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MEASURING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS UNIVERSITY SELECTION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION ON MALAYSIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Different higher learning institutions in Malaysia offer variety of courses for the students. However, selection of the institute varied considering the different influencing factors. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influence the students in selecting their higher learning programs in various higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The research is based on primary data collection approach. For this purpose, a survey using self-administered questionnaires was carried out by using cluster-sampling technique. Total 300 questionnaires were distributed and 145 found to be valid for further analysis. The collected data were then analyzed and discussed by statistical techniques-descriptive statistics and ANOVA tests. It has been observed from the outcome that university teaching quality is the most important factor that influences a student in selection of his/her higher learning institution followed by university facilities, program structure and accreditation, campus facilities. This study has also found that high standard teaching influences the student interest followed by knowledgeable faculty, helpful academic staffs and knowledgeable admission staffs. This study has explored that amongst the various races in Malaysia, Malay students prefer the local universities than the other races. To end with, this study has suggested that, on perception, a proper policy may go a long way to increase the quality of teaching with the improvement of other related facilities that will help the university in attracting new students in the future.

KEYWORDS

Qualities, Higher Learning Program, Malaysian Institute, Cost, Perception

INTRODUCTION

Changes in demography, economy, and public policies of Malaysia have increased the demand for more sophisticated and knowledgeable workforce to synchronize with the rhythm of the business world. Higher educational qualification has become a useful way of not only ensuring the employment, but also ensuring the success and marketability in an ever-evolving job market in Malaysia. At the same time, as cost of higher education continued to rise in the English-speaking countries, more and more Third World students are applying to study in Malaysia (Ayob and Yaakub, 2005). At present, there are over 650 educational institutions exist in Malaysia but only about 200 of these institutions offer higher learning programs (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). Presently, there are many universities and colleges (both public and private) are offering varieties higher learning programs in Malaysia. This has increased the competition to some extent where students have unlimited options to select the university. As the options have increased, the university selection criteria became more wide and complicated. "Which university is the best? Am I doing the right course? Which university is tops for programmes?" Lingering questions like these are enough to create confusions to student's mind. With over 200 higher educational institutions in Malaysia, choosing one to go to is never an easy task.

There can be many reasons why students select different universities. Research has shown that facilities perceived as having an important influence on students' choice of institutions (Hill, 1995; Joseph, Yakhou and Stone, 2005; Kloot, Marles and Vinen, 1999; Litten and Hall, 1989; Price, Matzdorf and Agahi, 2001; Stafford, 1997; Steve and Chu-May Amy, 2009). Again, to some students, cost is more important than quality (Joseph and Joseph, 1997; LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1999; Murphy, 1981; Steffen and David, 2011; Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004). The reputation, program structure and accreditation of the university are also sometimes very important to some students in selecting the universities (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Hayes, 1989; Kourik, Maher and Akande, 2011; Mavondo, Tsarenko and Gabbott, 2004; Steffen and David, 2011; Steele, 2002; Xu, 2011). For many students, it is very important to know about the future career prospects and opportunities following graduation from the university (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Many empirical findings support the positive impact of the university location in selecting the university (Vaughn, Oatlik and Hansotia, 1978). Other research found marketing to be an important element in the decision-making process (Alstete and Beutell, 2004; Drummond, 2004; Gilley, 1989; Hanna, 1989; Harket, Slade and Harker, 2001; Hawkins and Frohoff, 2010; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Santoro and Chakrabarti, 2002; Schimmel, Motley, Racic, Marco and Eschenfelder, 2010; Tucciarone, 2009). Finally, family and friends influence still play a key influencing role in the university selection (Chapman, 1981; Hawkins and Frohoff, 2010; Lawley, 1993; Patton, 2000; Pimpa, 2003; Wittmeyer, 2007; Yamtim, Wongwanich and Suwanmonkha, 2009).

From the above scenario, it can be seen that, most of the studies have used U.S or U.K sample and some, such as Joseph and Joseph (1997) a New Zealand one. It could be argued that, there is very little cultural differences between these samples; however, the purpose of this study is to extend the literature on the selection criteria of higher learning programs in different higher learning institutes from a different cultural framework namely Malaysia.

