

FACTORS THAT DETERMINE STUDENTS' PREFERENCES IN SELECTING HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Understanding factors that determine students' preferences in selecting higher learning institution would allow a comprehension of criteria that will attract more enrolment. This research also provides a more focus study on the essential criteria that need to be met by the higher learning institution to cater the students' needs. To this end, questionnaires were administered to a sample of 1993 students from various institutions. The questionnaire asked students to rank and evaluate various social, educational and attitudinal factors in terms of their importance and influence in selecting a higher learning institution. The data were analysed by using a large-scale survey and quantitative analysis. For this purpose, a five-point Likert scale was used to evaluate factors influencing students' decision where responses ranged from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important). Following which, the factors were ranked based on the average point of each factor. It was found that the factors (by ranking) that determine students' preferences in selecting higher learning institution are Quality of Education (Ranked 1); Campus Facilities and Atmosphere (Ranked 2); External and Financial Factors (Ranked 3); and Advertisement and Publicity (Ranked 4).

Keywords:

Preferences, Factor, Higher Learning Institutions, Facilities, Atmosphere.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education has become increasingly important in Malaysia as it is a key factor which will contribute towards Malaysia achieving its target to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020. This has resulted in Malaysia having a dualistic higher education system. This means that the higher education sector in Malaysia is divided into public and private institutions. The liberisation of the tertiary education sector has resulted in an increased number of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The continuous emergence of the private institutions of higher learning including the international institutions has resulted in these higher learning institutions competing to attract local and international students.

Various studies have been conducted to establish how students select their preferred higher learning institution. However, most of these studies are theoretical in nature. Furthermore, these factors may differ from one country to another country and even regions. Hence, this study attempts to establish these factors under the Malaysian context, specifically in the Klang Valley based on an empirical study. This is anticipated to establish key factors that actually influence students' selection in terms of college/university.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To identify factors which would attract more enrolment.
- ii. To establish a database on the criteria used by students in selecting a college or university in Malaysia, specifically the Klang Valley.
- iii. To utilise the identified criteria as a means of feedback by students on their assessment regarding facilities provided and subjects offered.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

- i. This research would identify criteria from a student's perspective that influences their selection of a university or college.
- ii. The university would be able to focus on the essential criteria so as to meet the needs of students.
- iii. This research also can be utilised by the marketing department where it would identify specific area and criteria that should be focused on to attract more students.
- iv. The university as a whole can customize its facilities and subjects in making it more attractive to students; thus attracting higher enrolment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite questions on ethics in terms of treating students as customers, it has been shown that when correctly understood and correctly applied by professionals in the field of education, it has been proven to be more beneficial than harmful. (Harvey and Busher, 1996). The function of a higher learning institution is not only to train a selected elite group of school leavers, but to attract the capable ones regardless the locals or internationals and to offer a focused educational experience. This includes providing students the required knowledge and skills to pursue their respective careers.

In the Malaysian higher education system, Baharun (2002) found that the students' selection of a university was mainly determined by types of academic programmes available, quality of education, administration standards, faculty qualifications and convenient accessible location. Based on a study of final year management students, Baharun (2002) proposed that these selection factors should guide university administrators in developing a preferred image of their respective universities. The identification of factors that determine a student's preference in selecting a higher institution means exploring the fundamental criteria based on which the decision is made.

Price, Fides Matzdarb, Louse Smith and Kelvin Agahi (2003) identified this task as exploring the mechanisms through which decisions are made, the perceptions that potential students have of the university and the contribution of these perceptions make to attract or deterring application. Bnsadi al Ekwnlujo (2003) highlighted that students are becoming more critical and analytical in their selection of education institutions. Ivy (2001) on the other hand identified that students' perceptions about the reputation and image of an institution are shaped by hearsay, past experience and marketing activities that promote the institution. Studies have also shown that an institution's good image can strongly affect students' preference for the institution (Mazzarol, 1998; Bowhe, 2000; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003).

