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Link to Published Version:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-05-2013-0082
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Becoming an education provider of choice in Hong Kong: an inquiry into student decision making

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Managers in higher education require cost effective ways to attract the optimal number of students. This study addresses that general problem at the college level, and in doing so, it points toward strategies that could also be relevant at university and at national level. Two crucial issues are whether potential students are more influenced by parents or by peers when it comes to choosing a college; and whether spending money on advertising is more efficacious than spending money on making direct contact with potential students. Our findings provide essential market intelligence for strategically managing the scarce resources available for attracting students.

Design/methodology/approach: data was gathered through a survey instrument and the partial least squares technique was subsequently applied to 314 responses.

Findings: Secondary school guidance counselors, followed by current and previous college students were the highlights in order of magnitude for non marketing information sources for college choice. Social life received the highest loadings amongst college attributes and phone calls from the admissions office received the highest loading among marketer controlled variables. The results reflect the nature of Chinese culture, which is regarded as being highly collectivist.

Research limitations: The model proposed in this study is applicable to students of sub degree courses, but may need to be adapted to degree and postgraduate courses students.

Practical implications: This study helps educational managers to identify which factors most strongly influence choice of higher education provider, and as a consequence enable managers to make more strategic use of scarce resources.

Originality/value: This is one of very few studies which employ partial least squares analysis to discover the key factors that influence student selection of a higher education provider, and one of few studies that focuses on Hong Kong.

KEYWORDS:
Sub-degree, college choice, partial least squares, information sources, college attributes, Chinese students, strategic
Introduction
At the national level, Hong Kong faces the challenge of finding strategic means of recruiting higher education students from other countries (Cheung et al, 2011; Cheng et al, 2011); and at the local level, Hong Kong tertiary organizations face keen competition amongst each other to recruit local students. Those same organizations also need strategies for decreasing the likelihood that Hong Kong students will choose to study in one of the many competitor nations, such as Australia or Singapore. Cheung et al (2011) argue that Hong Kong HEIs need to obtain better marketing information, and point out that insufficient empirical, systematic marketing research has been conducted in the Asian markets. This study goes part way toward meeting that need because we examine the critical factors that influence decisions of college choice that are made by Hong Kong students.

At the organizational level, where resources available for marketing are scarce, it is crucial to take an informed and strategic approach to the recruitment of new students. Armed with accurate market intelligence, managers in higher education are better able to develop what Davies (2004) calls ‘strategically focused’ colleges. He characterizes strategic planning as setting direction for the long term, but direction setting cannot be effective unless managers know what matters to potential students, and know which individuals and/or groups strongly influence the decision making of potential students.

There are over thirty thousand high school graduates each year in Hong Kong (2010/11) but only around sixteen thousand undergraduate places are government funded. For high school graduates who cannot enter a government funded university program, sub degree courses provide an attractive alternative. Not surprisingly, the number of colleges offering sub-degree courses increased from four in the year 2000 to twenty five in 2012. Our research focused on sub-degree colleges because we contend that higher education managers need to gather intelligence which is target market specific.

In other words, sub-degree students are likely to have different motivations and to be attracted by different college and course features than degree students, and degree students are likely to differ from postgraduate students, just as students from different cultural backgrounds are likely to differ in what motivates and attracts them. Our research therefore seeks to demonstrate how to uncover market intelligence specific to a particular target group; and thereby to provide readers with a research method that can be applied to any student group: the findings cannot be generalized across student groups, but the research method can be applied to any group.

With nine sub-degree colleges (one government funded; eight self-financing arms of public-funded institutions) and fourteen other tertiary colleges providing such courses in Hong Kong, there is keen competition amongst tertiary institutions. Because of limited government funding in the education sector, most sub-degree programs need to operate on a self-financing basis. In order to secure market share, these institutions implement marketing programs of various kinds to attract potential students. Though numerous studies have been carried out on
the efficacy of marketing programs implemented by colleges to increase student enrolment - studies such as that of Sojkin et.al (2012) and Nathan (2012) - only a few have explored the choice making processes of Asian students, and those studies have focused more on identifying factors which influence the perception of education quality available in overseas destinations (Muthaly et al, 2013).

