

A Model of Higher Education Institutions Choice in Malaysia – A Conceptual Approach

Joseph Sia Kee Ming

School of Business, Curtin University, Sarawak Malaysia
Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia
joseph@curtin.edu.my

Abstract - With the liberalization of Malaysia government policy in higher education services in the 1990s, student enrollment has increased substantially. However, the higher education institutions (HEIs) are faced with a difficult situation of trying to understand how students select HEIs of their choice. This conceptual paper seeks to explore the criteria with which students select their HEIs and build a conceptual model to suit to the local higher education services industry. Factors influence student's choices of HEIs are student characteristics, external influences, college attributes. Also, in the model, information satisfaction as a mediating variable is discussed. Areas for future research are highlighted.

Keywords - student's choice of higher education institution, higher education institution, student characteristics, external influences, college attributes.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian higher education sector has undergone substantial growth as a result of efforts taken by the Ministry of Education to expand the education industry. It is the government's long-term goal to make Malaysia a regional center of excellence in education. The growth of higher education in Malaysia can be seen in several areas: increase in students' enrolment, increase in number of higher education institution (HEIs), increase in government spending, additional government policies in promoting education and the country's continuous need for human resources [2].

Nevertheless, the increased public demand for tertiary education has led to higher education market becoming monopolistically competitive. Both, public higher education institutions (PUHEs) and PHEIs are competing for student enrollment. PHEIs mainly enroll student who have failed in admission in admission into public universities and there is a fierce competition among most of these institutions in winning students enrollment. This highly competitive environment has resulted in an estimated decline in student enrollment by approximately 20 percent across the board, especially among the smaller private colleges with student enrolment ranging between 400-500 students [47].

Over the years, models of college choice have assisted college administrators in identifying the pressures and influences that guide institutional recruiting policies. Without models, "colleges may overlook ways to increase the effectiveness of their recruiting or, conversely, overestimate the influence of recruiting in which they do engage" [8].

In Malaysia higher education environment, [3] found that students' selection of a university was mainly determined by types of academic programmes available, quality of education, administration standards, faculty qualification, and convenient and accessible location. Based on the preliminary study of final year management students, he argued that these selection factors should guide university administrators in developing the preferred image of their universities.

Another study conducted by [26] concluded that there were six (6) main institutional factors that attract students to study in Malaysian private universities. The factors are namely reputation of the institution, future graduates' job prospects, nature of the institutions, lower costs, affiliation of the institutions, entry flexibility and institutions' campus environment. He argued that it was essential for institutions to have the capabilities and offerings of the said factors to be attractive to the prospective students.

Two years later, [46] conducted a similar study as per [3] and [26]. However, their purpose of the research was to examine the expectations of higher education institutions among prospective students. Prospective students are those who are about to complete secondary school education and who were at the crossroads in choosing the place to further their studies [46]. It was concluded that availability of required programme at the university/college, academic reputation of the university/college, quality of the faculty/lecturers and financial assistance offered by the university/college were the four most important factors that prospective students expect before they enroll in university/college.

A research carried out by [10] revealed that the factors that students from New Zealand and USA considered in choosing higher learning institution do not correspond. To this end, the rank importances of the factors for New Zealand students were academic reputation, career opportunities, and program issues. However, the order of importance for the USA students was academic reputation, cost/time issues and program issues. Indeed, [10] commented that "...trying to develop a single model of important facts to apply cross-culturally might be a mistake."

Four years later, a research carried out by [11] also revealed that the differences exist between Australian and Malaysian of students in the factors they consider in selecting a university. Malaysian students rated quality of teaching, research produced by academics and academic qualification higher than Australian students. This concurs with the studied done by [10] that students from difference

culture background have different factors to be considered when choosing a higher education to study.

