

Factors Influencing Malaysian Students' Intention to Study at a Higher Educational Institution

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Higher education environments have become increasingly competitive and institutions have to woo for students in recruitment markets niches. As a result, the changes that have been considered in the Malaysian education sector over the past few years have aimed to introduce accountability for their services and, efficiency in conducting their programs into this sector. This study is aimed to identify the main factors that significantly influence students' intention to study at a higher educational institution (HEI). Findings of this study will be beneficial in terms of decision making and will contribute to the roles that assist the HEI marketers to plan and improve their marketing strategy for recruiting students.

Key words: Education; HEI; marketing strategy; recruitment of students; Malaysia

Introduction

In the context of higher education in Malaysia, a noticeable trend has been the increasing competition among universities and higher education institutes to attract students both locally and internationally (Sohail *et al.*, 2003). Competitive pressure has forced the higher educational institutions to look for more competitive marketing strategies in order to compete for students in their respective recruitment markets. Therefore, to study the important attributes that affect students' intention to study at a HEI become

pertinent on the part of marketing strategy planning for students' recruitment of higher educational institutions.

Joseph and Joseph (1998, 2000) have combined the factors of institutional information and the influences of family and peer as an independent variable, and named as general. As a matter of fact, there are several related studies that have found out the influence of family and friends playing a main role on student choice of higher education in Asian perspective. Pimpa (2003) pointed out that family as the most influencing factor on Thai students' choices of international education. Besides, the influence of family and friends are shaping intention of Taiwanese to study abroad (Chen and Zimitat, 2006). Moreover, McMahon (1992), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) cited recommendations from friends and relatives as important influences as the "push" factors in motivating student destination choice for students from Taiwan, India, China and Indonesia. Therefore, we may conclude that influence of family and friends play a principle factor in student's choice of higher education. Thus, it is proposed that the influence of family and friends is a significant independent variable in the framework of the multi-attribute model which has been adopted in this study.

Review of Literature

Several theoretical models have been suggested to describe the factors that influence student's intention to further their study at a specific university. Each of these theoretical models describes the various processes by which a high school student selects a college. The conceptual approaches describe the college choice process and factors that lead students to their college choice can be found in three models (Hossler *et al*, 1989). These three emerging categories of college choice models elaborated on further are:

1. Economic models
2. Sociological models

3. Combined models

(1) Economic models

Economic models emphasize college choice between enrollment in a High Educational Institution (HEI) and the pursuit of a non collegiate alternative. Economists are interested in the relationships between the attributes of “goods” (e.g. college and job characteristics) and individual choices (Jackson, 1982). Generic research indicates that individuals will select a particular HEI, if the benefits of attending outweigh the perceived benefits of attending other HEI or a non-college alternative (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1985). Therefore, the economic model emphasizes the rational decision-making process of students and their families and the variety of ways in which different student’s rate and use the college attributes to make their final college choice (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

(2) Sociological models

Sociological models were developed from educational and status attainment research, focusing on the aspirations of individuals desiring to pursue an HEI. The sociological model specifies a variety of social and individual factors leading to a student’s occupational and educational aspirations (Jackson, 1982). In the derivative model developed by Blau and Duncan (1967), family, socioeconomic background and student academic ability are predicted to have a joint positive effect on aspirations for college.

Sociological models of college choice (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1985) have focused on the identification and interrelationship of factors including parental encouragement (Sewell & Shah, 1978), influence of significant others (Chapman, 1981) and academic performance (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969) as indicators of enrollment in HEI.

(3) Combined models

Combined models utilize the most powerful indicators in the decision-making process from the economic and social models, providing a conceptual framework that predicts the effects of policy-making

interventions (Hossler *et al*, 1985). Various types of combined models contain multiple stages of the college choice process with two general categories of combined models: a **three**-stage model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Hanson & Litten, 1982) and a **multi**-stage model typically containing between five and seven stages (Litten, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Chapman, 1984). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model emphasizes aspiration, search, and choice. It is viewed as the "simplified, 'collapsed' version of the other" (Hossler *et al*, 1985). The major differences between the models are the descriptions of the intervening variables or characteristics and how they define institution activity to encourage student enrollment (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1985).

There are few established combination models that investigated the factors that seem to determine students' intentions to study at an HEI (college choice). Hereby, David W. Chapman (1981) presented the first well constructed theoretical frameworks incorporating various aspects of the affecting students' intention to study at a HEI relevant to this study.

Joseph and Joseph (1998, 2000) have carried out a previous similar study with the same designed multi-attribute model in two different cultural frameworks, namely New Zealand and Indonesia. The results obviously encounter some significant differences of attribute impact level on their choice of tertiary education between these two nations. The result is shown in table 1 in the following:

Comparison of ranking order of importance for three distinct nations

Rank	New Zealand (1998)	Indonesia (2000)	Malaysia (2008)
1	Value of Education	Course and Career Information**	Cost of Education
2	Degree (Content and Structure)	Physical Aspect, Facilities and Resources	Value of Education
3	Cost of Education	Cost of Education	Degree (Content and Structure)
4	Physical Aspect, Facilities and Resources	Degree (Content and Structure)	Family, Friends and Peers
5	General*	Value of Education	Physical Aspect, Facilities and Resources
6			Institutional Information

Note: *Comprised institutional information and influences from family, friend and peers

**Included influences from family, friends and peers

The perceived importance for Malaysian students is similar to the New Zealand students, because both have ranked cost of education, value of education and content and structure or degree as the first three most important factors, yet only different in order. Whereas, Indonesia student though the ability of a HEI to provide course and career information are the most important factor that influenced their intention to study. Perhaps, Indonesian student are more concerned about their future perspective after they have completed the course rather than the content or the value of the course.