The objective of this study is to identify and understand the impact of various factors on the college choice making process of students who enter (self-financed) sub-degree courses in Hong Kong colleges; thereby enabling college managers to make more effective use of their relevant resources.

**Literature Review**

When students choose a college in which to enroll, they are making a purchase decision and, regarding any purchase decision, Hawkins et al (2004) list three types of decision-making process: nominal, limited, and extended. The level of involvement of the consumer in the process increases from nominal to limited and then to extended. Decisions about college choice entail high involvement (Muthaly et al, 2013) because students need to consider a wide range of factors. Moreover, the decision will affect a student’s self-image and involves long-term investment and ongoing lifestyle and monetary sacrifices. In addition, there is a risk of making a wrong decision.

Perceived risk is high when any purchase involves an “intangible” service which is usually sold without guarantees or warranties (Lovelock, 2002). Since a college education requires parents and students to invest a substantial amount of money and time (for students), the perceived risk will definitely be high and consequently, the student will be motivated to seek and consider the advice and suggestions of different peer groups/reference groups (Kotler and Fox, 1985).

Hawkins et al (2004) defined a reference group as a group whose assumed values or perspectives are being used by an individual as the foundation for his or her present behavior. Reference group influence can take the form of normative influence, identification influence, and information influence. Normative influence occurs when an individual fulfills group expectations to get a direct reward or avoid a sanction. Identification influence occurs when individuals have internalized the group’s norms and worth. Informational influence occurs when an individual uses the behavior and opinion of reference group members as potentially helpful bits of information.

Hawkins et al (2004) suggest that group influence is strongest when the product or service is observable to the group. Also, group influence will be strong if the individual does not have confidence about, or sufficient understanding of, purchasing the product or service. Hence, the influence of group impact will be strong for students selecting a college, considering that college choice is observable to others, and that potential students may have little understanding of the characteristics of various colleges or courses provided, unless they consult with their reference group. Students could also be influenced by social media such as Facebook or twitter, as suggested by Johnston (2010) but this study will focus on direct contact with influence groups rather than indirect contact through electronic social media.

Who then, most strongly influences potential students when it comes to choosing a sub-degree college? The possibilities are: parents, secondary school teachers, secondary school counselors, friends, current college students, or previous college students as suggested by
Willis and Kennedy (2004), Bers (2005), and Donnellan (2002). Some of those individuals and groups can be controlled by college marketers, and some are outside the control of college marketers.

**Marketer non-controlled influencers**

Marketer non-controlled influencers (such as parents, academics, and friends) are not directly controlled by the college. Academics and friends include student peer groups, secondary school teachers/counselors, current college students and college alumni. Some studies found parental influence to be strongest (Boyer, 1987; Schuster, Costantino, and Klein, 1988; Donnellan, 2002). Other research found that friends and former students play the major role in college selection (Gorman, 1974; Clinton, 1989).

**Parents and friends**

Gorman’s (1974) study indicated that family, friends, and former students were the most important personal influence in students’ choice to attend college. This is a useful finding, but it lacks specificity – which of ‘family, friends, and former students’ is most influential and which is least influential? Willis and Kennedy (2004) surveyed 111 tertiary students studying foreign degree courses in Hong Kong or abroad. For marketer non-controllable influencers, Willis and Kennedy (2004) reported friends as having the greatest impact on the college choice of new students. Confusingly, however, parental influence was also reported as significant. Siblings’ influence was reported to be less significant - just slightly more than the influence of colleagues in the workplace.

Bers (2005) surveyed 4208 sets of students and parents from five community colleges in the U.S. Data from each college student information system were combined with parents’ responses for each student. Four out of five parents reported that they were involved in their child’s college choice process. Moreover, about half of the parents reported that the final decision to attend a particular college was a joint decision of the students and parents. Johnston T.C. (2010) found mothers and fathers’ involvement to be two of the most influential sources for students in making their choice of university. Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza (2012) also identified family opinion and expectation to be the most influential factor for university choice.

**Counselors and teachers**

Matthay (1989) found that aside from parents, counselors are also strong influences in students’ college choice. Notably, Hayes (1989) found that the role of school counselors was only important in the early stages of decision-making. Counselors take the role of gatekeepers in students’ college choice decision. Should a student express interest in a particular course, the counselor is able to help the student locate appropriate information and course material.