Based on the above statements made by [10] and [11], it can be concluded that student college choice model vary from one country to another country. Thus, this paper attempts to develop a conceptual model on student's choice of HEIs in Malaysia. However, for the purpose of this study, the proposed conceptual model (see figure 2, appendix A) will adapt and modify the models developed by [8] and [18].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reference [8] introduced one of the first models of student college choice. Reference [8] described it as a "general conceptual model of student college choice that specifies the important variable sets and their interrelationships." Reference [8]'s general conceptual model of student college choice is based on the interaction between the students' characteristics of socioeconomic status, aptitude, educational aspiration and achievement and a series of external influences.

The external influences fall into three categories: 1) significant other – friends, parents, high school teachers and counselors; 2) fixed characteristics of the institution – cost (financial aid), location, program availability; and 3) communication efforts of the college – campus visits, written information, admissions and recruiting activities.

The interactive effects of the factors in this model appear to directly influence the student's college choice decisions. Reference [8] model's acknowledges the longitudinal nature of the college choice process. Specifically, the model looks at the impact of student characteristics and external influences on the general expectation of college life. According to [8], many high seniors "share a highly stereotyped, idealized image of college life, an image not representative of any actual institution."

Reference [8] was careful to note that his model "does not exhaust the possibilities of influence." As such, the model highlights the major factors that influence the college choice process but does not contain the full range of possibilities. This model could best be characterized as a conceptual model which describes the interactions and influences on the college selection process; the model does not have defined phases or stages. This model has served as a catalyst for later models of student college choice.

On the other hand, the model developed by [18] explained the mediating variable that is "information satisfaction" that mediated external influences and student's choice of HEIs. The finding concluded that information satisfaction plays a significant role in mediating the relationship between external influences and student's choice of HEIs.

A. Student characteristics

1) Aspiration

Reference [6], [2] and [21] found that student educational aspirations are positively associated with post-secondary participation. In short, the prospective student's personal

aspirations have an important impact on the decision to attend college. Aspirations and career plans of potential students are key indicators of college attendance.

2) Aptitude

According to [13], students who are aware of their ability to achieve academic success in college tend to attempt post secondary education. Reference [33] stated that individual self-selection plays a critical role in the predisposition to attend college.

3) High school performance

Reference [5] found in a study of prospective college students that high school activities were a positive predictor of a student's predisposition to attend college. Successful participation in high school activities are related to the predisposition and achievement in college [15], [33].

B. External Influences

1) Friends attending colleges

Reference [28] and [33] stated that there is a peer effect that effects a student's predisposition to attend a post-secondary institution. They state that the larger the proportion of a student's classmates plan to enroll in college, the more likely that he or she will also make this choice.

2) Influence of parents

A study conducted by [3] stated that advice and recommendation from family was the most important factor, with advice from peers ranking second that impact on student's choice of tertiary education.

3) Influence of friends

Reference [13] reported that friends can be almost as important as parents in the decision to attend college. Reference [43] was blunt in his research study by stating peer pressure is a variable or factor that influences a student's predisposition to attend college.

4) Influence of other individuals

Family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and admissions counselors can influence the students to attending college. Reference [7] studied the role of older siblings and concluded that although the parents tended to pay for the applications fees and handled the other economic concerns, the older brothers and sisters provided advice that was sought after and often heeded by the younger students. Reference [7] said that this was more common in families where the older siblings were first generation college attendees. Also, according to the study by [16], ninth-grade students with siblings who had attended or who were currently attending college were more likely to have college aspirations than those without siblings.

C. College Attributes

1) Location

Reference [37] stated that research has consistently shown that college or university location can be a major factor for potential student's decision to apply and enroll. Some students may be looking for a school close to their hometown or place of work for convenience and accessibility [1], [39].

A study by [28] discussed that an important factor in student predisposition to attend college is the close proximity of a higher education institution to home. It was found that a low-cost, nearby college was an important stimulator of a student's decision to further his or her education. Reference [15] also concluded that the proximity to a college campus does affect college attendance rates. Students who live close to a campus are more likely to attend college though they may not attend the campus located near home.

2) *Academic programs*

A study conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia by [46] also found that availability of the required programme as "the very importance attributes" for first year university students to choose a particular higher education institution.

