

Factors Affecting Students' Choice of Universities

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Abstract

Choosing in university is a complicated decision for students since it determines the kind of profession they intend to pursue in life. This paper fills the gap in understanding the factors affecting the decision of freshmen students in choosing a university. For identifying these reasons the objectives of the study were to determine the influence of programs offered by the university reputation, flexibility in fee payment, and university's geographical location on students' choice of a university. The purpose of this research is to know what factors influence the high school students in choosing their higher education institution. The respondents of the research are 90 students from three Universities in Garowe. The research was conducted using 'quantitative survey research design using primary data on factors effecting students 'choice of university. The study population was freshmen students of the selected higher education institutions. A sample size of ninety respondents was used for the study. Data was collected using Questionnaires from the key respondents of the selected institutions. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists where conclusions were drawn from tables, figures from the Package. The analysis is done using descriptive statistics to find out which factors are the most significant ones. From the research, it is found out that the programs offered by the university, university reputation, flexibility in fee payment, and university's geographical location are all very influential factors in students' choice of higher education institution. It can revealed that the academic reputation of the university most influential factor on choice of university with the average mean of 4.1 which made it score the highest influential factors on choice of university. This is followed by academic programs offered by university being on the second rank on choice of university with average mean of 3.9 and flexibility in fee payment became on the third rank with an average mean of 3.85 while the geographical location is the least influential factor on choice of university carrying an average mean of 3.5. Thus in conclusion as per the findings of the study academic reputation followed by academic programs offered by universities ranked the most influential factors which contribute and leads the choice of a student in selecting universities to pursue their degree programs.

1. Introduction

Challenging economic times and the increasing number of universities in Somalia have led to tremendous competitions among those privately running institutions; therefore, with the knowledge of factors affecting the students' choice of university is of high alert.

Moreover, every year graduating high school students are faced with the problem of having to decide on future career paths. Making the decision to invest in your own higher education is extremely complex as higher education has an essential role in the professional formation. Understanding higher education as a knowledge acquisition and formation process, it must be emphasized that the providers within this process aim mainly at satisfying at a high level the needs of the consumers (Vrontis Demetris, et al., 2007, p.980). Nonetheless, higher education institutions have been faced up to lately with the limited number of students graduating and the increasing number of private universities as an alarming wave, and thus knowing the factors that influence the students' decision making process represents a useful source of information for academic management with a view to adopting some optimal decisions regarding the attraction and retention of students.. For those students considering attending a university, the selection process probably assumes high priority. This process typically spans a number of years and may have begun in early childhood when prospective students develop perceptions of universities and university life (Maguire & Lay, 1981). Many factors probably affect the final decision for all of the above mentioned issues.

Graduating high school students may have only unclear notion of future educational needs and benefits (Litten, Sullivan, & Brodigan, 1983), however, the university selection process allows students to investigate various alternatives. Identifying factors considered by high school graduates in punt land in this decision-making process is the goal of this study.

The overall objective of the study is to find out the factors affecting students' choice of universities in Puntland.

1. To find out the effect of academic programs offered on choice of university.
2. To determine the effect of university's academic reputation on choice of university.
3. To establish the extent to which university's flexibility in fee payment on choice of university.
4. To examine the effect university geographical location on choice of university.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical framework of the study

A number of authors have used different approaches to theories to explain the factors influencing students' choice of universities. This study mainly focuses on Choice theory proposed by William Glasser (1996).

Glasser postulates that all we do is behave, all we do is chosen, and we are driven by our genes to satisfy five basic needs: survival, to belong and to be loved by others, power and importance, freedom and independence, and fun. In his ten axioms notes that, a person's behaviour is inspired by what that person wants or needs at that particular time, not an outside stimulus. He notes that all living creatures control their behaviour to fulfil their need for satisfaction in one or more of the named needs. He states that every individual has the power to change their lives for the better based on the choices they make.

Chapman (1986) notes the use of Behavioural Theory to explain college selection as important by outlining the down-top selection process students engage in when choosing a college of study. He sequentially models the five stages students involve in while choosing a college such as Pre-search behaviour, Application decision, Choice decision and Matriculation decision. Kotler (2003) supports Chapman (1986) in pre-search behaviour stage, search and application stages which begins when a student recognizes the need and desirability of college education up to when he or she submits an application to the selected university.

Chapman adds that matriculation stage is important because students are given allowance to make adjustments to the choices made on courses and colleges to attend after selection has been done.