Maringe’s (2006) survey reported different findings. Respondents reported that their teachers have the strongest impact in students’ college choice: formal career guidance in schools was considered less important. Parents were least influential in students’ selection of a particular college. Wiese et al. (2009) also found that high school teachers’ influences were significant. These findings puzzlingly contradict studies which claim parental encouragement and involvement as the most important factor (Manski and Wise, 1983; Willis and Kennedy, 2004; Bers, 2005); and contradict studies which found that school counselors have the
strongest impact (Matthay, 1989) at least during the early stages of the decision making process.

Friends and current students
To add to the confusion, Simoes & Soares’ (2010) study suggests that “former/current university students” as well as “secondary school counselors” are important in students’ decision making process. Conversations with friends were also reported as highly influential in Lipman Hearne’s study (2009), as were ‘admitted student programs’ (where students and their families who have been offered a place are invited on campus and get a chance to speak with faculty and current students). Recommendations by friends and current college students minimize the level of perceived risk for potential students. Recommendation by current students also reduced prospective students’ uncertainty associated with purchase of service (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994).

McAlexander, Koenig, and Schouten (2004) sought to discover the reasons why some alumni recommend a course to others. McAlexander et al surveyed 481 alumni who had graduated three to eight years before the survey was conducted. The authors concluded that fun (i.e., whether or not they enjoyed school life), peak-challenge (whether or not the course was intense and pushed their limits), as well as year of graduation, were critical reasons. More recent graduates (those who graduated around three or four years prior to the study) reported a higher willingness to recommend the college to their friends. McAlexander et al explained this finding by proposing that recent graduates might have more friends that are planning to enter college or the university to advance their education.

It should be noted however, that the likelihood students would recommend the college to others increased as a result of interaction between university personnel and students (Browne et al., 1998). In other words, current students cannot be categorized purely as marketer non-controllable just as they cannot be categorized purely as marketer controllable.

In conclusion, the current state of knowledge concerning marketer non-controllable influencers is inconsistent and unsettled; nevertheless, we do know that parents, friends, and current students are the most important influencers - even though there are contradictory findings concerning their weighting. Teachers and counselors are known to influence students in the early stage of the decision-making process though there are mixed findings regarding their role and impact upon student choices.

Marketer controlled factors
In the college selection process, marketer controlled factors are those that can be controlled by the college. These factors include college publications such as catalog and leaflets or advertising such as TV or printed advertisements. Some marketer controlled factors are more directly proactive such as Open Days, phone calls from admission officers, and information on college websites.

The most influential directly proactive communication factors have been reported as face to face communication with college representatives, campus visits and websites. Pagano and Terkla, (1991) surveyed 5,000 respondents and their results highlighted the importance of campus visits on students’ decision making. Donnellan’s (2002) survey results reinforced the previous finding. Furthermore, Al-Hawary and Batayneh’s (2010) studies revealed that the factors most affecting student choices of universities are university websites and communication/correspondence with the university. The research of Bojkin, Bartkowiak and
Skuza (2012) produced similar results, emphasizing that websites are important in the selection process.

Turning now to more passive communications such as advertisements and brochure/leaflets, Rosen, Curran, and Greenlee (1988) surveyed 480 college administrators. College catalogues scored the highest mean among the various recruitment tools. Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza’s (2012) study concluded that brochures and handbooks are also important in the students’ university choice.

**Customer satisfaction and loyalty**

In addition to attracting new customers, higher education institutions also need “defensive strategies” in order to satisfy and thereby retain its current students. As suggested by Rust and Oliver (1994) as well as Jones and Suh (2000), satisfaction refers to “consumers’ post-purchase evaluation of the overall service experience (processes and outcome). It is an affective (emotional) state or feeling in which the consumers’ needs, desires, and expectations during the course of the service experience have been met or exceeded.” Customer satisfaction increases customer loyalty, improves the firm’s reputation, and enhances word of mouth. According to Lovelock et al (2004), delighted customers spread positive word of mouth and in effect become walking, talking advertisements for the firm, thereby lowering the cost of attracting new customers.