A study investigating students' preference for University of Malaya, found the top four reasons for students' selecting University Malaya were good job prospects, the reputation of the university, the availability of programmes desired by students and the reputation of the programmes (Nagaraj, 2008). Jacqueline Fernandez (2010), indicated that all the empirical studies in Malaysia concur that the reputation of the institution and the availability of programmes desired by students are very important considerations in the selection of a higher education institution.

Marketing and the promotion of an institution also plays a key role in the selection made by a prospective student. Marketing literature often concentrates on the decision making process that a consumer goes through prior to purchasing a product. Kotler and Armstay (1994) described the stages through which consumers go through before reaching a buying decision. The stages which were identified in the marketing theory are; need recognition when the buyers recognise a need to purchase or identify a problem. This is followed by information research, an evaluation of alternatives and a decision to purchase. According to Kotler and Armstrong (1994), the purchase decision is derived from the consumer ranking the alternatives to formulate a purchase intention.

However, two factors may intervene. The first is the attitude of others, whose influence will depend on the strength of the other person's attitude and the consumer's motivation to be influenced. The second is unexpected situational factors. Drawing a parallel between this marketing theory with the process of a student selecting an institution of higher learning, displays a clear similarity between both processes. The process commences with the student recognising the need to pursue higher learning in an institution of higher learning. This would then be followed by information research and an evaluation of alternatives prior to making a decision and the choice of the university selected.

The two intervening factors that may affect the decision are also similar to the marketing theory. The attitude of others could be represented by the influence of parents, family members and friends, whose attitudes and opinions can influence the students' choice of not only the university but also the course to pursue. The second intervening factors are situational factors that can be represented by not qualifying for a course/university in terms of grades required, achieving higher grades than expected which opens up opportunities to new universities previously not considered or being offered a good job which subsequently leads to further alternatives.

Mohar, Siti Nur Bayad, Musyer and Ravindran (2005) identified the following four factors to be the most important criteria in the selection of university by prospective students i.e. availability of required programme, academic reputation of university/college, quality of the faculty/lecturers and financial assistance offered by university/college. Essentially, most of the researches have concluded that the administrators of universities and colleges need to realise that students have become very selective and are more well-informed in selecting the higher institutions to pursue their education. This requires more research along these lines to better understand the needs and requirements of students. Studies such as Joseph and Joseph (1998); Joseph and Joseph (2000); AEI – International Network (2003), Sidin, Hussien and Tan (2003), Un (1997) and Crqy, Far Cares (2003) adopted a factor analysis to analyse many variable that influence the decision making in the selection of a university/college of choices. Factor analysis can also be used to statistically reduce a large number of items to a smaller set of composite items that are not correlated to one another (Neura 2003; Sekar 2000).

DATA COLLECTION

In the context of this research, the population were the students who enrolled in foundation studies, diploma programmes and undergraduates studies in Malaysia. The final list is made up of 17 institutions. 8 of these institutions are universities and 9 of them are colleges/university colleges. Table 1 shows the number of respondents from each institution.

Table 1 : Universities/Colleges selected for data collection and number of respondents.

University	Number of respondents
German Malaysian Institute (GMI)	106
KBU International College	115
Kolej University Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS)	110
Kuala Lumpur Infrastructure University College (KLIUC)	111
Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University College (KLMU)	208
Limkokwing University (LUCT)	132
Malaysia France Institute (MFI)	87
Management and Science University (MSU)	111
MASTERSKILL University College	107
Multimedia University (MMU)	106
SEGI University College	100
Sunway University	149
Taylor's University	100
UCSI University	116
Universiti Industri Selangor (UNISEL)	37
Universiti Tenaga Malaysia (UNITEN)	218
University College of Technology & Innovation (UTCI)	80
17 Universities	1993 respondents

Out of 1993 respondents, 1126 respondents were male and 867 were female. It is found that 58.91% of these respondents were in the range of 19-22 years old. This is followed by 19.32% in the range of 15-18 years old, 19.32% in the range of 23-26 years old and 2.46% in the range of 27-46 years old.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative survey analysis was utilised to derive factors that determine students' preferences in selecting a higher learning institution. This quantitative analysis is positive in nature (Hussey and Kussey, 1997). Under this methodology, a sample of subjects is drawn from a population and studied to make inferences about the population.

