

# The Relationship Between Thai Students' Choices of International Education and their Families

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*This paper explores the relationship between influencing factors from family on Thai students' choices of international education. The study classifies choices of international education into the decision to study abroad, choice of country, city, academic program, and of university. The influences from family are identified as finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition. The results indicate a positive relationship between choices and influencing factors. However, the degree of associations between variables are mixed. The decision making-process of Thai students is complex and involves various stakeholders. This information affords protagonists marketing Australian education a better understanding of choices made by international students.*

family, education choices, international students, Thailand

## INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has impacted on higher education such that there is an increasing flow of students across borders. Higher education is part of the increasing globalisation of the trade in goods and services. De Wit (2002) identified that today's universities and academic systems worldwide seek to make themselves attractive to international students, and to build links with universities in other countries, to enhance their global reach.

Australia has become one of the key exporters of education to the global market. In 2001 Australian Education International (AEI) reported that there were 233,408 international students studying at Australian education institutions. Of these 129,071 were enrolled at universities. There were also 49,380 in the ELICOS sector, 39,845 in the Vocational Education sector, and 15,112 in the Schools sector. According to IDP's latest survey of international university student numbers for 2003, the number of international students enrolled at universities increased to 174,732. Of these 114,680 are studying on-campus in Australia and 60,052 were transnational students (IDP 2003).

Research on marketing of Australian education suggested that Australia should prepare for competition in the global market (Smart and Ang 1993). Many studies attempt to investigate the choices of international education (AIEF 1997; Lawley 1997) in order to improve marketing strategies. Previous studies suggested that interpersonal influence and recommendation from family members are one of the most important sources of information and encouragement for complex services like international education (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Although the interpersonal influences among family members on international students' decision-making process are diverse, previous studies (e.g. AIEF, 1997; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) examine only a few dimensions of the sources of influence. The gap in knowledge relating to other aspects of influencing factors from family begged for further research, in order to develop the understanding of relationship between familial influence, international students, and the educational institutions.

### PUSH VS. PULL FACTORS

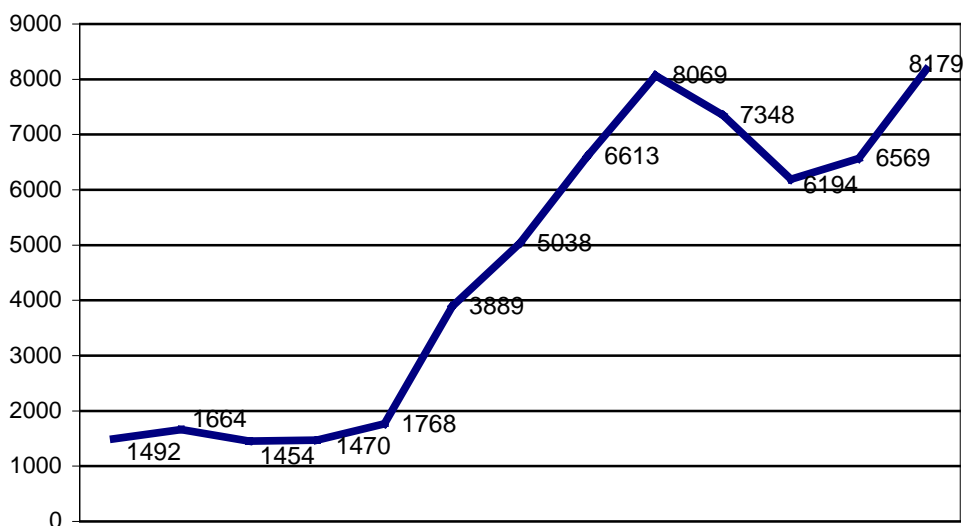
The influencing factors discussed in previous studies can be reclassified, by looking at their interplay in terms of home versus host countries. McMahon (1992) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) suggest the flow of students internationally results from a combination of 'push and pull' factors. On one hand, push factors operate within the source country and initiate the students' decision to undertake international study. On the other hand, pull factors operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

McMahon (1992) suggested that the push model depends on the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of a home country in the world economy, the priority placed on education by the government of the home country, and the availability of educational opportunities in that country. Major components of the pull model, in contrast, are the economic link between home and host countries, the availability of scholarships from host nations, and political and cultural links between home and host countries.