The individual student’s overall attitude toward a college depends upon the importance that person attaches to particular attributes and the belief that the specific college has those attributes (Cook and Zallocco, 1983). Students will thus select the college that best satisfies their needs and possess subjectively and objectively important attributes. Cook and Zallocco (1983) advocated a similar position to ours in stressing the importance of understanding what each individual or group of individuals believe to be important as college attributes before appropriate marketing strategies can be implemented.

Sojkin et.al (2012) contended that the most important factors influencing students’ satisfaction were social conditions (sports facilities, university canteen, coffee bars, parking spaces, subsidized accommodation), followed by professional advancement. They also found that females rely more on social factors, family opinion and student-like quality of life in their decisions than do males. In general, students will be more satisfied if they can enjoy college life with their friends and if the studies offered provide them with good career prospects.

Dolinsky (2010) on the other hand, suggested that one of the most important college or university attributes was overall academic reputation. Students will be more satisfied if they enter a college with a good reputation. Academic reputation alone, however, is not sufficient, as Nathan’s (2012) study pointed toward a completely different part of the student experience, indicating that time allocation and participation in campus activities is significantly associated with student satisfaction. Students devote considerable time to social and recreational activities, including socializing with friends and exercising or playing sports, and these activities are associated with higher levels of satisfaction upon graduation.

Donnellan (2002) suggested a few additional contributors to student satisfaction with college choice. These contributors included graduate’s comments about the college and outsiders’ impression of the college. Donnellan also includes whether the college prepares students for a good career - as did Sojkin et.al (2012) - and whether the college has at least some successful
graduates, amongst the factors contributing to choice satisfaction. Kotler and Fox (1985) pointed out the importance of post-decision assessment and follow-up action by marketers. They suggested that a phone call from the college to students after orientation week could be used to increase the likelihood of a positive post-decision assessment.

When we reflect on the overall current state of knowledge concerning marketer controllable influencers and factors we see a body of knowledge that is just as inconsistent and unsettled as the current findings concerning the non-marketer controlled influencers. Nevertheless, we do know that factors such as advertising and open days, brochures and handbooks, as well as the nature of the academic and the social experiences provided by the college are all important - even though there are inconclusive findings concerning their weighting. It is therefore time to bring more certainty and more clarity to the picture.

Hypothesis development
Based on the above review of previous research into the decision making processes leading to student college choice based upon key influencers and college attributes, the following hypotheses concerning marketer non-controlled influencers (H1 and H2) and marketer controlled attributes (H3 and H4) been derived. A conceptual model has also been constructed to capture and display hypothesized relationships between the various influencers and college attributes which influence students’ choice of Sub-degree College.

Previous research into marketer non-controlled factors has arrived at inconclusive findings about whether parents or peer groups have most influence upon student choice of college. This issue is of significant practical importance, because if colleges knew that parents, for instance, are more influential than peers, then colleges could invest more time and energy into developing product attributes seen as positive by parents rather than those attributes seen as positive by peers. Cultural considerations provide a reason for hypothesizing that parents in Hong Kong are more influential than peers. It is appropriate to infer that parental influence is of primary importance for Hong Kong youngsters, given that Chinese culture is regarded as a high power distance culture (De Mooij, M. Hofstede, G. 2011). Members of a high power distance culture have more respect for their parents and seniors than members of low power distance cultures. Consequently, we propose:

H1. Parental influence has the strongest direct and positive influence upon students’ perception of college attributes and college choice

H2. Peer groups and friends have a positive but lesser influence than parents upon students’ perception of college attributes and college choice

Regarding the marketer controlled factors; previous studies indicated that both proactive communication and passive advertising are important in the selection process. If we can discover which of those approaches to communication is most influential, that would matter to colleges in ways that are practically and financially significant. In particular, if active communication is more effective than passive communication, then colleges could not only
use that knowledge to attract more students, but also to save and reallocate moneys that would otherwise be spent on glossy brochures and advertising campaigns.

