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Hospitality Graduate Students' Program Choice Decisions: Implications for Faculty and Administrators

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Abstract

Despite rapid growth in the quality and volume of hospitality graduate research and education in recent years, little information is available in the extant body of literature about the program choices of hospitality management graduate students, information that is crucial for program administrators and faculty in their attempts to attract the most promising students to their programs. This paper reports on a study among graduate students in U.S, hospitality management programs designed to understand why they chose to pursue their degrees at their programs of choice. Given the large numbers of international students presently enrolled, the study additionally looked into why international hospitality management students chose to leave their home countries and why they decided to pursue a graduate degree in the U.S. Based on the findings, implications for hospitality administrators and faculty in the U.S. and abroad are discussed and directions for future research are presented.

Keywords

hospitality management, graduate education, graduate hospitality student, international hospitality graduate student; graduate program choice

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Despite rapid growth in the quality and volume of hospitality graduate research and education in recent years, little information is available in the extant body of literature about the program choices of hospitality management graduate students, information that is crucial for program administrators and faculty in their attempts to attract the most promising students to their programs. This paper reports on a study among graduate students in U.S. hospitality management programs designed to understand why they chose to pursue their degrees at their programs of choice. Given the large numbers of international students presently enrolled, the study additionally looked into why international hospitality management students chose to leave their home countries and why they decided to pursue a graduate degree in the U.S. Based on the findings, implications for hospitality administrators and faculty in the U.S. and abroad are discussed and directions for future research are presented.

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Introduction

U.S. hospitality graduate education has grown tremendously in recent years (Severt, Tesone, Bottorff, & Carpenter, 2009). Back in the mid-1980s, there were 12 Ph.D. and 26 Master's level hospitality management graduate programs in the U.S. (Formica, 1996). In the early 1990s there were approximately 25 graduate programs in hospitality and tourism education in the United States (Evans, 1990). Today, there are 31 U.S.-based graduate hospitality programs granting M.S. and/or Ph.D. degrees (Van Hoof, Wu, Zhang & Mattila, 2013), with several additional programs pending and awaiting approval, such as at the University of Houston. An estimated 600 students are pursuing MS degrees and some 150 students are working towards a Ph.D. (Van Hoof et al., 2013). This increase in the number of programs and students has brought about a rapid growth in the volume and level of graduate student research (Ottenbacher, Harrington, & Parsa, 2009; Tsang & Hsu, 2011) and given rise to a change in the nature and focus of hospitality management faculty positions. Some thirty years ago, the majority of hospitality graduate programs were designed to train professionals for industry positions (Pizam, 1985). Today, this picture has changed as research has come to the forefront as the main focus of hospitality management graduate programs and as graduate students prepare for faculty rather than industry positions. An example of how hospitality graduate student research has grown over the years is the Annual Graduate Education and Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism. Hosted on an annual basis by leading programs in the field, the conference attracts hundreds of graduate students to present their research and establish professional connections (Van Hoof & Mattila, 2010). As a testament to its growing importance in hospitality graduate education, the conference has tripled in size from the approximately 120 attendees who attended the first conference at the University of Houston to over 300 attendees annually (Van Hoof & Mattila, 2010).

While the field of graduate hospitality education continues to expand, this growth has also increased the competition among programs to attract the best possible students, as interest in joining graduate programs is still growing and as available faculty positions in the U.S. are limited. Despite this

growth in quantity and quality, there is little empirical research available that looks into the factors that graduate students take into consideration when choosing their programs of studies. Most of the research related to graduate hospitality education was conducted in the early and mid-1990s (Enz, Renaghan, & Geller, 1993; Evans, 1990; Huang & Brown, 1996; Khwaja & Bosselman, 1990; Partlow, 1990) and none of it specifically addressed the students' choice decisions. Whereas we know more or less how many students are pursuing degrees and in what areas of specialization, we do not have a clear understanding of why they choose one program or university over another or why international graduate students, who make up the bulk of the student body in particular at the Ph.D. level, decide to leave their home countries and come to the U.S. to pursue their degrees.

With students faced with more choices, answers to questions such as why they choose one program over another and why international students come to the U.S. for their studies becomes crucial for administrators and faculty in the U.S. and abroad as the competition for the very best and promising young minds is growing and with programs trying to present themselves in the best possible light. The study reported here was aimed at providing the answers to those questions as a contribution to the extant body of literature on the topic and to graduate hospitality management education in general.