Reference [10] also found that program issues such as range of programs of study, flexibility of degree program, major change flexibility and range of degree options are the most important factors for students to choose higher education institutions.

Reference [18] indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information satisfaction with respect to academic recognition (external influence).

3) *College reputation*

Institutional image and reputation has a tremendous effect on college choice. It is a powerful influence on potential student and college reputation is extremely persuasive in the college search and selection process. Students value the reputation of a college and it rates as an influential factor by students in the college choice process [29], [34], [37], [26].

Reference [27] stated that the most influential factor that students will evaluate in selecting their choice of institution was reputation of the institution. The study was conducted in Malaysia with an average mean score of 3.730.

4) *Educational facilities*

Reference [1] stated that educational facilities such as classrooms, laboratories and libraries are important in a student's selection of a college or university.

5) *Cost*

It was reviewed by [25] that cost-related issues seem to have more importance as years go by. For instance, [17] found they were at the bottom of the scale, while in [43] and [24] they are one of the most important elements. Reference [22] concluded that price is a negative influence on college choice while financial aid to reduce costs is a positive influence.

6) *Availability of financial aid*

A study conducted by [46] found that financial assistance offered by university as one of the four very important attributes expected from a particular higher education institution of choice. Thus, students who receive financial aid awards are more likely to enter college [23], [31], [33].

Reference [18] studied on mediating effect of information on college choice indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information

satisfaction with respect financial factors (external influences) which include financial aids and affordable fees.

7) *Employment opportunities*

Students are often attracted to post-secondary education because of the career opportunities it may provide [42]. Reference [35] stated that students often make college choices based on existing job opportunities for college graduates. Students are interested in outcomes. They are influenced by what graduates are doing, what graduate schools they attend and contributions that they are making to society [41].

8) *Advertising*

College marketing through the media has grown tremendously in the last ten years. Television and radio advertising have been shown to be particularly effective in building institutional image and visibility, especially in specific geographical areas [14].

9) *HEIs representatives*

Reference [29] found that visits to high schools by college admissions representatives were rated as an extremely effective influence for prospective students. College representatives were rated as a top influential factor in a study by [36]. These visits can be very conducive and beneficial for both the student and the admissions representative [14].

10) *Campus visit*

The campus visit is often a college or university's best recruiting tools. It is a major factor in the decision-making process [38]. Reference [14] found that the campus visit was the most important factor influencing a student's enrollment decision.

D. *Information Satisfaction*

A study conducted by [18] revealed that college attributes was found to exert a significant positive influence on college choice of HEIs. Also, information satisfaction played a significant role in mediating the relationship between external influences and student's choice of HEIs. Also, Reference [18] mentioned that student's choice of HEIs among the students is due to their satisfaction of the information they have acquired regarding the attributes of that particular colleges on which their evaluation was based upon. Thus, it can be implied that the further the information meets the prerequisite of the students' choice criteria, the more will the students have on their choice of HEIs.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As this paper is conceptual in nature, future empirical research can be carried out to test the fitness of the conceptual model. It can be tested both in the PUHEs and PHEIs. It is also important to recognize that other variables or constructs that may possibly have an impact on student's choice of HEIs. For instance, future research can explore student characteristics such as socioeconomic status whether it has an impact student's choice of HEIs.

Studies have successfully identified various external influences such as parents, siblings, friends, school counselors that influence students in choosing higher

learning institution. Nevertheless, “campus security” has yet to be explored by the researchers. Therefore, it would be more conclusive if future empirical studies be carried out to find out whether campus security is considered an important factor to be considered when choosing a higher learning institution.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The fact that literature on student college choice models indicated that students from different countries choose different factors in selecting HEIs. The conceptual paper aims to develop a conceptual model on student’s choice of HEIs in Malaysia. The model is developed based on research done by [8] and [18]. Students characteristics, external influences, college attributes and information satisfaction are the factors that influence the student’s choices of HEIs. Information satisfaction found in the model is known mediating variable. Other variables which are not found in the [8] model are also included in the proposed conceptual model i.e. college reputation, educational facilities, employment opportunities, friends attending college and influence of other individuals. Using the factors mentioned above, HEIs could re-strategise their marketing strategies in order to attract and retain students.