Sekara (2000) added that for a research question that is aimed at measuring the attitude of a population towards a particular decision, a descriptive survey can be used. The large population of this research (students selecting their preferences of a learning institution) and a relatively large sample size by way of a large-scale survey seems to be an appropriate methodology for this research. Furthermore, a questionnaire survey is the most appropriate

method to ask respondents of their 'self-belief or behaviour' including responses that allow measurements of different variables. As such, a questionnaire – based approach was adopted in order to obtain data on factors that influence students' decision in selecting a higher learning institution. The questionnaire was designed to discover:

- How respondents rank different attributes in selecting their preferred higher learning institution.
- The demographic information of each respondent to enable investigation whether these have any effects on the factors and selection made.

For this purpose, a five-point Likert scale was used to evaluate factors influencing students' decision where responses ranged from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important).

RESULTS / FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first set of results presents the overall findings of the survey results. The ranking of the factors are based on the average of the points given by students for each factor. The overall results are as follows.

Table 2: Ranking and Average Point of Each Factor

Rank	Factor	Average Point
1	Academic Quality	3.742
2	Academic Progress	3.643
3	College / University Reputation	3.546
4	College / University Expertise	3.541
5	Educational Facilities	3.525
6	Success of Job Placement	3.525
7	Campus Safety	3.410
8	Hospitality / Friendliness	3.305
9	Campus Atmosphere	3.263
10	Campus Location	3.262
11	Advice from Family Members	3.253
12	Social Activities	3.176
13	Financial Aid Availability	3.162
14	Cultural Uniqueness	3.124
15	Website	3.036
16	Campus Size	3.015
17	Published Materials	3.006
18	Advice of Teachers	2.971
19	Advice of Friends	2.953
20	Costing	2.866
21	College/University Representative	2.851
22	Advertising	2.842
23	Size of Class	2.721

From the overall findings, it is apparent that the factors that affect the selection of a university among students can be summarized to 4 broad categories. The categories are tabulated by ranking and they are as follows,

Categories:

1. Quality of Education
2. Campus Facilities and Atmosphere
3. External and Financial Factors
4. Advertisement and Publicity

Summarising the findings to the above 4 broad categories allows a better understanding of the results and provides an in-depth translation of the findings. From the above ranking of categories and the results of the factor ranking, it is evident that the primary factor that contributes towards the selection of a university among students is the quality of education and the quality of the university/college. This explains why the first 5 factors are: Academic Quality, Academic Programs, Reputation, Expertise, Educational Facilities and Success of Job Placement.

This means that the academic quality, educational programmes, educational facilities and the recognition of the university/college's degree in the job market are primary factors that determine the selection of university among students. This is followed by Campus Facilities and Campus Atmosphere, which is made up of factors such as campus safety, hospitality, campus atmosphere, location and social activities. The factors above indicate that the campus facilities and campus activities are second tier factors that affect the selection of a university/college. Between these second tier factors, the most important one is campus safety.

The third broad categories are external and financial factors. These factors include, influence of family members, financial aid provided, influence of teachers and friends and the cost involved. Coming under the third-tier group, it can be summarised that these factors are slightly less important. Nevertheless it is important to note that influence by family members and financial aid are key factors under this category.

The final category is advertisement and publicity which is made up of factors such as university/college website, published materials, impact made by university/college representative and advertising. It is significant to note that these are the least important factors but among advertisement and publicity, the university's website is the highest ranked. From the above results, it can be concluded that the quality of education and the university/college's reputation and the acceptance of the university/college's degree in the job market are the most important factors that influence the students' choice of a university/college.

The next stage of the analysis involves an in-depth review of the results. This next stage can also be considered similar to the sensitivity analysis of the overall results. Hence, the next analysis compares the differences between male and female students in terms of factors that influence their decision in selecting a university/college.