A Review of Literature

Research on graduate program choice decision making in higher education in general is fairly common and has revealed multiple factors that students take into consideration when making their university and graduate program choices (Chen, 2007; Simões & Soares, 2010). Based on extensive literature review, Lei and Chuang (2010) concluded that potential graduate students take several factors into account when considering which institution or program to attend. They consider institutional factors (e.g. campus facilities, library collections), program factors (e.g. department ranking, class size and overall program size), faculty factors (e.g. faculty research interests, faculty publications, faculty reputation) and personal factors (e.g. housing, geographic location, family accommodations). In general, research found that, although personal or family factors such as work opportunities for a spouse were

considered important, academic and program factors were most influential in graduate students' decision-making processes (Kallio, 1995; Webb, 1993).

In the field of hospitality management education, a few prior studies on student program decision making have been conducted at the undergraduate level (Lee, Olds & Lee, 2010; O'Mahony, McWilliams & Whitelaw, 2001). These studies revealed that students choose hospitality management as the preferred field of study mostly because of their positive perceptions of the industry. Such positive impressions are formed by personal experiences and by means of discussions with family and friends who work in the industry. Besides its focus on undergraduate education, most of this research was conducted in countries outside the US, with several more recent studies conducted in East Asia (Kim, Guo, Wang & Agrusa, 2007; Lee, Kim & Lo, 2008) and Europe (Connolly & McGing, 2006).

Based on survey data collected in Hong Kong, Lee et al. (2008) examined the motivations and preferences of local hospitality and tourism students. They found that hospitality and tourism students mainly consider five factors when choosing their program of study: self-actualization, job opportunity, field attractiveness, study load and scholastic achievement. In addition, Kim et al. (2007) also found that friendship, interest in practical aspects and perceived ease of study were important factors that influenced the students' choices, and Connolly and McGing (2006) emphasized the importance of practical training in hospitality education in Ireland.

With information available on undergraduate decision making in the U.S. and abroad, what is lacking is contemporary information on the choice decisions of US hospitality management graduate students. With the United States still the preferred country of choice for graduate studies by many international graduate students (Kim et al., 2007), up-to-date information on why they decide to leave their home countries and choose to study in the US is also important. Whereas about 43% of the total student body at the MS level consists of international students, they make up a 56% majority at the Ph.D. level (Van Hoof et al., 2013). Given that such large parts of U.S. graduate hospitality management

programs are made up of international students, it is just as crucial for hospitality educators to understand their preferences and decision-making processes.

With data collected from 56 first-year international graduate students enrolled in U.S. hospitality programs, Huang and Brown (1996) looked into school choice, career expectations, and academic adjustment issues. Back then, students considered course quality, cost of education, application procedures, prerequisites and program information materials such as brochures as the most important factors when deciding which program/university to apply to. Although these findings still have some implications for today's program administrators, this study was conducted eighteen years ago and student preferences may have changed over time. Besides a need for information on hospitality graduate students' program choices in general, a research update on the decision making process of international students is appropriate. The study reported here aimed to find exploratory evidence to answer the following research questions under the headings of graduate hospitality students' decision making and international graduate hospitality students' decision making.

Graduate Hospitality Students' Decision Making

RQ 1: How do hospitality graduate students choose a program of studies? Specifically,

- a) What factors do hospitality graduate students take into consideration when choosing a hospitality graduate degree program?
- b) Are there any significant demographic differences in the decision making process that can be identified among the respondents?

International Graduate Hospitality Students' Decision Making

RQ 2: Why do international students choose to go abroad to pursue a graduate degree? Specifically,

- a) What factors do international hospitality graduate students take into consideration when making the decision to go abroad?
- b) Are there any significant demographic differences in the decision making process that can be identified among the respondents?

RQ 3: Why do international hospitality graduate students choose to come to the U.S. to pursue a graduate degree? Specifically,

- a) What factors do international hospitality graduate students take into consideration when choosing the U.S. as the country best suited to pursue their desired degrees?

- b) Are there any significant demographic differences in the decision making process that can be identified among the respondents?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, a study was designed to collect and analyze information about those choice decisions. The data used in the study were collected among the graduate students studying hospitality management in the United States during the 2011-2012 academic year.

Instrument Development

The survey instrument was developed based on an extensive literature review and was subjected to expert review and pilot-tested among hospitality management graduate students. The measurement items were adapted from previous studies (Chen, 2007; Kim et al., 2007; Simões & Soares, 2010). Based on expert review and student feedback, the final version of the questionnaire was modified and consisted of four parts.