REFERENCES

- [1] Absher, K. & Crawford, G., “Marketing the community college starts with understanding students’ perspectives,” *Community College Review*, 23(4), 1996, pp.59-67.
- [2] Ariffin, A. A., Ahmad, A. H., Ahmad, M. S. & Ibrahim, M. A. “Determining decision-making styles and demographic differences in selecting higher education services among Malaysians,” *International Journal of Business and Society*, 9(1), 2008, pp.1-18.
- [3] Baharun, R., “A study of market segmentation in tertiary education for local public higher learning institutes,” *Malaysian Management Review*, 2002, 37(1).
- [4] Baharun, R., “Identifying needs and wants of university students in Malaysia”, *Malaysian Management Review*. 39(2), 2006, pp.1-7.
- [5] Borus, M.E., “Factors associated with college attendance of high school seniors,” *Economics of Education Review*, 3(3), 1993, pp. 169-176.
- [6] Carpenter, P.G. & Fleishman, J.A., “Linking intentions and behavior: Australian students’ college plans and college attendance,” *American Educational Research Journal*, 24(1), 1987, pp. 70-105
- [7] Ceja, M., “Understanding the role of parents and siblings as information sources in the college choice process of Chicana students,” *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(1), 2006, pp. 87-104.
- [8] Chapman, D., “A model of student college choice,” *Journal of Higher Education*, 52(5), 1981, pp. 490-505.
- [9] Chapman, D., “Toward a theory of college choice: A model of college search and choice behavior.” Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1984.
- [10] Ford, J. B, Joseph, M. & Joseph, B., “Importance-performance analysis as a strategic tool for service marketers: The case of service quality perceptions of business students in New Zealand and the USA,” *The Journal of Services Marketing*, 13(2), 1999, pp. 171-186.
- [11] Garma, R. & Moy, T. Y., “University Selection: A comparison of Australian and Malaysian students’ pre-choice behavior,” Paper presented at ANZMAC 2003 Conference, Adelaide, 1-3 December 2003, pp.1344-1350.
- [12] Gilmour, Jr, J. E., Spiro, L. M. & Dolich, I. J., “How college students select a college,” Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 208 705), 1981.
- [13] Hossler, D., “Enrollment management: An integrated approach,” New York, College Entrance Examination Board, 1984.
- [14] Hossler, D., Bean, J. P., & Associates, “The strategic management of college enrollments,” San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1990.
- [15] Hossler, D. & Gallagher, K., “Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policy makers,” *College and University*. 62(3), 1987, pp. 207-221.
- [16] Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N., “Going to college: How social, economic, and educational factors influence the decisions students make,” Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- [17] Houston, M., “Cognitive structure and information search patterns of prospective graduate business students. *Advances in Consumer Research*,” 7, 1979, pp. 552-557.
- [18] Ismail, N., “Mediating effect of information satisfaction on college choice,” Paper presented in Oxford Business & Economics Conference Program. UK, 2009.
- [19] Ismail, N. & Leow, Y. M., “Sourcing for information: A private higher education perspective,” *Proceeding of the 9th International Business Research Conference*, Melbourne, Australia, 2008.
- [20] Ismail, N., Leow, Y. M., Chen, C. H. Lim, C. T. M., Ng, F. L., “Choice criteria for private tertiary programs at a private higher education institution,” *Proceeding of the International Colloquium on Business & Management*, Bangkok, Thailand, 2007.
- [21] Jackson, G. A., “Financial aid and student enrollment,” *Journal of Higher Education*. 49(6), 1978, pp. 548-574.
- [22] Jackson, G. A., “Workable, comprehensive models of college choice. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: National Institute of Education,” Washington, D.C.: Spencer Foundation, Chicago, 1986.
- [23] Jackson, G. A., “Did college choice change during the seventies?” *Economics of Education Review*, 7(1), 1988, pp. 15-27.
- [24] Joseph, M. & Joseph B., “Identifying need of potential students in tertiary education for strategy development,” *Quality Assurance in Education*, 6(2), 1998, pp. 90-96.
- [25] Joseph, M. & Joseph B., “Indonesian students’ perceptions of choice criteria in the selection of a tertiary institution: Strategic implications,” *International Journal of Educational Management*, 14(1), 2000, pp. 40-44.
- [26] Keling, S. B. A., “Institutional factors attracting students to Malaysian institutions of higher learning,” *International Review of Business Research Papers*, 2(1), 2006, pp. 46-64.
- [27] Keling, S. B. A. Krishnan, A. Nurtjahja, O., “Evaluative criteria for selection of private universities and colleges in Malaysia,” *Journal of International Management Studies*, 2(1), 2007, pp. 1-11.
- [28] Kohn, M., Manski, C. & Mundel, D., “An empirical investigation of factors influencing going behaviors,” *Annual of Economic and Social measurement*, 54(4), 1976, pp. 391-419.
- [29] Lay, L & Maguire, J., “Coordinating market and evaluation research on the admission rating process,” *Research in Higher Education*, 14(1), 1981, pp. 71-85.
- [30] Lay, R. & Maguire, J., “Modeling the college choice: Image and decision,” *College and University*, 56, 1981, pp. 113-126.
- [31] Litten, L., “Different strokes in the applicant pool: some refinements in model of student choice,” *Journal of Higher Education*, 4, 1982, pp. 378.
- [32] Liu, J., “Factors influencing students’ choice of selected private universities in China,” PhD Thesis. Bringham Young University, Proquest, UMI Number: 3189180, 2005.
- [33] Manski, C. & Wise, D., “College Choice in America,” Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