Table 3: Comparison between Male and Female students' Ranking of Factors

Overall Total Factors	Factors Among Male Students	Factors Among Female Students
1. Academic Quality	1. Academic Quality	1. Academic Quality
2. Academic Programs	2. Academic Programs	2. Academic Programs
3. Reputation	3. Expertise	3. Reputation
4. Expertise	4. Success in Job Placement	4. Expertise
5. Educational Facility	5. Educational Facilities	5. Educational Facility
6. Success in Job Placement	6. Reputation	6. Success in Job Placement
7. Campus safety	7. Campus safety	7. Campus Safety
8. Hospitality / Friendliness	8. Hospitality/Friendliness	8. Hospitality/Friendliness
9. Campus Atmosphere	9. Campus Atmosphere	9. Advice of Family members
10. Campus Location	10. Campus Location	10. Campus Location

Based on the above tabulation, it is evident that primarily there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of the general category that determines the selection of a university/college. Academic Quality and Academic Programs are still the most important factors. However, the third most important factor among male students is the specialization of the university. For female students, the third ranked factor is the reputation of the university while the specialization of the university is ranked fourth. The ease with which, a job can be secured with the college/university's degree is ranked fourth among male students but only ranked sixth among female students. This indicates that male students weigh the acceptance of the university/college's degree in the job market as an important criterion while this factor is slightly less important among female students.

Another significant factor that contributes to the difference is the advice from family members according to the female students (its ranked 9th) but this factor is not that significant among male students. Alternatively, the male students indicate that the campus atmosphere is an important factor (ranked 9th) but this is not a significant factor among female students. The final analysis of the data compares the differences between urban and rural students, in terms of factors that determine the selection of higher learning institutions. This additional analysis is undertaken to review whether the urban and rural students have different factors that influence the selection of a university/college or not. The following table tabulates the factors that determine the preferences in selecting higher institutions among urban and rural students.

Table 4: Comparison between Urban and Rural students' Ranking of Factors

Overall Results	Urban Students	Rural Students
1. Academic Quality	1. Academic Quality	1. Academic Quality
2. Academic Program	2. Academic Program	2. Success in Job Placement
3. Reputation	3. Expertise	3. Educational Facility
4. Expertise	4. Reputation	4. Academic Program
5. Educational Facility	5. Educational Facility	5. Campus safety
6. Success in Job Placement	6. Success in Job Placement	6. Reputation
7. Campus safety	7. Campus safety	7. Expertise
8. Hospitality / Friendliness	8. Hospitality / Friendliness	8. Advice of family members
9. Campus Atmosphere	9. Campus Location	9. Campus Atmosphere
10. Campus Location	10. Campus Atmosphere	10. Hospitality / Friendliness

Comparing the results of urban and rural students, it is evident that Academic Quality is the most important factor among both urban and rural students. The biggest difference between urban and rural students is that among rural students the success in job placement is ranked second. However, this factor is considered less important among urban students. On the other hand, academic program was ranked second by urban students.

Another major difference is that urban students consider the specialization of the college/university as a major factor that influences their selection of a university/college. But this factor is only ranked 7th among rural students. Rural students also indicate that advice from family members does have an effect in terms of selecting the institution of higher learning. However, this was not ranked among the top ten factors among urban students. Urban students also ranked campus location as an important factor, but this was not among the top ten factors among rural students. The results indicate that the most important factor among students that influences the students' preference in selecting a university/college is the Quality of the Education provided. This includes Academic Quality, the Academic Programs and the University/College Reputation. The graph below tabulates the ranking of various factors that influence the selection.