To arrive at our hypotheses on this issue, we again took culture into consideration and propose that the collectivist culture of Hong Kong (Bhasin, 2007; Evers and Katyal, 2008; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2011) implies that students and their parents give more importance to direct contact from colleges than to indirect contact through brochures and advertising. The nature of making a choice of Sub-degree College is also important in the formulation of our hypotheses. As we noted in the literature review, decisions about college choice entail high involvement because students need to consider a wide range of factors, and high involvement cannot occur without direct communication between students and colleges – communication that goes beyond viewing an advertisement or reading a brochure. We therefore hypothesize that:

H3. Proactive communication by colleges has the strongest direct and positive influence upon students’ perception of college attributes and college choice

H4. Advertising and college publications have a positive but lesser influence upon students’ perception of college attributes and college choice

Diagram 1: Conceptual Model of the individuals/groups and the communication factors which influence student perception of Hong Kong Sub-Degree Colleges attributes
Methodology

Survey data was collected from respondents in Hong Kong who were sub-degree students. A broad range of variables related to college choice was studied and the main tool employed for data analysis was partial least squares which is increasingly being used to test hypothesized relationships (Muthaly, 2013). PLS provides explanation of the relationships within a model (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982) and enables a simultaneous analysis of whether the hypothesized relationships at the theoretical level are empirically confirmed (Khalifa & Liu, 2003). Therefore, PLS is deemed effective for analyses of exploratory models such as ours, where an explanation of the construct interrelationship is desired (Ranganathan, et al., 2004).

After respondents were selected they were contacted by one of the authors who personally administered the questionnaire. While other approaches, such as personal interviews, were considered, such techniques can be time consuming and costly in comparison to a printed questionnaire (Aaker, Kumar, and Day, 2001) and would therefore have limited the number of students who could be included in the project.

The survey instrument was developed after conducting a broad review of the relevant literature. The marketer controlled factors were measured with seven survey items adapted from Rosen, Curran and Greenlee (Rosen, Curran, & Greenlee, 1998a), Donnellan (2002), and Gomes and Murphy (2003). Non-controlled factors were measured with seven survey items adapted from Willis and Kennedy (2004), Bers (2005), and Donnellan (2002). College attributes were measured with 10 survey items adapted from Drewes and Michael (2006), Maringe (2006), and Donnellan (2002).

Questionnaire respondents were assured of anonymity. Survey questions were close-ended and Likert scales (“0” being not applicable, “1” being not influential, and “5” being very influential), and ranking scales (“1” being not influential and “5” being very influential) were employed. A pretest was performed to identify any problems with the questionnaire contents in regard to respondent understanding of wordings and procedures.

The sample was drawn from one of the major colleges providing sub-degree courses in Hong Kong. The use of a single institution within a country is common in such studies (for example, Auyeung and Sands, 1996; Chen and West 2008; Daly, 2005). Sub-degree students in Higher Diploma year one, and year two students majoring in Marketing who had already chosen their college courses, were selected for the study. Students who had already made their college choice were our focus because those who have not yet made their final decision may not have encountered, or have been influenced by, some of the variables being studied.

A total of 13 classes with 550 students were involved in this research. 314 questionnaires (which is within the range of responses suggested as sufficient by Roscoe, 1975) were administered, correctly filled out, and used for the data analysis. The required minimum sample size for analyzing data using PLS is at least (1) ten times the largest number of indicators used to measure a construct or (2) ten times the largest number of structural paths directed at a particular construct in the structural model (Hair, Ringle & Sarstedt 2011; Henseler, Ringle & Sinkovics 2009; Ringle, Sarstedt & Straub 2012). The largest number of indicators is nine, referring to the nine dimensions forming our “College Attributes” construct. The largest numbers of paths pointing to a construct in the structural model is five, and are represented by “Parental”, “Academic”, “Print”, “Proactive” and “Advertisement”. Therefore, based on the ten-times rule of thumb, the required minimum sample size for both
criteria is 40 or 90 respectively. However, the sample size for this study is 314, which is far greater than the recommended minimum sample size required to use PLS for purposes of the overall structured equation model.

Descriptive data such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used to obtain a general picture of the characteristics of the test variables. Partial least squares analysis was then conducted and the values of different variables were compared. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software and the Partial Least Squares (PLS) procedure in SmartPLS software were applied to the data.

**Analytical techniques**

The conceptual model was tested with structural equation modeling (SEM) using the partial least squares (PLS) procedure (Hulland, 1999; Ranganathan, Dhaliwal, & Teo, 2004). PLS enables researchers to explain the relationships within a model (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982) and thereby enables a simultaneous examination of whether the hypothesized relationships at the theoretical level are empirically confirmed (Khalifa & Liu, 2003). Therefore, PLS was considered ideal for analysis and evaluation of our exploratory model.