- [34] Murphy, P. E., "Consumer buying roles in college choice: Parents and students' perceptions," *College and University*, 56(2), 1981, pp. 140-150.
- [35] Paulsen, M. B., "College Choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior," (Report No. EDO-HE-90-60), Washington, D.C.: ERIC clearinghouse on higher education, 1990.
- [36] Rowe, F. A., "Assessing student information needs for recruitment purposes," *National ACAC Journal*, 25 (1), 1980, pp. 3-8.
- [37] Servier, R. A., "Freshmen at competitive liberal arts college: A survey of factors influencing institutional choice," Unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1986.
- [38] Sevier, R. A., "Recruiting African-American undergraduates: A national survey of the factors that affect intuitional choice," *College and University*, 68, 1992, pp. 48-51.
- [39] Servier, R. A., "Image is everything: Strategies for measuring, changing and maintaining your institution's image," (White paper No. 1). Cedar Rapids, IA: Stamats Communications, Inc., 1994.
- [40] Servier, R.A., "Those important thing: What every college president needs to k now about marketing and student recruiting," *College and University*, 71(4), 1996, pp. 9-16.
- [41] Sevier, R. A., "Major trends affecting higher education," Presentation conducted at the Symposium for the Marketing of Higher Education, Boston, MA, 1997.
- [42] Sevier, R. A., "Charting a course: Finding direction amidst the swell of data on student recruiting," White Paper No. 6, Cedar Rapids, IA, Stamats Communication, Inc., 1998.
- [43] Webb, M., "Variables influencing graduate business students' college selections," *College and University*, 68(1), 1993, pp. 38-46.
- [44] Weiler, W. C., "Transition from consideration of a college to the decision to apply," *Research in higher education*, 35(60), 1994, pp. 631-646.
- [45] Yangkelovich, D., "The changing values on campus", New York: The Free Press, 1972.
- [46] Yusof, M., Ahmad, S. N. B., Tajudin, M. & Ravindran, R., "A study of factors influencing the selection of a higher education institution," *UNITAR e-journal*, 4(2), 2008, pp. 27-40.
- [47] Zalina, Y., "IPTS, IPTA: Student competing to study in higher education institution," "Perang berebut pelajar kini bermula," *Utusan Malaysia*, 10 March 2003, pp. 1.