The theory as he notes is quite rigid because it focuses on down-top fashion unlike choice theory whereby the fashion is usually top-down as universities sell information on their products and services to students in lower levels of education. It is later followed by down-top fashion where students engage in Kotler's model and his five stages to determine their choices. Choice Theory becomes more advantageous over Behavioural Theory due to its flexibility. Choice Theory applies in the study of students' university choices in that, first it explains the importance of considerations students make when choosing universities for their study and calls for their freedom to choose them since the choices they make influence their future lives. Secondly,

students should be given power and freedom to make their choices on courses to pursue and at a university which well fits their choice as Glasser (1998) notes in his principles guided by the various factors they consider important to them. Students become responsible for their behaviour in choosing a university suitable for them. In addition, students need to be loved and feel belonging to a group which loves them back.

Kotler (2003) and Chapman (1986) agree that university choice and selection for students should be procedural and that the stages are equally influential to students' future life in and out of the university. Students need to be guided on the choices they make by people of significant such as parents, peers, career counselors but they have the overall responsibility of the choice they make. Choice Theory is also recommended to students over other theories because students learn what they want out of many options. Glasser notes that students need to make a good choice for themselves. However, this theory has its disadvantages though lesser than merits. Younger students may not be aware of the consequences of every choice in behavior they make and therefore may not choose wisely. Secondly, the stakeholders involved in their education may not know every action in order to react when need be therefore if untrained and uncontrolled they may lose control of their both social and education life.

Figure 2.1 below shows the relationship between the independent variables (input) and the dependent variables (output). The input represents the factors students consider while making a choice for a university to attend. The items in the process indicate the stages students go through in order to come up with a choice which is the output.

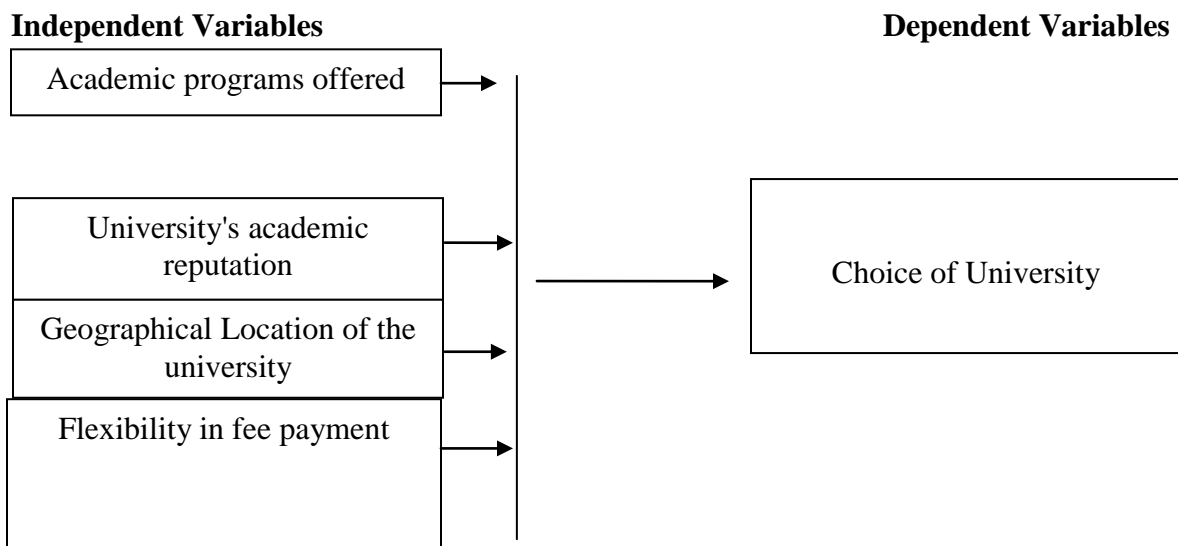


Figure: 2.1 Conceptual Framework

These stages develop at primary school level through secondary level. For instance, the choice of a particular university will depend on how knowledgeable a student is about the university. This knowledge can only be achieved through proper characteristics of the university to make it competitive. This is included the major programs the university offers to the students. University's policy on fee payment attracts students and motivates parents to pay the fees as per stipulated instalments. This makes learning affording to students from low income earning families. Some students choose a university which is located in a quiet environment where rural or urban based depending on their desires. This factor attracts or discourages some students due to individual differences, what is more some consider more the reputation of the university as being the greatest factor to attend that university.

2.1 Concept of university choice on students' influence in choosing it

Higher education, and particularly university education is recognized as a key force for modernization and development (UNESCO, 1998). This has caused an increase in the demand for its access, accompanied by a number of challenges. Minimal research on factors influencing choice of university among students has been done. Aaker, Batra and Myers (1996) define a brand's position as, the set of associations the consumers has with the brand, and these may cover physical attributes, lifestyle, or use of occasion or user image. In this case a brand refers to the university and the set of association refers to the attributes which make the university attractive to the students.