**Item Reliability**

For individual item reliability, as demonstrated in Table 2, the loading of the first-order factors ranged from 0.5558 to 0.8095 (p<0.01), indicating acceptable correlations among the first-order factors, because items with a loading of less than 0.40 were dropped (Bagozzi & Yi, 1994; Hulland, 1999).

**Convergent Validity**

The traditional reliability measure of Cronbach’s alpha assumes an equal weight for the items measuring the construct and is influenced by the number of items in the construct (Ranganathan, et al., 2004). In PLS, however, composite reliability depends on actual reading to compute the factor scores, proving to be a better indicator of internal consistency. Similarly, Fornell and Larcher (1981) argue that composite reliability is superior to Cronbach’s alpha because it uses the items’ loadings obtained within the nomological network or casual model. As illustrated in Table 2, all composite reliability estimates ranged from 0.849 to 0.917.

**Results and Discussion**

Contrary to H1, the results indicated that for non marketer controlled factors, the impact of academics and/or friends was higher than parental influence. For academics and/or friends the significant loadings in order of importance were secondary school counselors, followed by current college students and previous college students. While for marketer controlled factors, as predicted in H3, the impact of proactive communication factors is stronger than the impact of publications and passive advertising. The significant loadings in order of magnitude were phone calls from admission, followed by Open Days. In terms of college attributes, the significant loadings in order of magnitude were social life, school fees and sports.

We were surprised that parental influence is not as significant as secondary school counselors and current / previous college students. This suggests that culture, as a shaper of perception (Evers and Katyal, 2008) may have less force than is usually the case because of the ways in which counselors and college students are experienced as being objectively more knowledgeable than parents when it comes to college attributes. Perhaps the high perceived
risk noted earlier that is associated with sub-degree college choice (Kotler and Fox, 1985), overrides the usual power of culture, and accounts for our finding that students give most weight to the opinions of school counselors and previous college students.

For marketer controlled factors, the results support our hypothesis H3 - but in doing so they contradict some previous findings (Rosen, Curran, and Greenlee 1988; Sojkin, Bartkowiak and Skuza, 2012) by indicating that proactive college communications are more influential than passive college communications. As discussed above, this result may reflect the fact that high involvement decision making requires interactive communication. Moreover, in a collectivist culture (De Mooij, M. Hofstede, G. 2011), personal interaction and communication is important for students engaged in high risk decision making.

From diagram 2, it can be seen that for marketer controlled factors, respondents considered that proactive communications such as open days and phone calls were most influential (0.315 path coefficient). For marketer non-controlled factors, the stronger path coefficient was academic/friends (0.281 path coefficient). The most important college attributes were social life, school fees and sports. Analysis of the satisfaction components data showed that colleges benefit from having successful graduates. Outsiders’ favorable impression of the college received the highest loading.

Diagram 2: college attributes which influence college choice and post decision satisfaction
Table 1: The importance of college attributes and marketer controlled and non-marketer controlled factors using partial least squares analysis

Table 2: Loadings of the items related to the factors of the four constructs

**Teachers and counselors**
Our findings contradict prior research (Hayes, 1989) that indicated teachers and counselors are not important college choice influencers. The importance of counselors and teachers is instead highlighted by our findings. School and college counselors act as gatekeepers and help to channel information to students who express their interest in particular types of courses.

Because this study found counselors and teachers to be highly influential, we recommend that besides providing some catalogues and subject leaflets to students, college personnel should also work closely with secondary school counselors/teachers, perhaps by providing them answers to frequently asked questions that students are concerned about in the preliminary stage of decision making. This information could also be made available in the form of a table for easy checking. College personnel could arrange workshops with secondary school counselors/teachers so that students will be aware of the college (and courses provided). These actions and activities would deepen students’ awareness of the features of a particular college and increase the likelihood of those students including that college in their awareness set during the early stages of the decision-making process.

