



Research Paper

FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DECISION OF UNIVERSITY SELECTION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Numbers of universities in Malaysia are growing rapidly. Nowadays students have plenty of choices in selecting universities. This proves that educations in Malaysia are affordable and accessible for international students. There are about 500 higher educations' are operating in Malaysia, namely universities, university colleges and colleges. In ending of 2015, there were 135,502 international students from over 160 countries studied in higher education institutions in Malaysia (Jusoh, 2015). This research aimed to study the factors influencing international decision of university selection in Malaysia. A qualitative methods been used for this research. Content-based analysis and data interpretation were used for qualitative data. Face to face interview sessions were carried out to assist the data collections tools. Interview sessions were conducted in universities located at Cyberjaya, Selangor. Sample sizes of 10 were collected to help for the analysis. The interviews were carried outside the respondents' campuses. In conclusion, the content based analysis shows that there are several factors which have strong impact on students' decision making process. The most of the students pay high attention on the reputation of the university as a main influencing factor. It then followed by courses offered by the university. Cost of the program rated as another important element. Respondents consider location as one of the vital factor; this is because they give priority for convenient location. Influence from family members, friends, peers and education consultant plays a vital role in students' decision making process too.

Key Terms: *International decision, University selection, Reputation of the university, Courses offered, Cost of the program, Location*

1. Introduction

In 2007, Malaysia has launched an internationalization of higher education in the country which is Malaysia's National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). This plan was established to revolve the student and staff mobility, social integration, academic programs and many more. This policy was developed as the efforts of most Asean countries transforming to be education hub in the region. According to Ministry of Education of Malaysia, there are 1,134,134 students enrolled in higher education in Malaysia and 100,000 them are international students from various countries (KPT, 2015)

The development in social media has influence the business organizations to discover sustainable way to communicate with consumer and to attract potential consumers. The new marketing challenge has extended to universities Malaysia that has influence international student in decision-making process. Students need to decide which university to enroll affected by influence of social media, parents, friends, cost, location and other influences. As per Mazzarol (2002), there are several factors that affecting students in selecting a university in Malaysia, likely, availability of technology-based courses, commonality of languages, lack of improvement in higher education in Africa and Asia. According to Baharun (2006), international students' selection of university in Malaysia are categorized under several types, such as education quality, courses available, standard of administration, university qualification and convenient on location.

This study contributes to a variety of factors that influence the selection of countries and higher education institutions for international students. Explorations of this study are expected to develop an understanding of the theoretical aspects of study abroad destination selection and practically implementing the understanding not only at the university level but also the higher education sector in general. According to Herlina Jupiter, Irma Wani Othman, Norazah Mohd. Suki, Muhammad Safuan Yusoff, Hasbullah Awang, Rudie Adie Razak in their study of Factors Influencing International Student's Decision in Choosing Study Destination Abroad, therefore this study are significant to be carried out. Under the intensive international competition around the world for foreign students, there is a necessary to better understand the motivating factors for international students to choose specific study destination Zhang Shuai and Dai Lang (2017).

The decision making process for higher education is not easy to make. Family is one of the core influences that plays important role in students decision making, followed by demographics and the learning environment in the campus (Robinson, 2007). Furthermore, Robinson added that the other factors that involve are policies and values of the universities and the expertise of the university staffs. A part from that, other important factors are the mode of teaching, course context and on how the staffs responses to the students. Financial background too will determine the selection of university among

international students (Beekhoven, 2002). There various factors that will influence students and has a strong impact in the decision making process.

Research objectives:

- i. To identify external influences on international students in selection of universities in Malaysia
- ii. To identify University characteristics influencing international students in selection of universities in Malaysia
- iii. To identify University's communication efforts influencing international students in selection of universities in Malaysia

Research questions:

- i. What external factors influence international students' selection of universities in Malaysia?
- ii. What University characteristics influencing international students in selection of universities in Malaysia?
- iii. What type of University's communication efforts influencing international students in selection of universities in Malaysia?