Kotler and Armstrong (1992) add a product position is, the way consumers on important attributes define the product; the place the product occupies in consumers' minds relative to competing brand associations. Here, the product refers to the courses offered, their competitiveness in the labour market in relation to other universities. Therefore, Aaker (1992) notes, a well-positioned brand will have a competitively attractive position supported by strong associations. A competitive university will rate highly on a desirable attribute or occupy a distinct position from that of universities competing with it.

Aaker (1992) adds a brand image is a set of associations usually organized in a meaningful way. Thus associations summarize a set of facts that otherwise would be difficult for the consumer to process and access. Based on the desired or chosen service or brand associations and image,

university managers can choose a strategy or strategies to use to make the university highly competitive thus attracting a pool of students. Below is a discussion of these strategies.

2. Effect of academic programs offered on choice of university

It can be noticed in the conceptual framework below that the elements of the study programs offered by the university affect choice of university. A study conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia by Yusof et al. (2008) also found that availability of the required programme as “the very important attributes” for first year university students to choose a particular higher education institution.

Ford et al (1999) 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. Ismail (2009) indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information satisfaction with respect to academic recognition (external influence). Consequently, this study hypothesizes that there is a significant positive relationship between academic programmes and college/university choice decision.

2.3 Effect of University academic reputation on choice of university

Reputation of a particular institution is valued both by students and parents in the college/university decision making process (Broekhemier & Seshadri, 2000). The most influential vehicle providing knowledge of institutional prestige and comparison of institutions is the famous sources and World Report (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). Each fall, rankings of all institutions occur and the publicity associated with the rankings both sources and schools that are ranked high create a public awareness of the event (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999).

2.4 Flexibility in fee payment on choice of University

Universities and other tertiary institutions need funding to mobilize physical and human resources. Funding of universities is a cost-sharing venture involving both government and the students. In Somalia, payment of fees by those pursuing degree programmes was introduced as part of the efforts by government and international agencies to transfer the cost of financing university education to the beneficiaries. To cushion the poor against adverse financial difficulties, and to ensure that no eligible students dropped out of university due to inability to finance their education, but there is no loan and bursary schemes which were introduced to

benefit all university students who could not fully finance their education because all universities in Somalia are privately running institutions.

Kilemi (2006) pointed out that since private universities rely heavily on tuition and fees for income, the flexibility and stability enjoyed by these institutions becomes an issue of concern. He further cautions that, an institution's overall revenue structure reflects its diversity of funding sources. It is generally believed that an institution that derives its revenue from several independent sources enjoys greater flexibility and stability in financial capital as is the case of public universities. The policy on flexibility of fee payment is a key factor of consideration among outstanding students from families of low income status.

2.5 Geographical location influence on choice of the University

Geographical location involves how a firm avails its products and services to the final consumer. Services are inseparable from the service provider and this poses a challenge in marketing education services.

Location must give the customer accurate clues about the service offering. This means that the location of an education institution should be close to target market to attract and retain potential and current clients (Tinto, 2004). Location of university determines how conducive the place is for learning. While some universities are located in quite environment that is required for learning which is lacking in by some Universities, Main Campus because they are located at the heart of a noisy and busy town.

Mingchu, Vieweg and Schreek (2006) note that studies and literature investigating the influence of geographic characteristics on persistence to study in a given university are limited. Because of lack of information and research effort, many questions remain unanswered regarding the influence of geographical location hence need for more research which this study aims to achieve (www.ocair.org/files/presentations/papers 2006).

Accordingly, positioning is widely used in both the service and tangible product industry in Kenya. On positioning of health insurance cover services, Kisyoki (2005) confirms, extensive use of personnel, and physical environment as positioning strategies by health maintenance organizations as for use of positioning strategies in the detergent market.

Mulei (2005) adds that positioning by product benefit was the most important positioning strategy influencing consumer choice. However, in developing a positioning program for

marketing of services is much the same as for goods, but it takes into account the special characteristics inherent in services (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2007).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study took a quantitative survey research design using primary data from the participants prior to beginning their first semester at a University. The survey was conducted at a single point in time and provided a snapshot of current attitudes and beliefs of incoming freshmen students. The research questions focused on the university choice factors of freshman students. The quantitative data obtained from the survey was analyzed to determine the university-choice factors that affected freshmen students' decision to enroll in a particular university.