In addressing the first research question, part one of the survey asked students what factors they had taken into consideration when choosing their current university and program of study. Parts two and three were related to the second and the third research questions and explored the choices made by international graduate students: part two asked international students what factors they had considered when choosing to study abroad and part three looked into the factors that had been important to them in making the decision to come to U.S. The final part of the survey collected participants' demographic information such as gender, age and country of origin. The survey was input into Qualtrics software to be disbursed for data collection.

Participants and Procedures

The survey was directed at M.S. and Ph.D. students enrolled in all of the 31 research-oriented hospitality management graduate programs in the United States granting the MS (Master of Science) and/or Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) degrees in hospitality management in the 2011-2012 academic year.

The list of programs was based on the most recent Guide to College Programs in Hospitality, Tourism, & Culinary Arts as published by International CHRIE. To recruit student participants, the professors-in-charge of those programs were e-mailed invitation letters asking for their help, as well as IRB approved consent forms and a survey link. Those who agreed to help collect data then shared the survey link with their students with a request for them to participate. After the initial e-mail, a personalized reminder was sent out ten days after the initial invitation. A second reminder was sent out a week later. At the end of the data collection period a total of 202 students had participated in the study. There were 98 (62 MS, 36 PhD) international students and 104 (71 MS, 31 PhD) domestic students in the sample. These numbers were reflective of overall distributions found in earlier studies, with a small majority of PhD students being international and a small majority of MS students being domestic (Van Hoof et.al. 2013). Similarly, the majority of females in the sample (66%) reflected overall program enrollment trends. The respondents range in ages was from 22 to 59 years.

Findings

To answer each set of research questions, the study followed a two-step procedure in its data analysis. First, exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed to identify the major factors respondents had taken into consideration when choosing a program. Exploratory factor analysis is usually used to reveal a basic structure or major latent factors underlying a battery of measured variables. After that, group means comparison tests (e.g. t-test, ANOVA) were conducted to explore if there were any significant demographic differences of opinion among the respondents. The results of the various data analyses are reported below.

How do hospitality graduate students choose a program of studies?

Factors of Concern: Exploratory factor analysis revealed that there were five factors that hospitality graduate students took into consideration when choosing at which university and program to pursue their graduate degrees. These five factors were: admission process, faculty interaction, living

conditions, program and faculty reputation and location. A summary of the EFA results is exhibited in Table 1.

Table 1 Factors Influencing the Choice of University and Program

Factor s	Items	L o a d i n g s	Cronb ach's α/ Pears on's Correl ation
Admis sion Proces s	1- The speed of its application process	.8 6	.51 (p<.00 1)
	2- The quality of the admission process	.8 4	
Facult y Intera ction	1-Previous correspondence or contact with faculty	.8 2	.81
	2-The opportunity to work with a particular faculty member	.7 9	
	3-The interest of faculty in recruiting me	.7 8	
	4-My impression of research opportunities	.6 1	
Living conditi ons	1-The availability of child-care	.8 6	.74
	2-Job availability for spouse/partner	.7 9	
	3-The availability of university housing	.7 4	
Progra m/ Facult y Reput ation	1-The ranking of the university	.8 7	.80
	2-The reputation of the university	.8 3	
	3-The reputation of the faculty	.7 8	
Locati on	1-The location	.8 7	.53 (p<.00 1)
	2-The possibility to stay and work in this city after graduation	.8 7	

The first factor, *admission process*, covered the perceived quality and the speed of the admission process (Pearson's Correlation=.51, p<.001). The second factor, *faculty interaction*, captured the opportunity of working with faculty members at a particular institution and their interest in working and communicating with the student (Cronbach's α = .81). The factor of *living conditions* captured

opportunities to have a family life at a university (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). **Reputation** spoke to the reputation of both the university and the faculty (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$). Finally, **location** captured the geographic location of the university of choice (Pearson’s Correlation = .53, $p < .001$).

The study then investigated if any of the composite responses captured in the five identified factors were significantly different among the various demographic groups. It compared (1) domestic vs. international students, (2) MS vs. Ph.D. students, (3) female vs. male students, (4) students 20-29 years old vs. students 30-39 years old vs. student 40 years and older. Given the large numbers of Chinese and Korean students enrolled, it also looked at differences of opinion between (5) Chinese vs. Korean graduate students. Some significant demographic differences in perceptions were found for the factors of admission process, faculty interaction and location.