**Previous and current college students**
Previous and current students of the college also had a strong influence on the Hong Kong sub-degree students’ choice of college. This is consistent with the recent findings of Lipman Hearne (2009) and Simoes and Soares (2010), but less consistent with older studies of college choice. The findings can however be readily related to characteristics of Chinese culture: In cultures that are collectivistic, consumers are more likely to acquire information via interpersonal communication, relying heavily on word of mouth (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). Furthermore, when dealing with an intangible service, the preference in such cultures is to use an information provider who people in the social network already know (Lin et al., 2007).

While current and previous students are seen as not being directly controlled by marketers, they are an information source with relatively strong ties to a college. Graduates in particular can have a vested interest in the reputation of the college whose brand they carry on their qualification. Given the significance of recommendations from former students on college choice, it is clear that colleges need to invest in building long-
term relationships with graduates: to keep them informed of what the college offers and to enlist their aid in promotional activities. Moreover, our results highlight the importance of post-purchase satisfaction for graduates so that they are more likely to spread positive word of mouth.

Parents
Our findings differ from the results of Johnston T.C. (2010), and those of Sojkin, Bartkowski and Skuza (2012) who emphasized the importance of parental influence on student decision making for college choice. Our results indicated that parents in Hong Kong do not have the major influence in the decision making of their college-aged children. Nonetheless, parents are still important influencers because they are more often than not the ones who actually pay for the tuition fee of their children. Interestingly, the present study does indicate that female students are more affected by their father’s suggestions than those of their mothers – further research would be required to discover whether this is a culturally derived phenomenon.

Although academics and friends have the strongest influence, the parents’ influence should not be discounted or neglected. Bers’ (2005) study revealed that about half of the parents surveyed reported that their children’s final decision to attend a particular college was a joint decision of the students and the parents. Warwick and Mansfield (2003), reported that on average, parents use three to four different resources (such as newspapers, television, or magazines.) to get information. For parents, the most popular means of collecting information include college catalogue and personal contact, such as talking to teachers.

Warwick and Mansfield (2003) concluded that the decision making criteria of students and parents are remarkably similar. Their research indicated that the main difference is that parents placed more emphasis on the reputation of the school, whereas students put more emphasis on faculty reputation. Both students and parents believe that academics, financial aid, tuition cost, security, and friendly atmosphere are important.

Open Day
We found that open day is one of the most important marketer controlled factors influencing a college choice decision. Open days not only provide parents with direct access to information but also provide a chance for personal contact between parents and college personnel. Open Day is also a chance for potential students as well as their parents to get a feel of the atmosphere of a college. Parents and students can also learn more about academic aspects of a college during the visit and can make direct contact with current students or lecturers.

The fact that open days and phone calls from admissions were found to be the most influential marketing-controlled sources by quite a margin, is consistent with Hong Kong having a collectivist culture where interpersonal communication is most critical, and where buying decisions are often made based on trust and feelings between a consumer and a company or service provider (De Moolj and Hofstede, 2011). Both ‘open days’ and ‘phone calls from admissions office’ are interactive and provide two-way channels for students and college personnel to clarify perceptions of the benefits associated with studying at the college, and thereby help to establish positive yet realistic expectations for students.
Yang and Hsiao (2006) discovered that most potential students visit the campus they eventually choose before enrolment. If colleges can expose potential students to faculty members such as current students, successful graduates, and teachers in both a formal (briefing session) and an informal (discussion and social gathering) setting, potential students will be more confident that they could fit into the college environment. This not only increases potential students’ chances of enrolling in the college but also enhances a higher level of student-college fit after enrolment.

**Social Life**
Social life emerged as the most strongly influential institutional attribute on college choice in this study. This was followed by price and sports. In Donnellan’s (2002) study, price emerged as the most influential institutional attribute on college choice, followed by location and specific majors. Other studies identified program or reputation-related attributes as having significant influences (Hooley & Lynch, 1981; Hossler, 2004; Mazzarol, 1988; Russell, 2005; Soutar & Turner, 2002). The fact that the sub-degree students in the current study identified ‘non-academic’ attributes as having more influence could suggest that sub-degree students have different priorities to degree students. Alternatively, our finding could be explained by the context of a collectivist culture.

**Satisfaction**
Our survey results indicated that social life, school fees, variety of sports/recreational activities got the highest loading in order of magnitude for satisfaction with college attributes. Enjoyment of social life and recreational activities increased students’ satisfaction with their college life and their college choice. The result was in line with Sojkin et.al’s (2012) findings and Nathan’s (2012) findings which stress the importance of social conditions on student levels of satisfaction.