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence the students in selecting higher learning programs in various higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The objectives of our study are; (1) to determine the personal background and characteristics of students who are pursuing higher studies in Malaysia,

(2) to establish the factors influencing in selecting of higher learning programs in various higher learning institutions, and (3) to verify if there exists any relationship between personal characteristics and selection of higher learning programs in different higher learning institutions. The significance of doing this research is that there are not many research have done in Malaysia in this particular field. The findings from this study will benefit (1) the educational institutes and (2) the government in enriching their knowledge and idea. This will help in understanding in greater depth the factors influencing the selection process by the students while doing higher learning programs in different institutes. It will help both the institutions and the government to develop new policies to attract more local students to pursue their higher learning in Malaysia. Moreover, this will help the higher learning institutes to create sustainable competitive advantages in which their marketing strategies should be based to attract more potential overseas students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There can be unlimited reasons why different students choice different higher learning institutions. This will be clearer in the "Choice Theory" by Glasser (1998). "Behavior is chosen in a continuing attempt to make life the kind of experience that everyone wants it to be – a "good life", (Glasser, 1998). Relating with the concept of "Choice Theory", students also engage themselves in various activities to get a better life.

Choice is an iterative concept which is clearly a complex and multi-factorial process involving a wide range of influences that stand upon a decision (Foskett, 1999). Previously, Ryrie (1981) elucidated choice in the context of institutional, economic and cultural constraints based on individual's perspectives. Payne (2003) had used this model to explain the sequence of students choice into higher education. According to Hemsley-Brown (1999), while pupils often give practical reasons for making choices, these were usually filtered through layers of preconceptions emanating from influences in family background, culture and life history.

The issue of institution choice criteria has been widely researched (Murphy, 1981; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Mayer, Pioche and Webb, 1999) with varied results. In 1981, David Chapman developed a Model of Student College Choice, which identified the three major external influences:

- Significant person: friends, parents, and high school personnel.
- Fixed college characteristics: cost (financial aid), location, availability of program.
- College efforts to communicate with students: written information, campus visits and admissions/recruitment (Chapman, 1981).

EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES

Empirical evidence on this topic in Malaysia is very limited. Due to the limited literature and empirical evidence on the topic, we believe that other related studies focusing on the student's choice and criteria of selecting the institutions will also be able to provide us with some useful insights and information on the factors influencing the students in selecting various higher learning institutions. Studies that look at the variables that influence student's selection of institution, point towards a wide range of choice criteria and have identified several determinants (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004; Hawkins and Frohoff, 2010; Hill, 1995; Joseph and Joseph, 2000; Kourik *et al.*, 2011; Schimmel *et al.*, 2010; Steffen and David, 2011; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004; Xu, 2011; Yamtim *et al.*, 2009).

FINANCIAL ISSUES

There have been a number of studies aimed at assessing student's perceptions of higher education institutions from around the world. Cost related to tuition fees and living is very essential for any students. Previous researchers have found cost related to tuition fees and living expenses are very important factor in selecting the educational institutions. In 1981, a survey was conducted on the student's university choice (Murphy, 1981) recognized cost as the most important determinants of college choice. Cost related issues seem to have more importance as years go by. A study on the New Zealand university students (Joseph and Joseph, 2000) reveals that the cost associated with study at the university is the main factor that influences the student in selecting different institutes. This might be related to the university fees or the cost of living in the area, or even the possibility of securing financial aid.

The cost of study can be a crucial factor for mature candidates who have other financial commitments and have to play many roles in life simultaneously (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004). Steffen and David (2011) investigated social selectivity in access to higher education in Germany to understand which factors influence most found that monetary cost influences the preferences for most of the students. Research conducted by LeBlanc and Nguyen (1999) show evidence that price, quality, satisfaction, corporate image along with affective and social responses are strong drivers of value in a business education setting.