The study found a significant interaction effect of international/domestic and gender ($F=12.68$, $p < .001$) for the factor of admission process. As shown in Figure 1, male international students ($M=4.97$) rated the quality of the admission process as more important than female international students ($M=3.94$). By contrast, domestic female students ($M=4.41$) rated it as more important as compared to domestic male students ($M=3.83$).

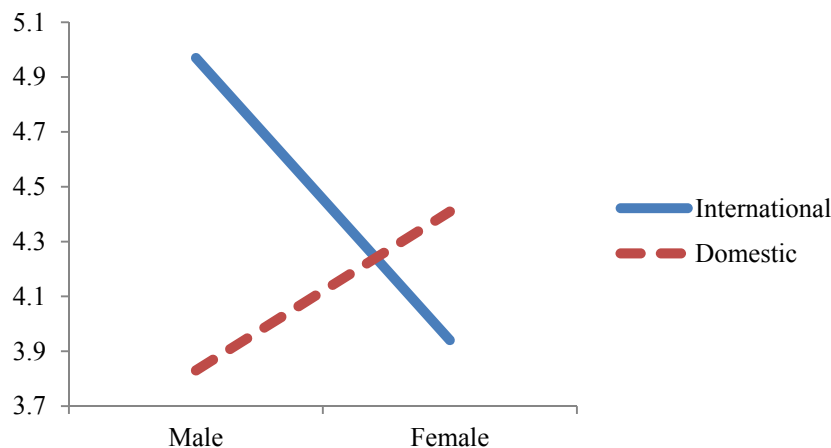


Figure 1 Gender-by-Origin Interaction Plot for Admission Process

In addition, there was a significant gender by age interaction effect on the factor of **admission process** ($F=3.39, p<.05$). Most of this variance came from the latter two groups (30-39 years old vs. 40 and above). The 20-29 year-old group did not show any significant difference of opinions between males and females in terms of the admission process (see Figure 2).

The results of the analysis showed that Ph.D. students rated the factor of **faculty interaction** as significantly more important in their decision to attend a particular program than MS students ($M_{PhD}=5.26, M_{MS}=3.96; F=37.28, p<.001$). Moreover, Korean students perceived this factor as significantly more influential in their decision making than Chinese students ($M_{Korean}=5.42, M_{Chinese}=4.18; F=10.33, p<.01$).

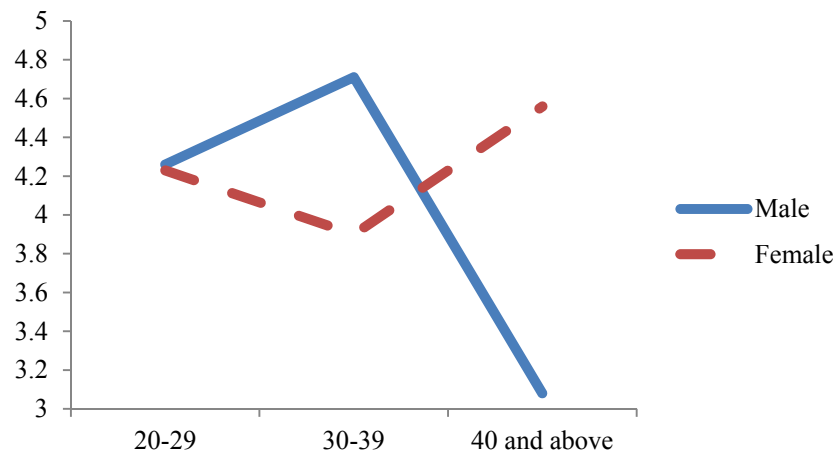


Figure 2 Gender-by-Age Interaction Plot for Admission Process

Finally, domestic students rated **location** as significantly more important than international students ($M_{domestic}=4.86, M_{international}=3.90, F=12.89, p<.001$) in their choice decisions. The study did not find any significant differences among the groups with regard to the *living conditions* and *program/faculty reputation* factors.

Why do international hospitality graduate students choose to go abroad to pursue a graduate degree?

