

Conceptualizing the Decision Making Process of International Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

Due to the intensification of globalization, crossing borders has become easier for all people in all walks of life. It is predicted that the number of international students will reach a total of 7.2 million by the year 2025 (Knight, 2005). This has made the competition to attract international students among hosting countries more intense as years go by. This study aims to identify the influential factors of international students in choosing private institutions in Malaysia for undergraduate. Therefore, there is a need to develop a model to explain international students' choice and decision-making process that is built on existing choice model and theory on factors that influence the students' choice at the undergraduate level. This study builds its foundation on previous choice model, more specifically from Hossler and Gallagher (1987) research that was previously used to discuss college and university choice among tertiary students.

Keywords: Decision making process, higher education institution, international student, Malaysia

1. Introduction

International students' enrolment in Malaysia's Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) has increased 8% from 58,294 to 62,705 students from the year 2009 to 2010. With that, only a handful of universities have successfully attracted and enrolled international students to their institutions in a yearly basis. However other PHEIs (except university status) did not manage to attract a significant number of international students. There is a lack of comprehensive research done on the reasons of foreign undergraduate students in choosing one private higher education institution from the other. Therefore, this study aims to examine the factors on the international students' decision in choosing the Malaysian PHEIs.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Combined Models

Combined models include the most important indicators from economic and sociological models in the decision-making process (Joseph & Joseph, 2000). These kinds of models allow a considerable amount of analytical power, as they combine sociological perspectives with rational decision making.

This study proceeds with the discussion on the four types of combined models: Chapman model (1981), Jackson model (1982), Hanson and Litten model (1989) and Hossler and Gallagher Model (1987).

Chapman (1981) was the first to present a combined model of influences that affect prospective student's decision to which college to attend. The model consisted of a set of student characteristics (level of education aspiration and high-school performance) in combination with 3 main categories of external influences, namely the influence of significant persons, the fixed characteristics of the institution and the institutions own efforts to communicate with prospective students. The model is longitudinal in nature and as Chapman describes, in order to understand a student's choice to which college to attend, it is needed to take into account the current characteristic and background of the student and his or her family as well as the characteristic of the college itself.

Jackson's (1982) model proposes that students' college choices involve three stages: the preference stage; the exclusion stage; and the evaluation stage. Jackson explains that the preference stage, which includes a student's educational aspirations and attitudes about college enrolment, is shaped by his or her level of academic achievement, family background and social context (e.g., the influence of peers, neighborhood, and school). In the second stage, the exclusion stage, the student goes through a process of eliminating some institutions from the prospective list. Tuition fees, location, and academic quality are among the factors that may be considered in eliminating higher education institutions. In the last stage, the evaluation stage, students are faced with a choice set of institutions; they make their final choice using a rating scheme. This model does not explain how the initial institutional sets are formed, however it is student centered.

Hanson and Litten's (1989) model describes college selection as a continuing process. The five-step process is as follows: having college aspirations; starting the search process; gathering information; sending applications; and finally, enrolling. Hanson and Litten identified a broad set of variables affecting the college choice process, including: background characteristics (e.g., parental income, education, and gender); personal characteristics (e.g., academic ability, class rank, and self-image); high school characteristics (e.g., social composition, programs, and curriculum); and college characteristics (e.g., costs, size, programs, and punctuality in responding to questions). They also introduced public policies, such as financial support, as intervening variables. The Hanson and Litten model is a cross between Jackson's student-based model and the more institutional-based Chapman model. The financial support is widely provided by public universities, not private colleges and universities in Malaysia.

Even though each of the combined models gives invaluable perception on student's choice process, Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) is the focal point of this study. Hossler and Gallagher model considers all previous models, but creates a simpler yet more conceptual model. It isolates and contains the college choice process within a manageable three-stage framework (predisposition, search, and choice). Predisposition stage is the student's decision to go to college as a goal in life. It is strongly influenced by the student's ability of continuing their studies at higher education as well as the background and encouragement from the student's family.

Search stage is the process of learning about specific institutions and their characteristics. Lastly, choice stage is when applications are completed and the student chooses a particular institution. This study specifically investigates the international student's choice stage in choosing a college or university in private institutions.

