international curricula, and trust the quality assurance system. Students also respect that faculty and staff members understand student problems and are ready to give advice, come from a variety of nations, have adequate teaching experience, produce recognized research, and have good reputations. Furthermore, students are satisfied with the University's facilities such as the on-campus dormitories and church, tidy and beautiful buildings, the library's many volumes of circulating and reference books, well-equipped classrooms and laboratories, clean restrooms, and adequate football field and sports complex.

The study results were consistent with related research results for factors affecting student enrolment decisions. Suntaree Songmueang (2011) found that price and people were highly important factors, but price had only a medium level of affect in this study. Kittipon Kitayanurak (2008) found that the factors with a high level of effect on decisions were university image, curriculum, and lecturers. Janjira Boonlue (2007) found that factors with a very high impact on enrolment decisions were stability and career progress, institutional reputation, and interest in the field of study. Phatchariyta Srisod (2005) found that personal reasons such as student desires to study near their hometowns, interesting programs of study, and tuition fees cheaper than other universities were important motivational factors, while Phitsamai Thongthaing (2006) found that the most important factor was programs of study.

The results found that gender, religion, high school CGPA, and parental monthly incomes did not have a statistically significant influence on enrolment decisions. Field of study, however, affected decision making behavior at a statistically significant level of 0.05. When the differences were analyzed using the LSD method, however, no item was found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level. These results were consistent with those of Cholada Sittigonsommanat (2005), who found that important factors were university reputation, quality of faculty members, ease of obtaining a job after graduation, and opportunity for secure employment with large, reputable companies. Phatchariyta Srisod (2005) found that gender, location, field of study, achievement in high school, and parental occupation and incomes did not have a statistically significant affected on motivation, while Somchai Lahnamwong (2009) found that the most important factor affecting enrolment decisions was career expectations because professional teachers can easily find work.

Five service marketing mix factors affected student decisions at a statistically significant level of 0.05. From the most to least significant, the factors were physical evidence (facilities), product

(curriculum), process (service), pricing (tuition fees), and place (location). Study results were consistent with related research findings for factors affecting student enrolment decisions. Loren Agrey and Nalton Lampadan (2014) found that factors significantly influencing decision making were support systems - both physical and non-physical, learning environment, job prospects, and good sport facilities. Chettana Suk-anake (2009) found that curricula should be the first priority of the marketing mix in order to influence first year students to study at a private university.

Recommendations and Future Direction

Recommendations for This Study

Study results indicate that the most important factors affecting student decisions were facilities and curricular quality. Therefore, the University needs to maintain a modern physical plant and high standards for its programs of study, paying close attention to changes in student needs in order to continue to attract good students.

The results found that the last three channels by which students learnt about the University were brochures, visits, and exhibitions. Therefore, the University should reduce the amount of time and resources dedicated to these three channels. The three most significant influences were parents, alumni, and current students. The University should find ways to motivate these groups to introduce the University to prospective students. For instance, it could offer a tuition fee discount to children of alumni who study at AIU. It should also organize alumni homecoming events that provide up-to-date information about the quality of university programs. A newsletter and website announcements about future activities or events to be held on- and off-campus may also help to keep parents and alumni informed regarding university programs.

When considered by each service marketing mix factor, the results found that:

- **Curriculum:** students focus on gaining knowledge that can be adapted to the workplace, so the University should improve how learning and teaching is conducted in the classroom. Faculty members should help student master skills which are useful in the workplace and plan extracurricular activities such as field trips and practicum opportunities. The University should also invite alumni who have been successful in their careers to conduct a seminar or workshop for junior and senior students so that they can share their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the University should find ways to maintain the quality of its curricula: for example, it must keep course contents up-to-date so that teaching will keep pace with constantly changing technology. Instructors must also be knowledgeable with appropriate expertise, experience, and qualifications to help students reach their full potential.
- **Tuition Fees:** students believe that Thai government student loans or university scholarships are available to help them to solve their financial problems. So the University must ensure that students who meet eligibility criteria can continue to access government loans. It should also continue its fundraising efforts to may establish funds through donations from donors or alumni. The University should also not neglect to provide financial information to students and parents early in the application process.
- **Location:** students feel that the University is well-situated and has a beautiful environment. Therefore, the University should continue to keep the campus clean and beautiful, so that it continues to provide an environment that supports learning.
- **Advertising:** students focus on the University's website, so the website should provide more useful information for students. The institution should also consider using large banners to introduce the University to the public.
- **Faculty and Staff:** students think that the University's faculty and staff understood their problems and are willing to advise them. The University should continue its academic advising and counseling systems, carefully guiding students so that most of them will be able to successfully complete their studies with the timeframes specified in the curriculum. In

addition, students are satisfied that faculty members come from a variety of nations, which means that the University is recognized as international. So the University should maintain its student counseling systems, and encourage capable faculty members to continue to work at the University for extensive periods of time.

The University should also support teaching activities both inside and outside the classroom, properly assign workloads that are not too heavy or too light, encourage faculty members to increase their efficacy, and build morale by providing rewards in case of outstanding performance.

- **Service:** students ensured high quality of teaching which means the University has effective teaching methods and students will receive full knowledge. Students also respected the accuracy of entrance exam results, which means that the university has a good admission system. So the University should continue its admissions processes in order to maintain its standards.
- **Facilities:** students are satisfied that the University has an on-campus church and dormitories. AIU is a Christian University, so it is important that the University has an on-campus church. Its residence facilities are very convenient and safe for students who are not from the local area. Thereby, the University should keep providing an on-campus church and dormitories. Learning support facilities such as books, computers, Internet, and Wi-Fi must also be adequate in number, good quality, ready-to-use, and up-to-date.

Future Direction

The next study could explore relationships between students and the University after graduation so that they may consider enrolling in University graduate study programs. Perhaps a future study could compare student enrolment decisions at the University with other universities that have similar features and capabilities with the University. Moreover, a study could examine external environmental factors which may affect student decisions to study at the University such as political, economic, technological, and social-cultural factors. Another aspect worth considering for future studies is the comparison of the factors affecting enrolment decisions between the undergraduate and graduate levels.

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