Factors of Concern: Results of the EFA showed that there were three major factors that the sampled international graduate students took into account when they decided to go abroad to pursue an advanced degree (see Table 2). The first factor, *value of foreign degree*, refers to the prestige of a foreign degree in one's home country (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$). The factor of the *negative influence in home country* captured both the availability of a desired degree (or lack thereof) and the general socio-economic and political situation in one's home country ($r=.18$, $p\text{-value}<.001$). Finally, the factor of *encouragement from others* refers to the encouragement one had received from important social others (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

In order to determine if there were any significant group-based differences in the importance perceptions of the above factors, the study compared the composite responses to the three identified factors by comparisons of the following groups (1) MS vs. Ph.D., (2) female vs. male, and (3) 30 years old or younger vs. older than 30 years of age. Additionally, since Chinese ($n=46$) and Korean ($n=19$) students were by far the biggest groups in the sample of international students, it was also decided to test for differences of opinions between these two groups. Overall, the study found some significant demographic differences in the students' importance perceptions for two factors: *value of foreign degree* and *encouragement from others* (see Table 2).

Table 2 Factors Influencing the Decision to Study Abroad

Factors	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's α / Pearson's Correlation
Value of Foreign Degree	1-Foreign advanced degrees improve employment prospect.	.86	.78
	2-I value an advanced degree from abroad.	.82	
	3-Foreign degrees are prestigious in my home country.	.81	
Negative Influence in Home Country	1-My desired graduate education is not available in my home country.	.76	.18 (p<.001)
	2-The situation in my country is uncertain	.68	
Encouragement from others	1-Encouragement from students currently enrolled in my graduate program	.80	.83
	2-Encouragement from fellow students	.79	
	3-Encouragement from alumni from my current institution	.76	
	4-Encouragement from friends	.67	
	5-Encouragement from spouse/significant others	.66	
	6-Encouragement from professors	.59	

For the factor of *value of foreign degree* the study found a significant age by degree pursued interaction effect ($F=4.31$, $p<.05$) (see Figure 3). MS students who were over the age of 30 ($M=6.44$) perceived the factor of *value of foreign degree* as significantly more important in terms of influencing their choices to study abroad than those who were younger than 30 ($M=6.04$). Conversely, Ph.D. students who were younger than 30 ($M=6.43$) believed that the degree factor was significantly more influential in their decision than their older counterparts ($M=5.89$).

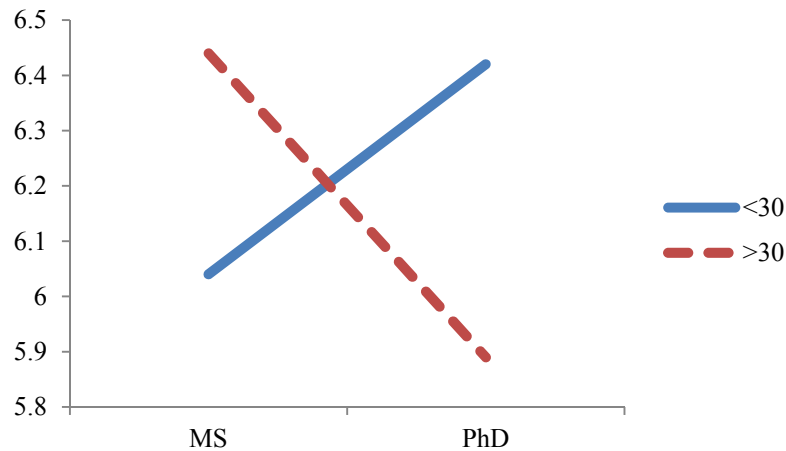


Figure 3 Degree-by-Age Interaction Plot for Value of Foreign Degree

In addition, a comparison between Chinese students and Korean students revealed a significant degree-by-country interaction effect for this factor ($F=6.02$, $p<.05$). This factor was perceived as significantly more important for Korean MS students ($M=6.47$) than Chinese MS students ($M=5.86$). Yet, as opposed to that, the factor was perceived as significantly more important to Chinese PhD students ($M=6.57$) than to Korean PhD students ($M=6.09$) (see Figure 4).

Encouragement from others: With regard to this factor there was a significant age by gender interaction effect ($F=5.06$, $p<.05$). For students younger than 30, encouragement from others was equally influential across both male ($M=3.36$) and female students ($M=3.36$). However, for students older than

30, encouragement from others was significantly more important for male students (M=4.34) than for female students (M=2.92) (see Figure 5).