2. Literature Review

The OECD (2003) describe international students as "persons accepted by a country other than their own, generally under special permits or visas, for the particular reason of following a particular course of study in an certain university of the accepting country. International students are those who do not hold the citizenship of the country for which the data are documented." Choudaha & Chang (2012) warn that the environment of great competition globally amongst universities and price range cuts strains universities to become more vital and to focus on international student enrolment. This bearing makes international student recruitment distinctly valuable aspects to the financial enthusiasm of many universities example in the United States and other countries.

Factors that influencing international students to study in Malaysia.

i. External influences.

Students decision to study in foreign country influenced by the condition of the family environment. Parents can be the strongest positive influence to student as they will encourage them to pursue study (Bers, 2002). Another study affirms that numerous international students were compelled to study abroad as an approach to escape their native country and to comply with their parents' desires (Andrade, 2009). Some of the push factors, in accordance to Phang (2013), encompass perceptions of better quality of foreign higher education framework; lack of access to quality, good local higher education; accessibility or presence of technology-based higher education courses. Furthermore, the pull factors that encourage international students to pursue higher education abroad (Phang, 2013; Maringe, 2006; Mazzarol, 2002) consist of the geographic propinquity of the

host, language commonality and chance to improve second language; the higher education institution's reputation for quality; teaching personnel's authorizations, qualification and reputation; availability of courses and programs; and the institution's advantageous recruitment and marketing campaigns.

For international students, their decisions to achieve higher education qualification in Malaysia were influenced by their individual approach and beliefs and they were impacted by their rivals and family members (Chen, 2006). Besides, study by Pimpa (2003) on international students decisions of international education and families, diagnosed five family influences: financial support from the family might restrain or broaden the scope of a student's country option for study; information from any family member who used to study in Malaysia; family desires from parents and siblings; rivalry among family members and to compare themselves with others in terms of academic achievement; and enticement, in the form of parents trying to persuade students to study abroad because everyone else did it. International students are unequivocally influenced by their families' financial support and desires (Pimpa, 2003).

ii. University characteristics.

The vital aspects that can incomparably influence potential students in decision-making process are university factors such as course offered, location, university reputation and cost of study. These factors are elaborated below. We have not considered the factor such as Service Quality as those matters when student starts studies with university (Martins & Dastane, 2014).

a. Course offered.

Maringe's (2006) research recommend that when selecting programs or courses, including which schools or universities to attend, international students put a great deal of stress on value for money. Portion of their decision-making process includes career opportunities, better return on investment, and a brighter future. These aspects play a vital role for students to choose the institution that is their best interest.

b. Location.

The strategic location of the university can major factor to influence students in decision making process in choosing their preferred university to pursue their higher studies. This point has been admitted by Sia (2010) in her conceptual framework that students prefer to select a university nearby their residence.

c. University reputation.

University reputation is one of the most significant that can impact students in choosing a university. Jager (2009) has stated that reputation of university in one of the most important factor for international students to pursue their higher studies.

Students select the university based on the quality of the university environment such as the facilities, courses offered, friendly staffs and quality academician (Gray, 2003). The physical appearance and the environment too matters in selection of university among students. The environment and the facilities including the accreditation, job opportunity, international reorganization, the university ranking and in campus services also plays an important roles while selection of university.

d. Cost of study.