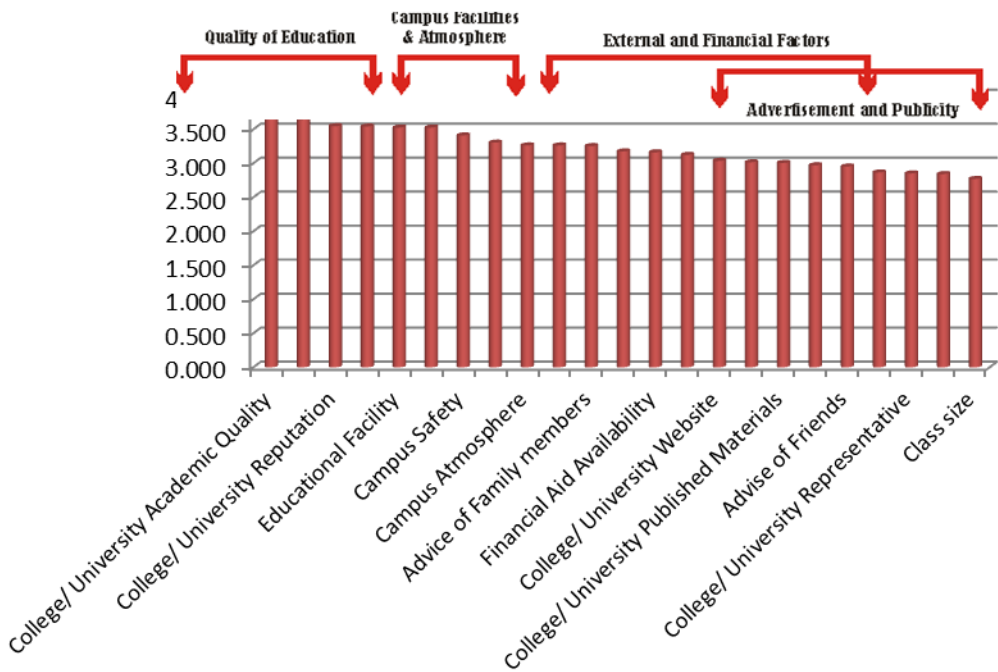


Figure 1: Average Point of Each Factor and Categories of Factors

The results indicate that although campus facilities are important, it cannot displace the quality of education as the main and most important factor. It is also evident that external influence and financial factors although being valid factors, cannot be considered as the most important. Similarly, it is also clear that advertisements and publicity that are not supported by a high education quality, reputation and campus facilities will not be effective to attract students to the university/college. It is also important to note that between the various advertisement and publicity factors, the university website is ranked the highest. A comparison between the factors that influence male and female students is presented in the graph in Figure 2.

From the graph, it can be concluded that primarily Academic Quality; Academic Programs; Reputation and University/College Specialization are the most important factors. However, male students rank the Job Placement as a highly ranked factor, while female students only ranked it sixth. This may be due to male students having high expectation by the family and society to gain job placement as soon as they graduate. Another significant difference is that female students ranked advice from family members as the top ten factors that influence their choice but this is not a top ten factor among male students. Again, this may be due to our social characteristics where female students in general are influenced more by advice from family members. Finally, a comparison between urban and rural students (as presented in the bar chart below) highlighted overall similarities with selected differences.