Survey (according to Oso and Onen, 2008) “present a leaning methodology used to examine population by selecting samples to examine and discover occurrences”. The same Authors explain Correlation as the determination of whether or not and to what extent an association exists between two or more variables. Survey was used for its economy, rapid data collection and capability to understand a population from a part (Oso and Onen, 2008). Correlation was used as a means of trying to examine the relationship between factors affecting and the student's choice of university.

3.2 Target Population

A population is the whole group that the research focuses on (Kothari, 2012). It is the total number of respondents, or the total environment of interest of the researcher (Oso & Onen, 2009).

The target population of the study was all the institutions of higher learning in Puntland State of Somalia. These include Colleges and Universities. Because of their uniform way of operations, Puntland State University (PSU), East Africa University (EAU), University of Bosaso (UoB), are chosen as a representative case study.

The study focused on factors that influence undergraduate students to choose a university.

The sample size consisted of (90) respondents from 115 population using Sloven's formula which is $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(0.05)^2}$ where (n= Sample size, N= target population). This sample will be sufficiently high and representative enough to validate the findings.

From this formula, the sample will be calculated as follows

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + (N e^2)}$$

Where: n= sample size

N= target population

α= level of significance/marginal error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N (e^2)}$$

$$= \frac{115}{1.2875}$$

~ 90

Thus 89 respondents consisting of first year undergraduate students from three universities were involved in the study.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Techniques

In selecting the respondents, purposive and convenience sampling was used to identify universities in this survey for achieving the study objectives. Purposive which is also known as judgmental sampling is where the Researcher deliberately decides who to include in the sample in order to satisfy the research objectives. It was used simply because the study was targeting basically freshmen students who enrolled universities recently. It also ensures that only people with applicable information are sampled. Convenience sampling (sometimes known as grab or opportunity sampling) is a type of non-probability sampling which involves the sample being drawn from that part of the population which is close to system. The researchers used convenience sampling because respondents that the researchers could easily reached out to be used for the study. This is because universities are some of the largest and most diverse learning institutions in Puntland State of Somalia and because they have been operational for a long time that is enough to provide the data required for the study. The data from the universities focused

on factors effecting students' on their choice of universities and which are these factors most influential.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using primary data collection techniques. Primary data was gathered basically through structured questionnaires with "Key informant members" According to Oso and Onen, (2008) questionnaires are a data collection technique in which the respondents respond to the number of items in writing. Questionnaires were chosen simply because of the time limitation and partly because the Research was dealing with an elite community (respondents).

Data was essentially collected from students those enrolled in universities last year.

In an attempt to survey as many incoming freshman students as possible, a purposive sample of freshman students from those three mentioned Universities was surveyed during the new-sessions. It was anticipated that if students are surveyed prior of their classes there will be a lot of absentees or the researcher may not find the intended respondents all. This sample included students across all subject majors. Data collection was done in cooperation with the admissions team from the Universities.

3.5 Data Processing and Analysis

The study targeted students those enrolled universities last year. The collected Data was fed into computer programs (using particularly the Statistical Package for Social Scientist -SPSS-) for easy analysis and explanation of results. The data was analysed using both statistical and description methods.

4. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out the factors that influence high school students in Puntland who plan to attend higher education institutions. The study also was created to ascertain if there is a significant difference in the factors for incoming students to determine which college to attend among the institutions who participated in the study. A replication of this study could provide chief enrollment managers with information that could assist in how the admissions office recruits students using similar data analysis techniques.

The study was conducted by surveying the population at three higher education institutions in Garowe (PSU, EAU AND OUB) those indicated they are freshmen those enrolled the universities in 2017/2018 academic year. The number of participants per institution that

completed the survey was equal in proportion: each institute had 30 participants and the overall participants were 90.

The objectives of the study were to determine the influence of programs offered by the university, university reputation, Flexibility in fee payment, and university's geographical location on choice of a university. Research question one sought to examine how programs offered by the university influenced its student's choice. Research question two aimed at establishing how University's reputation influenced student's choice of a university. Research question three wanted to find out the role university's flexibility in fee payment plays on students' university choice. Research question four investigated how geographical location of the university influence students' choice.

The study used descriptive survey design in which it targeted 90 freshman students in three Universities in Garowe. The data was collected by use of questionnaires. Data was later analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

This sections looks into the factors students consider important when choosing a university for study. The study was guided by four objectives whose findings are as discussed below.

4.1 Academic programmes offered by the university

The first objectives the study sought on influence of programs offered by the university on students' choice of universities established that it was the major factor students considered while choosing the universities.

The respondents agreed 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.

The study conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia by Yusof et al. (2008) 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.