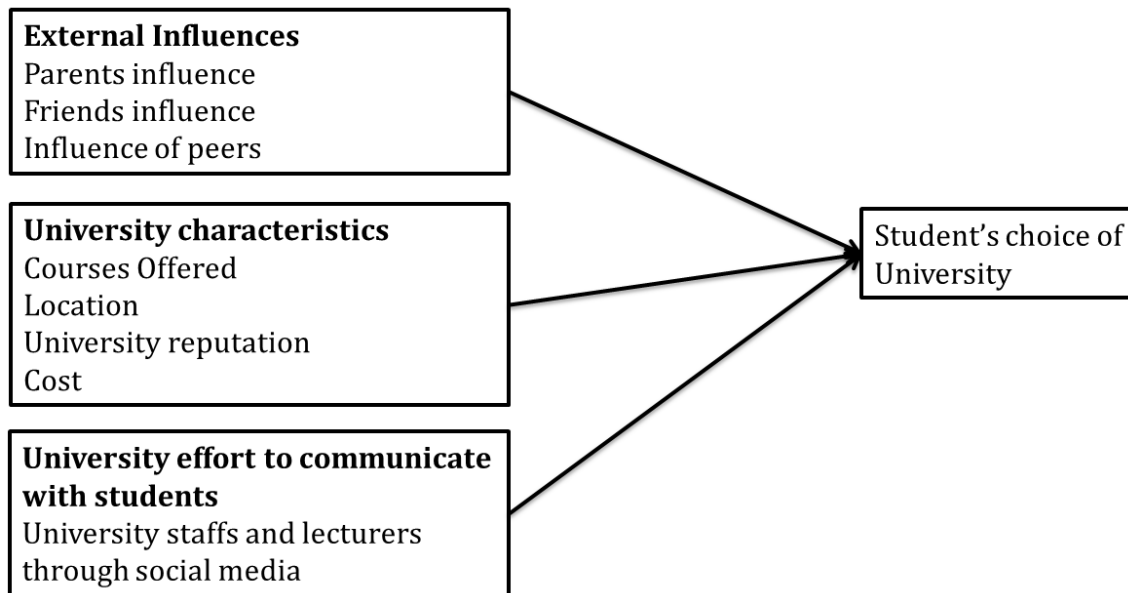
The course fee as well as the cost of dwelling and pursuing study abroad is one of the main factor influencing students in selection of higher education in Malaysia. Some of the sources of financial aid incorporate from the international students' home country; resource from international organizations, aid from non-public sponsors, help from the host Government and aid from the University (EduPASS, 2013).

iii. University effort to communicate with the students.

Whitehead (2012) mentioned that social media not only important tools in student recruitment it also strengthen the branding of university which can be very effective. Universities posted information related to marketing need to be accurate and credible information to the students mainly for the universities' admission. When it comes to selecting a university, it would just be natural for potential students to depend on a cause of information they are well familiar with. Thus, any information procured from the said source is considered to a great extent tenable. It is maybe with this in mind that universities have ventured up their using of social media in their student recruitment endeavors.

O'Reilly (2006) stated that the changes in the strategy in terms of pattern and communication channels effected university's credibility with potential students and their trust of the university. It is particularly important to evaluate the potential of these tools to reach and attract future students and align with how they perceive the most and less trustworthy sources of information. According to Constant in ides & Stagno (2011) universities can benefit from identifying the students' preferred communication tool social media and habits in an effort to design an effective communication plan for student recruitment purposes.

Conceptual Framework



Adapted from study by Ng, Nik Muhd, Rahman and Ismail. 2011. Workable, comprehensive models of university choice.

Conceptual Hypotheses Development

i. External Influences.

Study by Baharun (2002), the recommendation from family is very important factor that has impact on student. This is because the students trust their family member and friends and believe that these people will choose the best for them. Previous research found that while students making decisions about their destination country based on their own knowledge, the family and friend's feedback and discussion influence their perception of the university and the country indirectly (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2000; Pimpa, 2003; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). Study conducted by Zhang Shuai, Dai Lang (2017) also found that the recommendation of friends and family was in the sixth place as one of the influential factors in selection of university.