Many institutes (both public and private) in Malaysia offer different types of higher learning programs. Many local as well as foreign students are pursuing their higher studies in these different institutions. The cost of the higher learning programs also differs from institutions to institutions. Normally the cost in public universities is less than the private institutions. As, students are pursuing their higher learning's in these various types of institutions existing in Malaysia, it is clear that cost plays an important role in selecting the institutions. Moreover, in the process of the research, we may find that, most of the Malay students prefer local universities where as the other races like Chinese and Indians prefer the private ones when cost is concern.

UNIVERSITY TEACHING QUALITY

Quality of education is very difficult to define. It may vary students to students. '...it is considered that the traditional importance/performance paradigm is the most appropriate way of measuring service quality in education...' (Joseph and Joseph, 2000, pp. 16). However, it is an important factor in selection of the higher learning institutions. According to Steve and Chu-May Amy (2009), institutional quality and reputation (e.g. reputation of university staff) influence the student's choice of institution. Litten (1980), Seneca and Taussig (1987) and Tierney (1983) have found that academically talented students are looking for different attributes when compared with average students. Talented students appraise an institution based on the quality of their programmes while the others are also interested in factors like physical appearance and social life in addition to good programmes (Yamamoto, 2006).

A survey conducted on 306 pupils studying at various schools in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004) to discover the information requirements and the importance of various types of information for potential students when selecting a university. They have found out that the potential university students see their studies as a social activity and learning experience. Therefore, the top three matters that students collect information about are university's offering and reputation, the opportunities to develop a healthy social activity and the ability to find suitable accommodation. Another study conducted by Keskinen, Tiuraniemi and Liimola (2008) suggested that, the primary focus of potential students are on the institution's reputation and the available courses when they choose universities or colleges. When choosing to apply to a university, the importance of the perceived overall academic quality is unquestionable and the most important attributes when assessing this are the quality of faculty and the degree programmes offered of that particular university (Coccaro and Javalgi, 1995).

James, Baldwin and McInnis (1999) have found that, course and institutional reputations, course entry scores; easy access to home and institutional characteristics have a significant influence on applicants' choice of institution. Research conducted in England shows that applicants consider the teaching reputation of universities as more important factor in selection of the institute (Price *et al.*, 2003). Other researchers have found that, the quality, location of the university and the geography of its surroundings are also important to some students for selecting the university (Clewes, 2003; Cullen, Joyce, Hassall and Broadbent, 2003). Another survey conducted on 200 UK College students has found that, the quality of life during their studies is the most important factor in the university selection (Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis, 2005). The applicants also consider the surroundings and the available facilities in the region, as well as the location of the institution (Chapman, 1981; Gremler, and McCollough, 2002).

The quality and the reputation of the different institutions also vary in Malaysia. It may be differentiated by the quality of the teaching faculty, course offerings, surrounding environment, etc. Normally, in all the public universities in Malaysia, the teachers' minimum qualifications are PhD. Nevertheless, in the public universities, this is not same as the local university. However, this does not mean that private institutions do not offer quality education. Many private universities like Nottingham, Monash, Unitar, etc have very good and experienced teaching staff and provide quality education. Therefore, basing on their needs, students select their universities.

UNIVERSITY FACILITIES

Normally facility means a service that an organization or a piece of equipment offers to somebody (Luxhoj, 1991). This is also related to the university selection, as students are concerned about the facilities provides by the universities. Some researchers found out that, the institutions' infrastructure, such as the library

facilities, classrooms, computer labs, campus security and accommodation provided by the university affects heavily in the university selection process by some of the students (Kloot *et al.*, 1999). Some of the infrastructure elements, such as the laboratory equipment and the computing resources were found to be good indicators of top-quality institutions (Litten and Hall, 1989; Hill, 1995). A survey conducted in UK has found that, for many institutions those provide high standard of facilities perceived as having an important influence on students' choice of institutions (Stafford, 1997). A comparison of "reputational pull" and "facilities pull" suggested as a mean of differentiating the "brand" of different institutions (Price *et al.*, 2003; Joseph *et al.*, 2005).