Ismail (2009) indicated that students are satisfied with university choice based on their information satisfaction with respect to academic recognition (external influence). Consequently, this study hypothesizes that there is a significant positive relationship between academic programmes and university choice decision.

4.2 University reputation

The second objective; the study targeted to find out the range at which university and lecturer's reputation have influence on students' university choice. With 89% of the respondents agreed Institutional image and reputation has a tremendous effect on their university choice. So this is a powerful influence on potential student and university reputation is extremely persuasive in the university search and selection process.

Lay & Maguire, (1981); Murphy, (1981); Sevier, (1986); Keling, (2006) findings also state Students value the reputation of a university and it rates as an influential factor by students in the university choice process.

Keling (2007) 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. The existence of this relationship justifies that there is a positive relationship between university reputation and university choice decision.

4.3 Flexibility in fee payment

The third objective the study aimed to achieve was establishing the extent to which university's flexibility in fee payment influence students' choice of University. All respondents highlighted flexibility of fee payment "very influential" 79% of the respondents agreed to be the most very influential, However, 21% of students felt it was "not influential" to attract them to the university but other factors.

Kilemi (2006) supports the findings by stating that public universities students enjoy greater flexibility because the universities have several independent sources of generating revenue thus financially stable. The study differs with Domino et al. (2006) who see cost and related factors as important aspect from parents' point of view than a student's perception.

4.4 Geographical location of the university

This study was also aimed at establishing the extent to which geographical location influence students' choice of University. The study established that majority of students were highly influenced by geographical location of the university (80.5%). The study also stated that college or university location can be a major factor for potential student's decision to apply and enroll. The respondents were willing to study at or attend the close proximity of a higher education

institution to home due to a low-cost, nearby university was an important stimulator of a student's decision to further his or her education.

Hossler & Gallagher (1990) findings also adhere that the proximity to a university campus does affect university attendance rates. Students who live close to a campus are more likely to attend university though they may not attend the campus located near home. As a result, this study objectives that location has a significant influence on college choice decision.

5. Conclusion

The study therefore made the following conclusions in relation to study objectives which were studied. Programs offered by the university were identified as a key way of attracting, motivating and ensuring student retention in the university.

Universities are also in need of putting in place policies giving guidance on fee payment in order to make available for low-income earners and students from poor background. Privately running universities in Puntland can come up with educational loans in order to make fee payment flexible which in turn make the fees affordable and attract a pool of students.

Geographical location, though important, should not be a limiting factor for students when making a suitable choice of a university. Students should be carefully guided on making university choices to put various factors into consideration instead of focusing on few aspects. For instance, institutional reputation may motivate the respondent more to choose a suitable university for study in relation to flexibility in fee payment.

On the other hand, giving consideration the campus location and investing how the campus should look beautiful and conducive environment for learning will urge visitors especially parents and freshmen students to enroll in the university.

5.1 Recommendation

Basing on the study findings and the conclusions, the researcher derived the following Recommendations:

1. University Council as the governance of universities has a role creating an environment of activeness in universities. One of the ways of doing this is through motivating students. University council through the secretary is able to identify a hard working respondent and recommend the respondent for recognition.

2. University Council should avail easier and convenient ways for students to access the university.
3. Transport should be availed to students to enable them save time and energy thereby improving their academic performance.
4. Flexibility in fee payment being a key factor should be put in place by all universities in order to make learning affordable even to needy students.
5. Students should be encouraged to focus on academic performance instead of a university's geographical location as long as the learning environment is attractive.
6. University's reputation being very influential for selection, the university council should consider it greatly and build their academic prestige and recruit only respected personnel in the society for lecturer.
7. Universities should have financial aid system such as scholarships which is crucial for the students to decide what kind of university they are comfortable to choose.
8. It is beneficial to use the reputation of the academic strength to communicate the advantage of the educational offerings of the university. Students have to be informed whether what they are getting educated from an institution is worthwhile for what they spend. Making the strong points, facets, advantages, effects of the university academic offerings clear will eventually help prospective students choose the university they want, as well as ensuring current students to carry on successful graduate or even to enroll for further degree.
9. Library and lab facilities appear to be the top influencing factors in university choice. Universities should improve and provide quality services with those fields and with well-informed system and serviced minded skilled staff.
10. Continuous improvement on the campus facilities. Improvement of the services offered by the university all contribute to the decision making process by prospective students.

5.2 Suggestions for further research

This study found the need for further research to be carried out and find other factors influencing the choice of university for respondents that may not be only freshmen but all university students. Other factors do influence student choice and are well deemed important.

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