Most studies on push-pull factors determining students' choices of international education, strive to identify the degree of importance of these various influencing factors. The influences from family in the forms of opinion and recommendation are substantially reported in previous studies (e.g. AIEF 1997; Lawley 1997; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Smart and Ang 1993). AIEF (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) reported that the recommendation from family is one of the prominent push factors for international students.

### THAI STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

AEI (2000) reported that there was a 6 per cent increase in Thai students studying in Australia institutions in 1999 over 1998. In 2000, international students from Thailand ranked ninth of all source countries (the top ten countries account for 76 per cent of all students) and accounts for 5 per cent of all Asian students in Australia. In 2001, the number of Thai students enrolled in Australian universities has grown 17 per cent from 2000. The number of Thai students in Australia from 1988-2000 is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure1. Numbers of Thai students enrolled in Australia from 1988-2000**

In terms of the education market trend for Thai students in Australia, there has been some shift of Thai students to higher education because of perceptions and job prospects after graduation (AEI 2000). Thai students are becoming more discriminating, particularly when coloured by their own

perceptions of the relative values of qualifications which are based on their experiences in Thailand, which cause 'guilt of association' for Vocational education and training (VET) providers. These shifts could explain the increase in Thai students in higher education and declines in VET, over 1996-1999, because VET courses are of one to two years duration and the highest qualification obtainable is an Advanced Diploma. For credential conscious Thai people, qualifications below Bachelor degree are generally not countenanced unless they can articulate into university courses (AEI 2000). This fact is supported by Lawley (1997) and Pimpa (2002) who concluded that the Thai market for Australian universities is predominantly postgraduate.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to explore and identify the relationship between Thai students' choices of international education and influencing factors from family. Two major research questions are:

- 1) What is the pattern of relationship between family and Thai students' choices of international education?
- 2) What are the implications for people involved in marketing Australian education to Thailand?

To answer both questions, two methods were employed to clarify these research problems. Study 1 is a qualitative study that aims to identify how family influences students' choices. To further investigate the relationship between choices of international education and influencing factors from family, Study 2 employed quantitative methods (Burne, 2000). Details of each study are presented in the following section.

### STUDY 1

In order to analyse how family influences Thai students' choice of international education, three focus group interviews were conducted. Each group contained nine participants. The first group of participants was recruited through Thai students associations in Victoria. Then, a snowball technique was employed to recruit the participants of the second and third groups. The researcher moderated the interviews. After a general introduction, in which the group's discussion was described as a study of "*the influence of reference groups on Thai students*", participants were asked to discuss their choices of international education, and how their family influenced these choices.

Regarding the choices of international education, Thai students revealed that they made five basic choices prior to studying abroad; the decision to study abroad (instead of studying at home), the choice of country, city, academic course, and university. The focus group discussions indicated that family is among the most important sources of influence. The results also reveal that influence from family can be slotted into one of five categories: 'finance', 'information', 'expectation', 'competition', and 'persuasion'. Selected comments from the focus group interviews are shown in Table 1.

Firstly, most students mentioned family **financial support** as one of the most important factors. Most students identified financial factors as family support for tuition fees, cost of living in a foreign country, and related expenses. Most students noted that financial support from the family might limit or expand the scope of their country choices, as their financial sponsors may support or constrain them to study in certain destinations or courses.

Secondly, **information** from any family member who used to study in Australia was mentioned as one of the influencing factors. Most Thai students asked questions regarding the country and city

of intended destination, the reputation of the academic course and the university, part-time employment, and accommodation from family members who had been living abroad.