Besides, study by Bibi Noraini Mohd Yusuf, M. Qabbur M. Chazali and Muhammad Fazlee Sham Abdullah (2017) in the article of 'Factors Influencing Local and International Students Decision in Choosing Public Higher Learning Institutions in Northern Region Of Malaysia', also found positive relationship between influence from peers, families and friends in choosing institutions of higher education in Malaysia. It is supported by Prof Dr Karl Wagner and Pooyan Yousefi Fard (2009) in their study found positive relationship that family, friends and peers influence students to study in higher education in Malaysia.

ii. University Characteristics.

The popularity of the university, (Whiteside and Mentz, 2003) and cost of the courses offered. According to Koe and Saring (2012) on determine the extraneous and institutional elements that impact the international students' intention to study in

university in Malaysia. The result demonstrated that location, university reputation, low course fee, country image, learning facilities, and academic course were having a powerful moderate relationship with the aim to study in Malaysia. According to Vrontis Demetris (2007), individuals select a specific university based on the value it can offer them and by contrasting the costs included with the future benefits that may come about because of graduating the education institution in question.

iii. University effort to communicate with students.

According to Mackenzie (1996), the satisfaction feeling will be contingent if the acquired information prior to choice decision and based on their expectations. Leow (2008) has urged that students will gather information for up to five universities at the same time and evaluate them before deciding which university to select. In turn, this requires the allocation of resources, a different approach to marketing (from one-to-many to one-to-one), monitoring the social media domain, keeping these applications up-to-date.

According to study by (Forbes & Vespoli, 2013) on the impact of social media on consumer behavior, 59% of all respondents were utilizing Facebook as their social media instrument when they got a product recommendation. 37% percent of all users were utilizing Twitter. From these outcomes, social media has impacted their purchasing behaviour. The relationship between social media and consumer decision-making exhibit that social media influence advertising attitudes, brand attitudes, and purchasing aims of consumer. It will not necessarily influence consumer's decision-making, but may possess an intervening effect (Taining, 2012). The good image of brand or product can lead the consumer to settle on choice on their purchases,

Numerous researchers have investigated the influence of **cost** in the selection of a university (Wagner & Fard, 2009), in which high rebates were seen more positively than low rebates (Quigley et al. 2000). However, Domino (2006) contends that cost is the most vital elements from parents' point of view rather than a student's point of view. The effect of financial aid or packages that incorporated **scholarships and grants** was investigated thoroughly by Kim (2004), Govan et al. (2006) and Hoyt and Brown (2003), while Beneke & Human (2010) distinguished that financial aid given is only listed as the fifth vitalelementsto study at a university.

3. Research Design and Methodology

In this study, the research approach was employed by using qualitative approach design. Furthermore, the research design that was used in this study is descriptive research design. Descriptive research in where the researcher reach out with the respondent, it may include surveys or interviews to collect the necessary data from the respondents that were used to counter the research problems (Malhotra, 2010). For this study interview method is being

used for data collection. There are various types of methods available to collect data such as unstructured interview and structured interview as demonstrated by several researchers earlier (Dastane & Lee, 2016). The survey method used for this research is structured interview.

Foreign students will be the target population from many universities in Malaysia. The students were selected based on interview. In addition, the target population of foreign students aged between 18 to 25 years old. There are 74,996 international students from about 160 countries studying in private tertiary in Malaysia as at 31 December 2015 (Sun, 2016). International students studying in Malaysia are supportive in giving responses for research (Zahid & Dastane, 2016). For this qualitative research, purposive or theoretical sampling was used for the interview. In depth interview were conducted to explore on the individual's experience (Lincoln, 1985). Therefore, I have targeted a sample of 10 international students from several countries studying in Malaysia. The interview conducted to gain deep understanding of student's perception of their experiences in selection of university in Malaysia using social media.

There were 10 participants included in the interview session. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at interviewee's convenient choice of time and location. The open-ended interviews were tape-recorded followed by data transcription. The open-ended interview questions allow the respondents to brief more detail on their opinion and perceptions on the research issue. The interview questions carried out as follows:

General

1. Where is your home country?
2. What course are you studying now?
3. How did you first hear about your university?

External Influences

4. Which information sources influenced you most in your decision making and university selection?
5. What factors influence you most regarding choice of university?
6. Does university reputation matter?