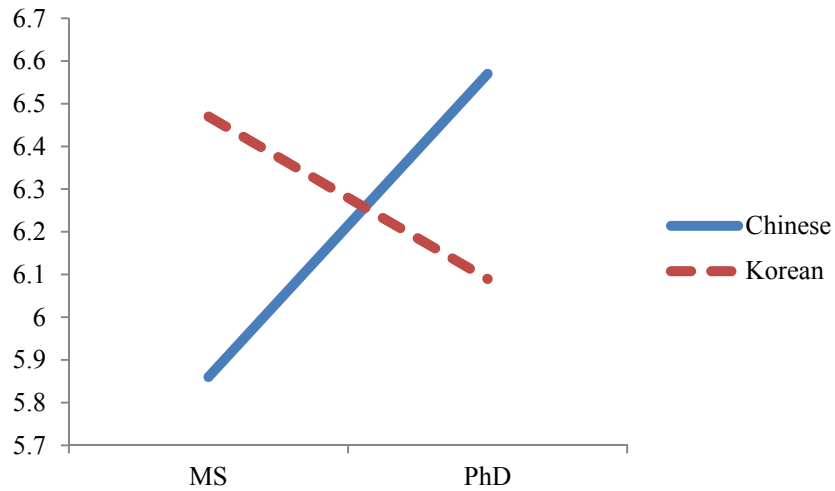


Figure 4 Degree-by-Country Interaction Plot for Value of Foreign Degree

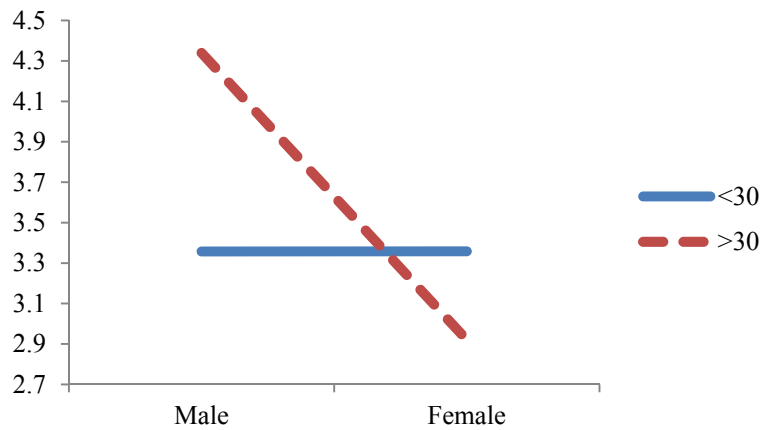


Figure 5 Age-by-Gender Interaction Plot for Encouragement from Others

Why do international hospitality graduate students choose to come to the U.S. to pursue a graduate degree?

Factors of Concern: Again, exploratory factor analysis was performed to identify the relevant actors in the choice decisions of international hospitality graduate students to come to U.S. Two factors were identified: (1) *U.S. life* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$) and (2) *U.S. Degree* ($r=.57, p<.001$). The items loaded on each of the factors are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Factors Influencing the Choice of Studying in U.S.

Factors	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's α / Pearson's Correlation
U.S. Life	1-The U.S. is an exciting place to live.	.86	.77
	2-The quality of life.	.85	
	3-The diverse and multicultural environment.	.72	
	4-The possibility of applying for immigrant status.	.61	
U.S. Degree	1-US degrees are prestigious and valued in my country.	.88	.57 ($p<.001$)
	2-US graduate programs have a good reputation.	.86	

The study then compared participants’ composite responses to the two factors among the demographic groups of (1) MS vs. Ph.D. students, (2) younger than 30 years of age vs. 30 years and older and (3) Chinese vs. Korean students. There were no significant demographic differences for the *U.S. degree* factor. However, results revealed some interesting demographic differences for the *U.S. life* factor: International MS students ($M=5.08$) rated the *U.S. life* factor as more important than international

Ph.D. students ($M=4.31$; $F=7.75$, $p<.01$). International students younger than 30 ($M=5.01$) also perceived *U.S. life to be* significantly more influential in their decision making than their counterparts of 30 and older ($M=4.10$; $F=10.00$, $p<.01$).

In addition, the study found some interesting differences between the Chinese and Korean graduate students for the factor of *U.S. life*. In general, *U.S. life* as a factor was more important for Chinese students ($M=5.15$) than for Korean students ($M=3.79$; $F=21.87$, $p<.001$). This difference was further qualified by a significant interaction effect of pursued degree and country of origin ($F=9.33$, $p<.01$). While Chinese PhD students ($M=5.7$) perceived *U.S. life* as significantly more important than Korean PhD students ($M=3.46$), there was only a slight difference in importance of perception between Chinese MS students ($M=4.99$) and Korean MS students ($M=4.70$) (see Figure 6).