As there is no empirical study done with the multi-attribute model in the Malaysian context, the theoretical framework of previous international studies has been adopted here. Joseph and Joseph (1998, 2000) combined the factors of institutional information and the influences of family and peer as an independent variable. Nevertheless, other studies found that the influence of family and friends have significant importance on students' choice of higher education within selected countries in Asia. Hence, the separation of the influences of family and peers from institutional information as an independent variable is proposed in this study.

Methodology

Subjects

The targeted experimental sample of this study consists of those students who are currently attending the pre-university level programme, and those students who have just graduated from their secondary school within two years. These two groups bear the highest possibility to continue their study at a HEI. Hence, HEI marketers are interested to get know about factors that influence the students' intention to study at a HEI. However, the intention to study of those students has to be determined. As a local restriction, this study only focuses on Malaysian students who are currently studying at pre-university level around Klang

Valley. Sampling processes were carried out in six selected tuition centres, matriculation centres and some private institutions.

Measurement

The instrument used in this study is based on published researches prior regarding significant factors affecting student selecting a HEI. The importance-performance analysis model developed by Joseph and Joseph (1998, 2000) was adopted in this study to identify the relationships between important factors influencing students' intention to study at a HEI in Malaysia context. This instrument is suitable to be employed in the Malaysian context, because the same instrument was used successfully in the previous similar research done in Indonesia as the neighbour country.

The instrument to gain primary data is a self-administered questionnaire containing three sections:

- I. The importance of factors influencing respondents' intention to study at a HEI (six IVs, items measured on a five-point Likert scale) and respondents' intention to study one potential Dependent Variable). Responses to the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale where 1 meant "Strongly Disagree" and 5 meant "Strongly Agree".
- II. The ranking of most important attributes.
- III. Demographics.

Completed by face to face interviews and self-administered questionnaire survey.

Determination of Sample Normality

To ensure the samples are normally distributed and randomly selected, parametric inferential analysis was done on the samples, all collected scale type data from the survey were subjected to exploration for

the normality tests before the subsequent analyses. Normality tests were carried out on the data by employing graphical and statistical analyses on the sample as the following:

- (A) Histogram
- (B) Stem-and-leaf Plots
- (C) Boxplot
- (D) Normal Q-Q Plot and Detrended Normal Q-Q Plot
- (E) Descriptive Statistic
- (F) M-Estimators
- (G) Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk Tests

Reliability of the instrument

Reliability tests (*Cronbach's alpha*) were carried out to determine the internal consistency of the measurable items of each variable accordingly to make sure that the combination of ordinal data with interval data are valid for later part of the analyses.

Descriptive analysis

Descriptive analyses were implemented on three distinctive dimensions of collected data. The analyses were:

1. Demographical factors.
2. Mean of items in each variable and computed means of items for each variable.
3. Rank ordering score for each influencing factors on DV.

Relationship Approach

Correlation analyses were carried out to identify the significant relationship between the proposed independent variables and dependent variable. All the computed items of independent variable (six

variables) were subjected to analysis of Pearson's correlation of the dependent variable (one variable), and the framework as the following:

Hypothesis testing

According to the findings in this research, all independent variables are significantly correlated to the dependent variable. Therefore, the hypotheses proposed in this study (*H1* to *H6*) are accepted, as shown in **Table 2**.

		Intention to study
H1 Cost of education	Pearson Correlation	.39**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
H2 Degree (content and structure)	Pearson Correlation	.41**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
H3 Physical aspects, facilities and resources	Pearson Correlation	.55**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
H4 Value of education	Pearson Correlation	.46**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
H5 Institutional information	Pearson Correlation	.56**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
H6 Family, friends and peers	Pearson Correlation	.24**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: The correlations between independent variables and dependent variable

Accordingly, from the results of hypotheses tests, we can conclude that in the Malaysian context the proposed factors such as cost of education, degree (content and structure), physical aspect and facilities, value of education, and institutional information have significant relationships with a students' intention to study at an HEI. Additionally, there is a significant relationship between influences from family's, friends', peers' and students' intention to study at a HEI based on the output result in this study.

In managerial strategy, HEI administrators, marketers and policy decision makers must take in consideration the important factors that affect students' intention to study at their institution. The findings of this study indicate that *physical aspects, facilities of HEI* together with the *information received by students* are also significant factors. Therefore, HEI authorities should seek for improvement of their physical aspects, facilities, resources including the service quality provided to their students. Furthermore, HEI marketers are advised to establish a wider flexible network with significant persons, and increase their ability to convey up-to-date information to students.

Implications

Our research has shown that HEI administrators, marketers and policy makers should focus on the proposed two main factors which are cost of education and degree (content and structure). Malaysian students are emphasizing their concern on the content and structure of the degree. Furthermore, the higher the ability of HEI to offer a wide range of course and specialist programmes that suits the needs for students, the higher will be the tendency of students' intention to study at the HEI. Entry requirements for a HEI are also considered by students in their decision of further study. Other factors such as influences from family members, friends and peer, physical aspects and facilities of HEI and institutional information were ranked at the lower level of importance by New Zealand and Malaysian students. Although, those factors have effects on students' intention, however, their contribution is less.

Limitation of Study

1. The sample size ($N = 162$) is insufficient to represent the whole population. The sample was only derived from the urbanized Klang Valley, it might not give a thorough picture of view reflecting the whole Malaysian population.
2. The accessibility and evaluation of those questions in the questionnaire by respondents may not be accurate due to misunderstanding between the respondents' thoughts and the objective of the respective question. Honesty of respondents in answering questions during the survey is a related constraint in the study.
3. Respondents from different backgrounds of courses that they were currently attending are tendency and favouritism of placing the importance on certain factors. In this example, students' who were studying the STPM programme, may be more cost-conscious than others.

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