Dolinsky’s (2010) study indicated the importance of college reputation for student satisfaction with their choice of college. A good reputation gives outsiders a better impression of the college, which then adds to the satisfaction of current students. The results of our survey show that outside impressions and successful graduates are the key determinants of student satisfaction with their choice of college. Students are more satisfied if they perceive positive outsider impressions of the college and if the college has successful graduates. Our findings highlighted the importance of “successful graduates” as these alumni provide evidence to college students of a promising future and good career prospects. Consistent with our findings, Sojkin et.al (2012) point out that offering professional advancement and promising futures also increases student satisfaction with their choice of college.

Given these findings, colleges should advertise in ways that foreground successful college alumni sharing their positive experiences.

**Implications of this study**
This study found that potential students rated previous students as highly influential in their college choice.

Moreover, the study highlighted the importance of post-purchase satisfaction for students. Post-purchase evaluation is the last stage in the buying process. It follows from our finding
that satisfied customers (previously enrolled and currently enrolled students) would be influential in the early stages of the decision making process for new students. “Current/previous students” who are regarded as marketer non-controllable factors could nevertheless be partly marketer controllable by colleges taking the approach outlined below.

Satisfied students directly help to generate new business and revenue by suggesting that juniors apply for entrance to their college. In the context of higher education, marketing managers should be able to identify “customer high schools”, from which most of the college’s students are drawn, so marketing strategies can be tailored for these target high schools. College graduates who were satisfied with their choice and who obtained a good job, or who subsequently gained entry to university, or those who greatly enjoyed their college life, could act as key influencers. Connections (such as seminars, sharing sessions, leaflets, or informal conversations) could be arranged between these alumni and prospective students. The sharing of experience helps to reduce perceived risk (both function risk and social risk) faced by prospective students. The process could be repeated each year with positive word of mouth continuing to influence potential applicants to apply for the college.

Limitations
The findings and implications drawn from this study should be used with care due to limitations in the methodology and the sample population. Firstly, although survey research is cross sectional it only captures perceptions and feelings at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies would deepen the validity of our findings. The impact of changes in specific marketer controllable and non-controllable factors which influence the selection of colleges cannot be examined and tested in a moment-in-time survey such as ours. Secondly, the respondents were drawn from one division of a particular college. Students from different divisions of the same college may report different results if surveyed.

Suggestions for future research
As mentioned earlier, we found that the opinions and advice of fathers tends to have a higher impact for female students than for male students regarding college choice. This is a finding worthy of further investigation. If it turned out to be true over time, then colleges would benefit by discovering which college attributes are considered to be important by fathers in Hong Kong, particularly those colleges that offer courses where female students are in the majority.

Secondly, the number and type of marketer controllable factors, non-controllable factors, and college attributes may change over time. Due to advances in technology and the impact of those advances on society, it is suggested that further research should include the influence of social media such as Facebook.

Conclusions
This study investigated a broad range of information sources and influencers used by Hong Kong students in selecting sub-degree colleges. The partial least squares analysis enabled identification of the relative impact of various factors, while correlation and regression highlighted significant relationships between variables.

The results confirm that influential others such as college staff and current college students/alumni play a crucial role in the process of students making a choice of college. Some of the influencing factors that have emerged from this study had not been highlighted
in studies of non Hong Kong students (specifically the influence of phone-calls from admissions staff and opinions of previous students; cultural factors that influence choice decisions of Chinese students; and the greater importance given to ‘non-academic’ attributes such as social life).

Replications and extensions of this study needs to occur in other contexts so that differences between sub-degree and degree students, and differences between Chinese students and those from other cultures can be better understood, thus enabling more effective management of marketing strategies. We do not consider the specificity of our findings to be a disappointing outcome; rather we hope to have demonstrated the need for research similar to ours but targeted at different types of student populations. If Hong Kong is to establish itself as a regional education hub (Cheng et al, 2011) then higher education managers within the region require finely grained understandings of the factors which influence student perception of quality and benefits; understandings specific to each of the various student groups, typed by destination (and perhaps also by culture): sub-degree, degree, and postgraduate.

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