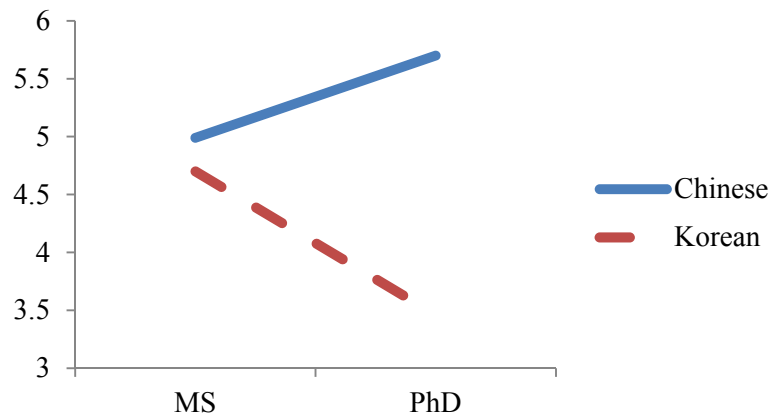


Figure 6 MS/PhD and Chinese/Korean Interaction Plot for *U.S. Life* Discussion

Given the vast growth in US hospitality graduate education (Ottenbacher et al., 2009; Tsang & Hsu, 2011; Van Hoof et al., 2014), this study looked into why hospitality graduate students chose their current universities and programs of studies. Consistent with previous research (Chen, 2007; Simões & Soares, 2010), the findings suggest that students made their decisions mainly based on their perceptions of the admission process, faculty interaction, living conditions, the reputation of the program and its

faculty members and the location of the program. Extending previous literature, the current study also examined demographic differences in students' perceptions along the above factors. The quality of the admission process was significantly more important for male international students and for female domestic students. The factor of faculty interaction was significantly more important for Ph.D. students than for MS students. Meanwhile, domestic students paid significantly more attention to the location of the program than their international counterparts.

The study also looked into the choice behaviors of international hospitality graduate students since they make up a large portion of hospitality management graduate programs. Results of the analysis showed that one of the big factors influencing international students' choice to go abroad for education was the perceived value of the foreign degree. Among the international students, MS students above 30 years of age and Ph.D. students younger than 30 perceived this factor to be the most important in their decision to go abroad. International students indicated they would be even more likely to go abroad if the desired degree was not available in their home country or if the socio-economic or political situation in their home country was uncertain. Finally, encouragement from friends and family was a factor that international students also took into consideration when making the decision to go abroad. Social encouragement was particularly important for male students who were older than 30.

The final critical issue that the study looked at was why international hospitality graduate students chose to come to the U.S. rather than go to other countries. The analysis revealed two major factors influencing this decision: the perceived quality of life in the U.S. and the quality of the degree. While there was no significant demographic difference among the groups for the quality of degree factor, there were some interesting demographic differences for the quality of life factor. It was found that international MS students paid more attention to the quality of life factor as compared to international Ph.D. students. The quality of life in the U.S. factor was more important for international students younger than 30 than it was for their counterparts who were older than 30.

Given the large body of Chinese and Korean international students pursuing graduate degrees in hospitality management in the US, the study also performed some analyses to assess the differences between these two student groups. It found that, when deciding to go abroad for higher education, Korean MS students paid more attention to the value of foreign degrees. This factor was also perceived as more important by Chinese (vs. Korean) Ph.D. students. As for the decision to come to the U.S. for graduate school, Chinese (vs. Korean) students gave the factor of U.S. life significantly more consideration. While Chinese (vs. Korean) Ph.D. students perceived U.S. life as significantly more important, there was only a slight difference in importance perception between Chinese and Korean MS students. Finally, Korean students paid more attention to the faculty factor than Chinese students when choosing which university/program to attend.

Implications for Program Administration

The findings of this study have important implications for hospitality educators and administrators. It was found that graduate students' school choices are mainly driven by the speed and quality of the admission process, faculty interaction, living conditions, reputation of programs and faculty, and location. Clearly, several of these are outside of the control of hospitality program administrators and faculty. Program location and living conditions are given and cannot be affected in any way. The admission process is a combination of factors and its speed and perceived quality can be enhanced or hindered by central university bureaucracies as well as efforts at the program level. Yet, the sooner candidates hear from their program of choice and the quality and frequency of the communications leave a lasting impression and set the tone for the remainder of the process. The speed and frequency of feedback and its perceived quality will make one program stand out in comparison to others. Offers that are sent out after Spring break often fall on deaf ears as candidates have already made their decisions.