Learning environment (e.g. quality of course content, course information and learning materials) is an important issue for the students in selection of their institutions. Institutions' infrastructure, such as the library facilities, classrooms, computer labs, campus security and accommodation provided by the university also differ institutes to institutes in Malaysia. Normally the facilities in the public universities are better as they get fund from the government. At the same time, most of the public universities also provide modern facilities to the students, though limited to some extent like most of them do not have their own campuses specially those are located in the city centre. Therefore, as competitions between universities are increasing, students may select basing on the facilities provided by the various higher learning institutions. Location (e.g. city or rural) is also an important factor for the students in selection of their institutions (Steve and Chu-May Amy, 2009).

Again, as like the other countries, universities in Malaysia are also located in different places both inside and outside of Kuala Lumpur. However, it is most likely that students prefer those universities, which are located in the Kuala Lumpur city because of the location. On the other hand, foreign students also like to stay near to Kuala Lumpur for the attraction of the city life. The students whose houses are nearer mainly prefer the universities, which are located outside of Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, cost related to location is also very important factor in the university selection process.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND ACCREDITATION

Evaluation may define as the systematic determination of the quality or value of something (Scriven, 1993). Evaluation often used to distinguish and explain subjects of interest in a wide range of human enterprises, such as the arts, business, education, engineering, etc. Actually, it is very difficult to define which criteria students follow to evaluate a higher learning institution. It may vary student to student. Researchers have found that, the reputation of the university in general and the specific programme in particular plays a vital role while students select higher learning institutions (Hayes, 1989; Mavondo *et al.*, 2004). Drawing on rational choice models of educational decisions, Steffen and David (2011) have found that scholastic performance and preferences for study content considerably contribute to selective choice patterns of the postgraduate students.

Another study conducted on the university selection surveyed 20,000 students applying for entry to a full-time undergraduate course at a UK university or college in 2001 and found that the most important factor influencing the students in choosing a university was the course (Steele, 2002). The author further stated that, some other factors that were also important to the students were the university location, facilities and university reputation. For many students, it is very important to know about the future career prospects and opportunities following graduation from the university (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003).

Further study investigates university choice attributes of students, identifies key choice criteria, and examines gender and ethnicity issues related to student's college choice (Newell, Titus and West, 1996). Kourik, Maher and Akande (2011) have found that, in a global context, accreditation is essential for academic institutions to remain competitive. According to Donaldson and McNicholas (2004), the reputation, nature of the courses, location and address, financial considerations, facilities, program structure and accreditation influence student's choice of institution and course for postgraduate studies. Sum *et al.* (2010) conducted a survey on the newly enrolled master's students to carry out their satisfaction regarding their universities and found that the majority of the students were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the dynamic educational program and the environment the university offers.

In Malaysia, different institutes offer different types of higher learning programs like Full time program, Part time courses (12-18 months), Modular programs, International programs, Distance learning programs and Online programs. Normally, public universities offer full time programs that are normally 2 years of durations where as private universities offer many types of programs. Normally jobholders, prefers the part time programs. To some students higher learning is just a degree for the better opportunity. Some students prefer the foreign programs. Again, to some students, courses offered by the institutions are important. According to Xu (2011), students from different education and culture background may have different perceptions towards higher education, particularly expectations related to teaching and learning. Therefore, these different evaluation methods of different students are very important, as their demands and needs are also different.

MARKETING

Marketing is a social and managerial function that attempts to create, expand and maintain a collection of customers (McKenna, 1991). According to Krachenberg (1972), "marketing deals with the concept of uncovering specific needs, satisfying these needs by the development of appropriate goods and services, letting people know of their availability, and offering them at appropriate prices, at the right time and place" (as cited in Joseph and Joseph, 2000, pp. 18). Marketing plays an important role in the university selection process. A student, who does not know about a university get the information either from the local representatives or from the Internet. They do not have any choice except believing on them. Past research have found that, today's marketplace faces an intensified and rapid change of competition in the market, fostered by factors such as globalization, maturing markets and rapid technological change (Santoro and Chakrabarti, 2002). According to Hawkins and Frohoff (2010), one of the challenges in promoting higher education is the assumption that students are not customers or neither are their parents. The authors further added that, in addition, many academics and university personnel view marketing as compromising academic freedom (Hawkins and Frohoff, 2010). According to Moogan (2011), understanding the potential student's information needs by the universities is vital, as there is a better chance of matching the information sources to the needs of the students.