Drawing upon earlier models on undergraduate college choice (e.g., Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) offer a three-stage model where the interaction of individual and organizational factors produces outcomes in each stage as shown in Table 1. The level of interaction among these factors increases with each stage. As with other three-stage models, Hossler and Gallagher's model can be seen as a "collapsed" version of earlier multistage models. Differences between Hossler and Gallagher's model and the models with several stages "lie in the description of the intervening variables and in how they define constraining and institution activity" (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989).

Table 1: A Model of College Choice Developed

<i>Model Dimensions</i>	<i>Influential Factors</i>		<i>Student Outcomes</i>
	<i>Individual Factors</i>	<i>Organisational Factors</i>	
Predisposition (Phase 1)	Student Characteristics Significant Others Educational Activities	School Characteristics	Search for : College option Other options
Search (Phase 2)	Student Preliminary College Values Student Search Activities	College & Univ. Search Activities (Search for Students)	Choice set Other options
Choice (Phase 3)	Choice Set	College & Courtship Activities	Choice

Source: Hossler and Gallagher (1987)

The first phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, "predisposition," identifies individuals' backgrounds and characteristics that are positively correlated with college attendance. That is, students determine if they want to attend college or pursue other options. The second phase, "search," outlines the dynamic process whereby students decide to which colleges they should apply in pursuing their postsecondary education. It is during this phase that greater interaction between students and higher education institutions begins to occur.

Thus, "at the same time students are searching for institutions, institutions are searching for students" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The final phase, "choice," is the climax of the college selection process. During this phase institutions increase their communication with students and stress courtship activities, while students evaluate their options and determine which specific colleges and universities to attend.

In sum, this study was based on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, specifically the final phase of the selection process, the choice stage that focuses on the factors influencing choice by international students to attend private colleges and universities in Malaysia.

2.2 Undergraduate Studies

A review of studies was conducted on undergraduate student college/university choice and it is found that there are strong associations among the following factors: program, academic reputation, significant others, facilities, location, marketing communication and cost of education.

Moogan (2011) conducted a study on the marketing communication activities that influence UK undergraduate psychology students' decision-making in choosing a university. The findings show that the prospectus is the most important source of information, followed by university websites, UK UCAS data, faculty website and faculty leaflets. As for the findings of importance of communication channels, hard copy of the institution's information was the most preferred channel, followed by email and CD-ROM.

Fernandez (2010) examined the factors influencing the decision of Malaysian students to study at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), more specifically focuses on the reasons students pursue higher education, factors that influence students' choice of public versus private institutions, sources used to choose a tertiary institution and the factors that influence students to study at USM. The findings for the reason students pursue higher education are to improve their career prospects and to gain further knowledge and experience. This study also found that students choose tertiary institutions based on information compiled from different sources, which the main source would be the Internet. The findings on students choosing public institutions were primarily due to the quality of education and pecuniary factors. Lastly, the result of which factors influence student to study at USM was due to USMs strong business links, good reputation, facilities and availability of the programs that suit the student's needs.

Kusumawati, Yanamandram and Perera (2010) results showed that cost, reputation of the university, location of campus, job prospect and parents are the five most important choice criteria for Indonesian students.

Wagner and Fard (2009) examined the main factors that significantly influence students' intention to study at a higher educational institution (six selected tuition centers, matriculation centers and private institutions) using Chapman model as their foundation. The result of the study of the highest influence to study at a higher institution is cost of education and degree (content and structure).

Nagaraj, Munisamy, Jaafar, Wahab and Mirzaei (2008) conducted a study that examined Malaysian students in University of Malaya on their university selection process. The first findings shows that there are five main reasons of furthering studies which were to obtain a good job, stepping stone in the career path, to obtain more knowledge, personal interest in the field of study and to broaden their current experience.

Hassan and Sheriff (2006) examined the influences of internal and external environment and marketing stimuli on students' need recognition to study at private colleges in Malaysia and used consumer decision making process as the foundation of the study. The findings showed that for the individual motive, family influence, quality of programs, quality of lecturers and quality of physical resources are the main influencers on students' need recognition for higher education at private colleges. However, the external marketing stimulus was perceived the most influential in comparison to the internal and external variables.

2.3 International Student Studies

Padlee, Kamaruddin and Baharun (2010) examined the selection criteria by international students of their higher education at private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The findings showed that seven main factors have significant influences on international students' decision making process which is quality of learning environment, costs, facilities, influencers, customer focus, socialization and location.