Related to the faculty interaction and program reputation, factors that can be controlled to some extent, hospitality graduate programs would be wise to incorporate information on faculty reputation and faculty accomplishments in their marketing efforts, just as they also include information on location,

living conditions and the details of the application process. Such information will help potential candidates get a better idea of the program and will develop a more explicit program fit assessment that will eventually help candidates make better educational and personal decisions. Programs would be well-served to have faculty members contact the most promising recruits personally ahead of the final admission decision. The very best potential students will be highly recruited and personal attention from an expert in a particular field of study will make them feel wanted and might entice them to make a favorable decision. Certain demographic groups (e.g. male international students, female domestic students) indicated that the perceived quality of the admission process was highly influential in their choice of which university/program to attend.

From an applicant's perspective, the quality of the admission process reflects the quality of the education, one more reason why program and university administrators should do their utmost to ensure that the application process is easy to understand, clear and as fast as possible. While graduate school applications in general involve a certain level of frustration and uncertainty and are accompanied by long waits, being informed about the progress of one's application at regular intervals will greatly reduce candidates' anxieties and ingratiate them to a program. In addition, a personal touch in that communication may further enhance candidates' favorable impression of a program and further increase the likelihood of selecting the program.

The study found that the opportunity to work with certain faculty members was an important factor in graduate students' program choice decisions. This factor was particularly important for Ph.D. students, as was to be expected. Interestingly, in a recent study examining the characteristics of U.S. hospitality graduate programs, only a small number of program administrators considered faculty expertise as the most unique feature of their graduate programs (Van Hoof et al., 2013). Based on these findings however, it is recommended that program administrators, especially those of with Ph.D. programs, pay very close attention to faculty expertise in the positioning of their program positioning and

use it in their recruitment efforts. Program positioning that is closely in line with the expertise of faculty members will positively differentiate one program from the next.

The study also looked into the program/university choice behaviors of international hospitality graduate students. Results of the study showed that for international students, one of the most important factors influencing their choice to go abroad was the perceived value of the foreign degree. In countries such as Korea where the degree merits high social status, potential high quality candidates will be particularly interested in applying for U.S. degree programs and program administrators should pay close attention to the perceived value of their offered graduate degrees in foreign countries when deciding which countries to target for students recruitment.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had some important limitations that need to be acknowledged here. First, while some prior studies differentiated the factors that influence students' university choice vs. program choice, this study took a more holistic approach in grouping university and program together in the choice decision. It would be interesting for future research to examine if the factors for university or program choice are different or similar.

Second, when assessing the demographic differences, this research only examined a limited set of variables such as gender, age, national origin. A particular area of concentration might further differentiate students' choice behaviors for graduate school and future research could investigate this. Moreover, this study only looked at research-oriented graduate programs. A study investigating choice decisions among students in graduate programs with a professional orientation might find different factors that determine the choice process.

Finally, this research only examined the students' perspectives at a particular point in time. As students mature in their studies, will they continue to consider the factors that determined their initial program choices to be important, or will their opinions change? Will they regret their decisions because

they have overlooked certain factors that really matter? All of these would be additional fruitful avenues for future research.

Conclusion

Five major factors were revealed in this study that hospitality graduate students consider when choosing a university and program of studies. Whereas the study by Huang and Brown (1986) found that cost, course quality, admission procedures, prerequisites and information materials were most important, this study found that students were more interested in program and faculty reputation, living conditions, interaction with faculty and program location. Only the factor of the perceived quality/speed of the admission process (a factor that is, to some extent outside the control of the program) remained the same, indicative of the continued importance of this issue in the process.

As for the large body of international graduate students, the study found that they chose to go abroad to pursue an advanced degree overseas based on their considerations for the value of foreign degree, a potential negative situation in their home country and the encouragement from others in their social circles. International graduate students chose to come to the U.S. because of the perceived quality of the U.S. degree and the quality of life in the US.

The competition for the very best graduate hospitality students is growing as more programs are developed. Every program hopes to attract the very best students since they will continue to spread the word about the quality of a program once they graduate and accept faculty positions elsewhere. Some factors, such as program location and even living conditions, are outside a program's control. Others can be controlled. Programs can improve their admissions processes and their communication with potential recruits. Most importantly, they can be vigilant about their reputations and those of their faculty and use those in their efforts to attract the best candidates. High standards for faculty performance lead to a better program reputation, and that, in turn, will attract better students.

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