**Table 1. Selected Focus Group Comments on Family Influence**

Finance	<i>I really wanted to study in the UK but my parents could not afford it, so I simply shifted to study in Australia as it is much cheaper.</i>
Information	<i>I met two relatives who graduated from Australian universities before I made my final choice to study in Australia. They said that Australia is a good country to study and overseas students can work up to 20 hours per week.</i>
Expectation	<i>My father did not attend any university, so he transferred his hope to me, to have a good education and speak English fluently.</i>
Competition	<i>I realise that I wanted to upgrade my education qualification because of many factors. One reason is when one of my uncle's daughters went to study in America.</i>
Persuasion	<i>My parents chose Melbourne for me because of my relatives whom lived here.</i>

Many students reported that they were pressured by the family **expectation** prior to their final decision to study abroad. Most students mentioned that expectation from parents and siblings had a great impact on their decision to study abroad, choices of country, academic course, and university. Some students attempted to comply with the expectations of the others, in order to satisfy them. Some students mentioned that their parents convinced them, since their childhood, that education from overseas university is superior to local education. Most students stated that their families expect them to obtain an overseas academic qualification, be fluent in a foreign language, and gain valuable life experience. Thus, this kind of idea formed their positive attitudes toward international education.

A few students expressed the view that **competition** among family members arises from comparing the opportunity and intentions of overseas study between the students themselves and the other family members, such as siblings, cousins, or relatives. It appears that Thai students tend to compare themselves with others in terms of academic achievement.

Regarding **persuasion**, some students reported two major forms of persuasion from family. Strong family opinion was frequently mentioned by many students. They said that their parents simply use the expression of like or dislike related to their decision to study abroad. Secondly, family persuasion in the form of "everyone else" was frequently mentioned by students. Their parents tried to convince them to study abroad because everyone else did it.

## STUDY 2

To further investigate the findings from Study 1, the second study examined the relationship between five choices of international education and types of influence from family.

## Sample

Thai full-fee paying international students were chosen as the population of the study. The researcher sent questionnaires with consent forms, both in Thai, to approximately 1,600 FPIS students from 28 higher education institutions across Australia. A total of 803 completed questionnaires were returned, and used in the analysis. A profile of the sample is presented in Table 2.

## Structure of the questionnaire

The major aim of this paper is to analyse the relationship between influence from family and education family and Thai students' choices of international education. The 30 items of the

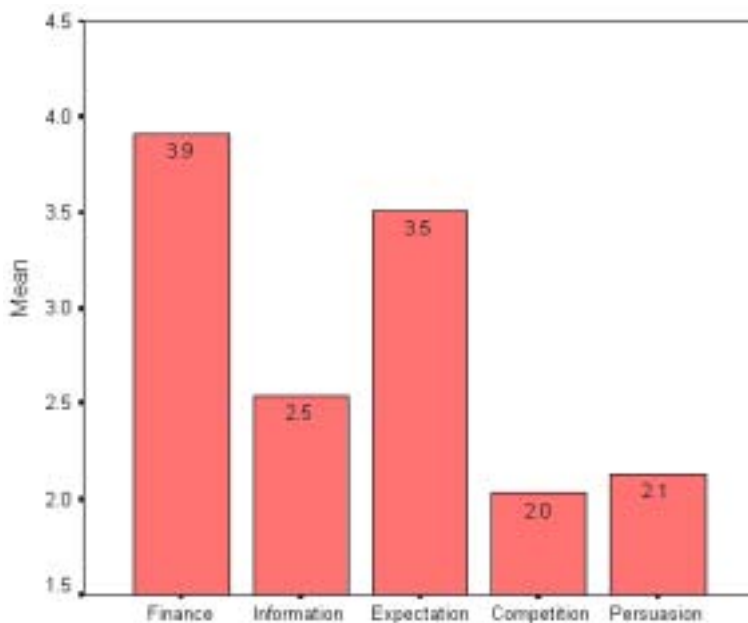
questionnaire used response categories of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument was divided into five subscales: family finance scale (FFS), family information scale (FIS), family expectation scale (FES), family competition scale (FCS), and family persuasion scale (FPS). Each subscale contains six items. Details of the scale is presented in Pimpa (2003). Regarding data analysis, Spearman's Rank Order Correlation ( $\rho$ ) is used to calculate the strength of the relationship between variables.