University Characteristics

7. Did you contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university using social media?
8. What do you take into your consideration when you make a university choice?
9. What are the factors you find most useful in making university choice?

University communication efforts

10. Which social media sites did you visit for university information and what type of information did you seek on social media while searching for a university?

4. Results and Discussion

The researcher used the interview method as the main finding of the study. The table below summarizes the profile of the interviewee. The participants who participated in interview were students from several countries that studying in universities in Cyberjaya, Selangor. There are 4 students from Nigeria, 2 students from Pakistan, 3 students from Bangladesh and 1 student from India were interviewed.

Name	Demographic	Course Studying	Country
Yuguda 01	Male	MSc in Information Management	Nigeria
Deepa 02	Female	Diploma in Business. Information Technology	Pakistan
Sunny 03	Male	BSc (Hons) in Software Engineering	Pakistan
Collins 04	Male	BSc (Hons) in Software Engineering	Nigeria
Charles 05	Male	Master in Business Administration	India
Chukwuma 06	Male	BSc (Hons) in Business Information Systems	Nigeria
Abdullah 07	Male	BA (Hons) in Business Management	Bangladesh
Menon Ali 08	Male	BA (Hons) in International Management	Bangladesh
Humphery 09	Male	MSc in Computer Systems Engineering	Nigeria
Huzaiifa 10	Male	BSc (Hons) in Accounting and Finance	Bangladesh

Student Selection of University – Analysis of Major Factors

i. External influences.

According to respondents, 6 out of 10 students said that they get to know about their university through their friends and 2 students said they family members suggested the university and 1 student said his agent influence him selecting the university. Study by Moogan and Baron (2003), stated that students' selection of higher studies may start in their secondary schooling time where parents, teachers, career consultants influences students in decision making in selecting a university. It is said that the selection of higher studies might be influenced by numerous internal and external elements. Based on study

by Hossler (2005) and Jenkins (2001), influencing elements during this stage can be related to development of the youngsters and their aim to pursue higher studies. It is supported by the study of Harris and Halpin (2002), variables that inspire a person to pursue study in higher education include of social impact (peer, parents, and family), self-control and self-efficacy, financial aid, and general preparation for university, teacher-student communication, and relative functionalism.

ii. **University characteristics.**

Below are the findings from this study.

Course offered: 3 out of 10 respondents said that courses offered play a vital role in university selection. Study by Prof Dr Karl Wagner and Pooyan Yousefi Fard (2009) in his study 'Factors Influencing Malaysian Students' Intention to Study at a Higher Educational Institution', course offered (content and structure) and cost of education have significant positive influence for students to study in higher education in Malaysia.

Location: 3 out 10 respondents have said that they prefer to have accessible location of university. The location should be convenience to the students to access with minimum cost where many of the students interested in location of the university. Study by Bibi Noraini Mohd Yusuf, M. Qabbur M. Ghazali and Muhammad Fazlee Sham Abdullah (2017) found negative relationship between location and student's decision in choosing institutions of higher education in Malaysia and it is not influence student decision.

University reputation: According to respondents, the university reputations were the extremely important selection criterion. 7 out 10 respondents said the reputation of university play a vital role in selection of university. The respondents even stated that the quality of lecturers also an important factors that influence them in selection of university. Some of the students even said that academic standard influence in selecting university in Malaysia. Study by Zhang Shuai and Dai Lang (2017) indicate that the academic reputation of university as the second most influential factor influencing decision of international students to study in Malaysia. Bibi Noraini Mohd Yusuf, M. Qabbur M. Ghazali and Muhammad Fazlee Sham Abdullah (2017) found negative relationship between reputations of college or universities on the student selection of the university. Reputation of universities and college do play some parts in selection of the higher education but study by Bibi Noraini Mohd Yusuf et. al (2017) did not prove it to be a major factor for student to affect their choice.