Maringe and Carter (2007) examined the motivations of African students pursuing studies in UK and utilized the consumer decision making process as their base of their study. It is found that the main motivators are recognition, international quality, safe, part-time jobs, learning environments and opportunities for post-graduate studies.

Gomes and Murphy (2003) conducted a study on the Internet's role in communication educational opportunities; students' Internet use to facilitate information search and decision making to choose overseas institutions. The results show that students searched the web for information about educational institutions, followed by going to the university's website and used the search engine.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) examined the reasons of international students to select a particular study destination. The model that the authors have used in their study is the push-pull model. It was found four 'push' factors that motivate the student to study overseas are studying outside of their country is better, programs of interest is not available in their country, difficulty to gain entry of the program of interest in their local university, desire to know more of the Western culture and intention of migration after graduation. There were four 'pull' factors that influence the decision to study overseas namely, the reputation of the country, parental influence, geographic proximity and cost.

Factors most commonly associated with a comprehensive college/university choice model include cost of education (Padlee et al., 2010; Kusumawati et al., 2010; Wagner & Fard, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), academic reputation (Kusumawati et al., 2010; Nagaraj et al., 2008), location (Kusumawati et al., 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), program (Wagner & Fard, 2009; Nagaraj et al., 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Hassan & Sheriff, 2006) and facilities (Padlee et al., 2010). Due to its aspects that are commonly identified as higher education institutions features, these five variables are categorized under institutional characteristics in this study.

Significant others (Kusumawati et al., 2010; Padlee et al., 2010; Hassan & Sheriff, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) and marketing communications (Moogan, 2011; Nagaraj et al., 2008) have been chosen and will be discussed further in the following section as the chosen variables that are considered as the critical factors that influences international students in choosing Malaysian PHEI.

2.4 Institutional Characteristics

The institutional characteristics are the overall features of the college and university which are distinctively different from one another. There are features of the private higher education institutions which are easily identifiable such as physical facilities while others may not be clearly seen such as reputation. In this study, the institutional characteristics are divided into two main categories which are financial (e.g. cost of education) and non-financial (e.g. degree, location, academic reputation and facilities).

2.5 Financial Institutional Characteristics

Cost of education has been the most studied factor in influencing student's choice of a particular college or university.

Cost of education can only be the tuition fees or it can also refer as the tuition fees along with the cost of living and lower travel costs in a foreign country. When studying in any Malaysia higher education institutions, international students are not allowed to work full-time and therefore they need to consider on their living expenses during their time of study. Many studies have stated that cost of education is important (Padlee et al., 2010; Wagner & Fard, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). As for Kusumawati et al. (2010) research paper, it investigated 25 factors of student's choice criteria in selecting public universities in Indonesia. It was found that cost of education is perceived as the most important factor.

Students in general highly consider the cost of education before deciding on the university that they want to study in. This applies in different countries, namely Indonesia (Joseph & Joseph, 2000), Australia (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and Malaysia (Padlee et al., 2010; Wagner & Fard, 2009).

Despite the belief that international students are wealthy, research has shown that cost of education is an important factor in choosing their place of study. Dora et al. (2009) examined the 6 factors of international students on choosing Malaysia's public universities as their study destination and their finding shows that one of the main reasons is due to the competitive overall costs of studying in Malaysia.

2.6 Non-Financial Institutional Characteristics

Non-financial institutional characteristics (academic reputation, location, program and facilities) had will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The academic reputation is the private institutions' capacity to positively position itself in the minds of the students. Even though the undergraduate and postgraduate programs have their own distinctive departments, the overall reputation is still heavily dependent on the college/university's name. The main obstacle in studying reputation as a factor is because it is not always measurable. It is more towards the students' perceptions or statements from the private institutions. However, reputation is undeniably influential in which the empirical findings that show reputation is consistently ranked as the most important factor in the students' selection of a college/university (Kusumawati et al., 2010; Nagaraj et al., 2008).

Due to the increase of private institutions, students are more careful in choosing their colleges/universities. It is believed that when students graduated from a reputable university, there are more opportunities to get employed easily or it is some form of guarantee that the students are able to obtain a well-paid job in accordance to their specialization upon graduation. Hence, it is important for PHEIs to develop and maintain a distinct and unique image in order to maintain their competitive edge.