**Table 2. Profiles of the Thai students responding to the questionnaire**

<b>Age</b>	17-44 years (mean = 24.8 years)
<b>Gender</b>	Male = 373, Female = 430
<b>Level of education</b>	Undergraduate = 274 Masters = 474 Doctoral = 55
<b>Living Area</b>	Bangkok = 490 Northern = 67 Southern = 47 Central = 111 North Eastern = 52 Eastern = 36
<b>Education Background</b>	Private school = 88 Public school = 61 Private university = 331 Public university = 323

## Results

Participants were asked to rate their perception regarding the influence from family on their choices of international education. Means and standard deviations of five influencing factors (three from peers and two from agents) are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Types of Familial Influencing Factor**

Figure 2 shows that financial support from family ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $S.D. = 1.28$ ) is the strongest of the influencing factors on choices of international education, when compared with the other influencing factors from family. Family expectation ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $S.D. = 1.31$ ) is also one of the strong familial influencing factors on Thai students' choices of international education. Furthermore, the results indicate that competition among family members ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $S.D. = 1.31$ ) is the least influencing among all five factors.

Regarding the relationship between influencing factors and choices of international education, the results indicate that all five influencing factors are positively associated with the decision to study abroad, choice of country, city, academic course, and university, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Correlation between Choices and Influencing Factors**

Choices*Types of Influence	$\rho$	Mean ( $\sigma$ )	$R^2$
<b>Family Finance</b>			
Decision to study abroad* Family Finance	0.577*	3.51 (1.35)	0.33
Choice of country* Family Finance	0.353*	3.38 (1.31)	0.12
Choice of city* Family Finance	0.268*	3.02 (1.33)	0.07
Choice of academic program* Family Finance	0.163*	2.77 (1.42)	0.02
Choice of university* Family Finance	0.157*	2.77 (1.35)	0.02
<b>Family Information</b>			
Decision to study abroad* Family Information	0.696*	2.68 (1.42)	0.48
Choice of country* Family Information	0.633*	2.69 (1.38)	0.40
Choice of city* Family Information	0.619*	2.64 (1.37)	0.38
Choice of academic program* Family Information	0.501*	2.33 (1.30)	0.25
Choice of university* Family Information	0.522*	2.33 (1.29)	0.27
<b>Family Expectation</b>			
Decision to study abroad* Family Expectation	0.651*	3.16 (1.36)	0.42
Choice of country* Family Expectation	0.476*	2.94 (1.31)	0.23
Choice of city* Family Expectation	0.457*	2.83 (1.30)	0.21
Choice of academic program* Family Expectation	0.366*	2.61 (1.36)	0.13
Choice of university* Family Expectation	0.347*	2.54 (1.31)	0.12
<b>Family Competition</b>			
Decision to study abroad* Family Competition	0.791*	2.15 (1.35)	0.63
Choice of country* Family Competition	0.726*	1.96 (1.19)	0.52
Choice of city* Family Competition	0.670*	1.88 (1.15)	0.45
Choice of academic program* Family Competition	0.647*	1.92 (1.19)	0.42
Choice of university* Family Competition	0.659*	1.93 (1.22)	0.43
<b>Family Persuasion</b>			
Decision to study abroad* Family Persuasion	0.812*	2.14 (1.32)	0.65
Choice of country* Family Persuasion	0.795*	2.11 (1.32)	0.63
Choice of city* Family Persuasion	0.729*	2.12 (1.33)	0.53
Choice of academic program* Family Persuasion	0.633*	1.88 (1.16)	0.40
Choice of university* Family Persuasion	0.651*	1.86 (1.19)	0.42

\* $p < 0.01$

### **Finance**

The results indicate an overall positive relationship between financial support from family and five choices of international education: the decision to study abroad ( $\rho=0.577$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of country ( $\rho=0.353$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of city ( $\rho=0.268$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of academic program ( $\rho=0.163$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and choice of university ( $\rho=0.157$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The range of the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 2-33 per cent shared variance, which means there is not much overlap between financial support from family and Thai students' choice of international education. The mean scores indicate that among five choices of international education, family financial support has a strong impact on Thai students' decision to study abroad (instead of at home) and choice of country. In contrast, it has the least impact on choice of academic program and university.