Cost: From the conducted interview in this study, most of the students agreed that the cost of study influencing the selection of university in Malaysia. Study by Zhang Shuai, Dai Lang (2017), cost of tuition and reputation of institution contribute as the most influential factors for international students to choose the country and institutions followed by the academic reputation of institution and competitive program fees. Besides, study by Bibi Noraini Mohd Yusuf, M. Qabbur M. Ghazali and Muhammad Fazlee Sham Abdullah (2017) found positive relationship between cost and facilities of university with student's decision in choosing institutions of higher education in Malaysia.

iii. University effort to communicate with students

Based on the findings, most of the respondents agreed that the university effort to communicate with students influence the selection of universities in Malaysia. Survey findings indicate that social media that have significant following and student profiles include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube and other social media. This Creating attractive social media applications and connecting with potential students is therefore a major challenge for university marketers. It is supported with the study by Johan de Jager and Therese du Plooy (2010) in his study of 'Information Sources Used To Select A Higher Education Institution: Evidence From South African Students', the university web site is clearly perceived as the best performer in terms of disseminating information for decision making regarding a Higher Education Institution. Campus visits and open days as well as word of mouth are regarded as 2nd and 3rd most powerful sources to disseminate information for the purpose of decision making in selection of university. In the same study by the author also show the lower side of influence where advertisements on both TV and radio have been regarded as less appealing.

Zhang Shuai, Dai Lang (2017) in their study also found that the advertisements for studying and living in in Malaysia at 12th place according to sequence. On the other hand, university rankings around the world weigh heavily for the reputation of institution, thus Malaysian higher education institutions should devote more resources to increase the rankings locally and internationally For the specialized colleges or private universities, international cooperation or exchange programs with top universities all over the world is an effective way to promote good reputation for higher education.

5. Conclusion

The leading influential criterion is the *university reputation*. This show that the key factor that influences the students to choose a particular university to have a reputed education. Study by Jager and Soontiens (2009), stated that the reputation of a University do play a huge part in student's decision in choosing the higher education platform.

The next factor is *courses offered*, student select a university based on their preferred course is being offered there. Zhang Shuai and Dai Lang (2017) in the sample study of University Malaya found the availability of courses Study place at third as the most influencing factors in decision making. Paulsen (1990), Montgomery (2002), Avery & Hoxby (2004), and Hsieh (2010) through their studies, examined that programs offered is really the strongest factor influencing students to enroll in any university.

The third most influential factor is *social media*, almost all the respondents said that they have browse the internet and social media to get information on the courses, student activities, environment and the lecturers. Study by Johan de Jager, Therese du Plooy (2010) found that the students prefer to be informed about Higher Education Institutions by the web sites. A high premium is also placed on campus visits and open days follow by high

school teachers to obtain information rather than other sources. It show that the higher institutions website play an important role in attracting international student in their decision.

The fourth element is *external influence* from family, friends or education counsellor. Most of the students have said that the significant people have impact in the decision making to select a university. There are some of their friend are studying in the same university as the respondents. So, their friends are recommending the university to them.

The fifth factor is *location*. Where the respondents did not consider location of university as the main factor in the decision making process even most of the students prefer the university close to their hostel or home so that, it is convenience and accessible. The location should be convenience to the students to access with minimum cost where many of the students interested in location of the university.

The last factor is *cost*. It is at the bottom of the scale and the issues related to cost seems to be very less. Despite that, the study by M. J. Calder, S. Richter, Y. Mao, K. Kovacs Burns, R. S. Mogale, & M. Danko (2016) in show opposite result where high tuition fees in second place as most influential in selection of university. Universities or colleges should reexamine their price policy of the tuitions and accommodation on campus to make sure costs always play as a competitive advantage to attract international students.

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