The geographical location of the private institution within the country or its proximity to home and environment of the host country has been found to be an influential factor among undergraduates (Kusumawati et al., 2010) and local and international students in Australia (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Many students seriously consider colleges/universities that are relatively close to their homes (Jackson, 1982). Pooch and Love (2001) study on doctoral students identified location as most important factor in deciding the university they want to continue their studies. Environment is more towards the study "climate" of the country, which takes into consideration of its physical climate and lifestyle (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Another institutional characteristic is undergraduate and postgraduate program. Students evaluate programs on the following criteria: program offerings (Nagaraj et al, 2008), quality (Hassan & Sheriff, 2006), content and structure (Wagner & Fard, 2009) and international recognition (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

The last institutional factor is the facilities provided by the institution. Price et al. (2003) found that high-standard facilities, such as availability of library facilities, computers and study areas play a role in choice of the institution. Other facilities such as recreational facilities (Joseph & Joseph, 2000), laboratory and accommodation (Padlee et al., 2010).

Proposed H₁. Institutional characteristics are positively related to and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{1a}. There is a positive relationship between cost of education and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{1b}. There is a positive relationship between academic reputation and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{1c}. There is a positive relationship between location and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{1d}. There is a positive relationship between programme and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{1e}. There is a positive relationship between facilities and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

2.7 Significant Others

There are certain groups of individuals or an individual that may influence prospective student's choice process. Significant others are defined as friends, parents, counselors, other students, teachers, college/university admission officers (Padlee et al., 2010).

Many studies found that one or more of these significant others are important influential factors in students' choice of college/university (Kusumawati et al., 2010; Padlee et al., 2010; Hassan & Sheriff, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, there is little known on the effects of significant others on the choices of foreign postgraduate students. In terms of international students, it is necessary to consider the potential role of relatives and education agents as well.

Proposed H₂. There is a positive relationship between significant others and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{2a}. There is a positive relationship between parents and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{2b}. There is a positive relationship between friend(s) and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{2c}. There is a positive relationship between teacher(s) and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{2d}. There is a positive relationship between university agent(s) and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{2e}. There is a positive relationship between university admissions officer(s) and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{2f}. There is a positive relationship between relative(s) and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

2.8 Marketing Communications

While it may be considered that marketing communications can be classified under institutional characteristic, it seems that marketing communication is a separate entity that is in the control of various parties (admissions, academic department and education agents). With that, marketing communications is the last variable to be researched in this thesis as one of the influencers of international students' choice.

It is necessary to define marketing in the context of higher education; Kotler and Fox (1985) defined education marketing as "The analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organizational objectives". Malaysian government together with PHEIs has aggressively pushed in promoting local private higher education in the overseas market with the assumption that international students will be well informed consumers in choosing Malaysian and the right PHEI in accordance to their programs of interest.

Marketing communications identified as most significant among students were prospectus, UK UCAS data, faculty website, faculty leaflets (Moogan, 2011). Gomes and Murphy (2003) focused on the web-search behavior of students and found that students searched the web for information about educational institutions, followed by going to the university's website and thirdly, utilized the search engine.

Marketing communication can be viewed broadly or specific; it may involve in expensive print (brochure, prospectus, advertisement in foreign newspapers and magazines locally and abroad) (Moogan, 2011), technology (Internet, CD-ROM and college/university website) (Moogan, 2011; Fernandez, 2010) or through efficient communication between prospective student and PHEI (education fairs and email communication) (Gomes & Murphy, 2003).

Proposed H₃. There is a positive relationship between marketing communication and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3a}. There is a positive relationship between technology and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3b}. There is a positive relationship between print media and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3c}. There is a positive relationship between public relations and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3d}. There is a positive relationship between broadcast media and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3e}. There is a positive relationship between word-of-mouth and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3f}. There is a positive relationship between visual aids and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

H_{3g}. There is a positive relationship between promotional materials and international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

3. Proposed Conceptual Framework

This Proposed Conceptual Framework investigates the relationship between three categories of independent variables based on institutional characteristics, significant others and marketing communications. The dependent variable is the international students' choice of Malaysian PHEI.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual paper aims to develop a conceptual framework on international student's private university choice in Malaysia. The model presented here shows the international student's choice as a variable dependent on three main factors, mainly institutional characteristics, significant others and marketing communications. The confirmation from the student of the different elements of making up the factors included in this study will determine the chosen private university.

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