### **Information**

The results indicate an overall positive relationship between informational influence from family and five choices of international education: the decision to study abroad ( $\rho=0.696$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of country ( $\rho=0.633$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of city ( $\rho=0.619$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of academic program ( $\rho=0.501$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and choice of university ( $\rho=0.522$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The range of the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 25-48 per cent shared variance, which means there is moderate overlap between information influence from family and Thai students' choices of international education.

The mean scores indicate that among five choices of international education, family financial support has a strong impact on Thai students' decision to study abroad (instead of at home), choice of country, and city. In contrast, it has the least impact on choice of academic program and university.

### ***Expectation***

The results indicate the moderate positive relationship between expectation from family and five choices of international education: the decision to study abroad ( $\rho=0.651$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of country ( $\rho=0.476$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of city ( $\rho=0.457$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of academic program ( $\rho=0.366$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and choice of university ( $\rho=0.347$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The range of the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 12-42 per cent shared variance, which means there is moderate overlap between family expectation and Thai students' choice of international education. The mean scores indicate that the expectation from Thai family has a strong influence on Thai students' decision to study abroad but it has the least impact on choice of university.

### ***Competition***

The results indicate the moderate positive relationship between competition among family members and five choices of international education: the decision to study abroad ( $\rho=0.791$ ,  $n = 803$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of country ( $\rho=0.726$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of city ( $\rho=0.670$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of academic program ( $\rho=0.647$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and choice of university ( $\rho=0.659$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The range of the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 42-63 per cent shared variance, which means there is moderately high overlap between familial competition and Thai students' choices of international education. The mean scores indicate that the expectation from Thai family has a strong influence on Thai students' decision to study abroad but it has the least impact on choice of city.

### ***Persuasion***

Regarding the relationship between the persuasion from family and Thai students' choices of international education, the results indicate a moderate positive relationship between choices and family persuasion: the decision to study abroad ( $\rho=0.812$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of country ( $\rho=0.795$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of city ( $\rho=0.729$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), choice of academic program ( $\rho=0.633$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and choice of university ( $\rho=0.651$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The range of the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 40-65 per cent shared variance, which means there is moderately high overlap between family persuasion and Thai students' choices of international education. The mean scores indicate that the expectation from Thai family has a strong influence on Thai students' decision to study abroad. On the other hand, it does not have a strong impact on students' choice of university.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis of Thai students' choices of international education reveals that Thai students in Australia made different choices prior to the final decision to enrol in a particular institution. Thus, the results elucidate that the choice of international education is not a one-step decision-making process. Each choice consists of complex processes and can be influenced by various factors. The study also indicates that there are different levels of correlation between Thai students' five choices of international education and five types of influencing factor from family.

The results indicate that the correlations between the decision to study abroad and five influencing factors from family (finance, information, expectation, competition, and persuasion) are highly correlated. Furthermore, the mean scores indicate that the five influencing factors significantly impact on the decision to study abroad. Thus, this study confirms that the decision to study abroad (instead of at home) is the most important choice for Thai students. On the contrary, the results show that the correlations between Thai students' choice of university, academic program and five

familial influencing factors are low. The mean scores confirm that the family members do not highly influence Thai students' choices of academic program and university. The qualitative findings (from Study 1) explain that, for Thai students, choices of international academic course and university are more 'personal choices' than the other choices of international education. Therefore, students have more freedom to make both choices.

Finally, the study indicates that stakeholders involved in the global marketing of Australian education should be aware of various factors that impact on students' choices of international education. As the international education market evolves, protagonists involved in the marketing of Australian education ought to better understand international students, in order to sustain the strong position of Australian education services in the global market.

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