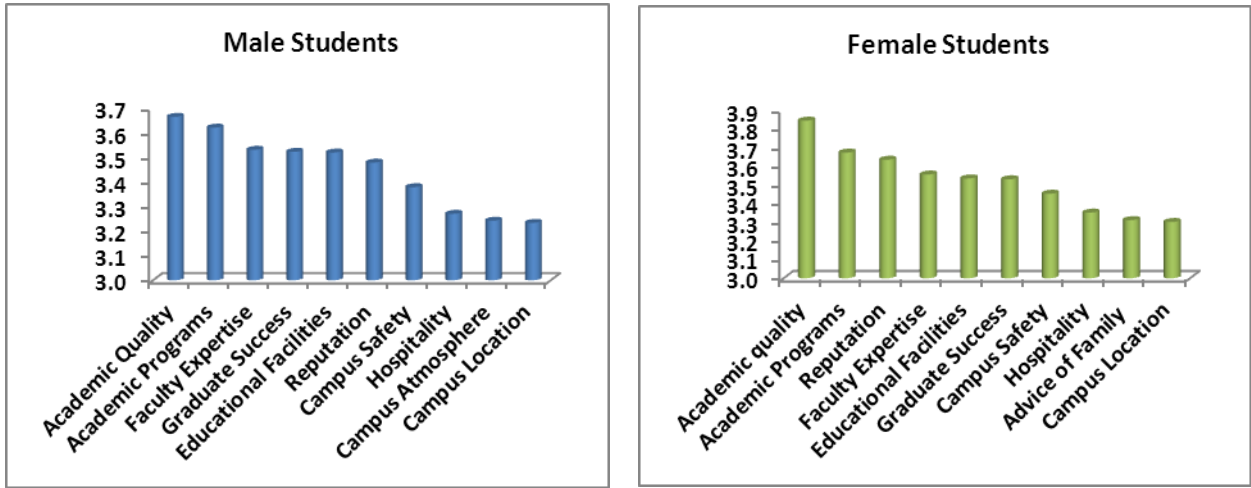


Figure 2: Graphical Comparison of Male and Female students

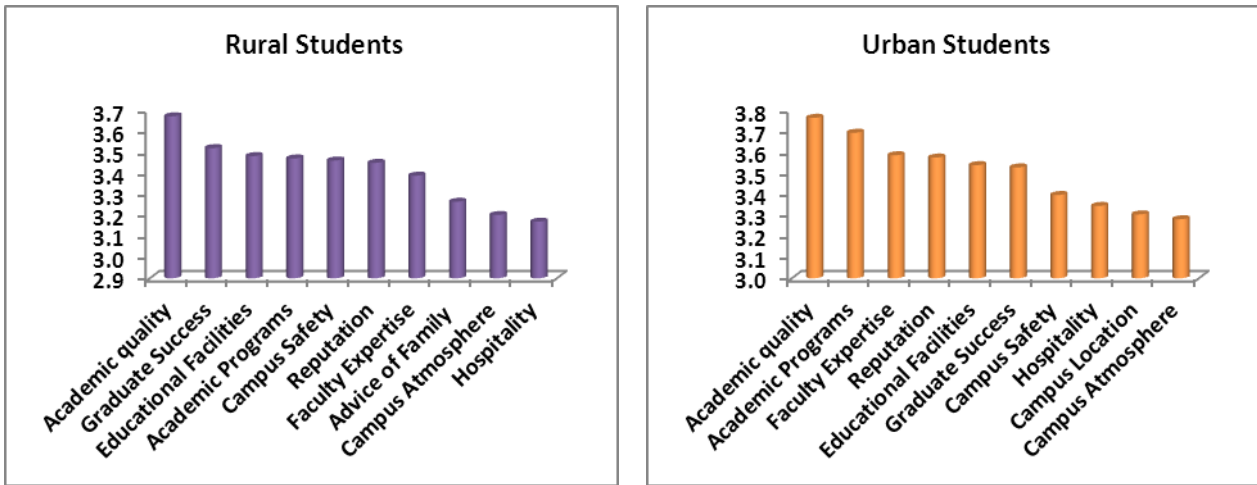


Figure 3: Graphical Comparison of Urban and Rural students

Rural students rank success in obtaining jobs as the second most important while urban students rank this factor as sixth. This may be due to rural students are generally coming from lower income households (in comparison to urban household), thus consider obtaining a job as being a critical factor. Urban students on the other hand appear to be more selective in choosing the university probably due to the various choices available in the urban area. This is reflected in the college/university specialization being ranked third. However, this factor is only ranked seventh among rural students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the most critical and important factors that influence students preferences in selecting a higher learning institution are primarily related to the Quality of Education provided by the University/College. Specifically this relates to factors such as Academic Quality, Academic Programs, Reputation, Education Facilities and Success of Job Placement. It is also evident that publicity and advertisements alone cannot attract students to an institution of higher learning. This may be due to all universities and colleges putting up similar amount of advertisements in the media. However, it is apparent that students do undertake research on their own, regarding the university/college which is the reason why the higher learning institutions website is the highest factor among the publicity and advertisement category. Similarly, influence from external factor such as family members and effect of financial factors are also less important. More important are factors related to campus facilities and campus atmosphere. In summary, the factors that determine student's preference in selecting higher learning institution can be categorised to the following:

1. Quality of Education
2. Campus Facilities and Atmosphere
3. External and Financial Factors
4. Advertisement and Publicity

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all the individuals who directly or indirectly contributed to the success of this study. Our special thanks go to our research assistants for helping us in processing the data collected and special thanks to Mr. Ravi Shankar for his encouragement and comments in the process of writing this research. It is also our great pleasure to thank our university, IUKL for providing the funding to complete this research.

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