Because of increased national and international competition, more and more research institutions and universities are under pressure to find new ways to generate income (Baaken, 2005). Since the 1990s, universities have become much more marketing focused in the competition to reach their goals ahead (Farr, 2003). According to Drummond (2004), the expansion and commercialization of higher education has seen the wide scale adoption of marketing techniques within the sector. Hanna (1989) pointed out that, the image is a composition of images held by the institution's external and internal images. These images play an important role on student's university selection process. To assist students in making their decision, universities employ a large range of communication tools in an effort to reach and influence potential students. However, by far the most popular tactic is to ensure that everybody has adequate access to some form of printed promotional material, ranging from printed brochures to simple letters on university letterhead, supplemented by promotional CD's and videos (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999). Hawkins and Frohoff (2010) have further suggested that, developing a curriculum that in accordance with the student's preference can be the most important marketing strategy in attracting new students.

University brochures also play an important role in the decision-making process as this is among the top sources of concrete information about the courses offered by the universities (Harket *et al.*, 2001). Gilley (1989) discussed how radio, television, newspaper and magazine used as university marketing communication tools to attract more students. Steele (2002) found catalogue, application tools, and program materials are being useful marketing tools for the universities. According to Mayer *et al.* (1999), brochures, posters, meetings, sponsorships and billboards, web pages, TV and newspaper advertisements mostly used as some communication tools for university selection. Study conducted by Tucciarone (2009) found that students rely on information from college websites in evaluating the institution. Schimmel, Motley, Racic, Marco and Eschenfelder (2010) have found that university webpage plays an important role in the decision-making process of the potential students in selecting their universities. Some research indicates that graduate students and undergraduates differ in online educational environments as well (Alstete and Beutell, 2004). Graduate student and undergraduates also found to differ on the perceptions of internet data quality (Klein, 2002).

To attract international students, universities need to create foreign language versions of their web pages. According to Callahan (2005), even universities in countries that have different preferred languages other than, English (Greece, Italy, Japan, etc) will not attract many foreign students. Other studies suggested that, they might publish web pages in English to facilitate academic exchange of ideas and create greater interest in the academic environment (Lawley, 1993; Patton, 2000). According to Alstete and Beutell (2004), as the use of technology by the current and next generation of students as well as their parents continues to grow, universities will need to utilize better and more easily navigable websites. Study in a foreign country requires knowledge of the medium of instruction

to that specific country (Callahan, 2005). Since, English is widely spoken in Malaysia; Malaysian universities reasonably be expected to have greater numbers of potential foreign students. As competition is increasing, and as challenges associated with recruitment increase, universities must develop and employ recruiting strategies based upon attributes that students identify as important to their decision-making process.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS INFLUENCE

“Probably the strongest influence in our lives is the family we grew up in”, Wittmeyer (2007, pp. 1). A candidates decision-making process is often influenced by “significant others”, for example, friends and family (Chapman, 1981). The situation has changed as information is more widely available and access is much easier than before. The extent to which friends and family continue to influence the decision-making process is highly debatable (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Groggaard, 2002). Many authors have found that, due to the readily available sources of information, this friends and family influence on institution selection has changed such as school leavers (Soutar and Turner, 2002) and the mature students (Harket *et al.*, 2001). However, other studies suggest that “significant others” still play a key influencing role in situations where information is scarce and not well understood, such as overseas applicants (Patton, 2000), or younger age applicants (Newell *et al.*, 1996). Study conducted by Yamtim *et al.* (2009) showed that parent’s involvement in university selection significantly influences the student’s choice. Further Hawkins and Frohoff (2010) found that perceptions of the students in university selection is influenced by whether parents, current students (friends and relatives) and partially by alumni.

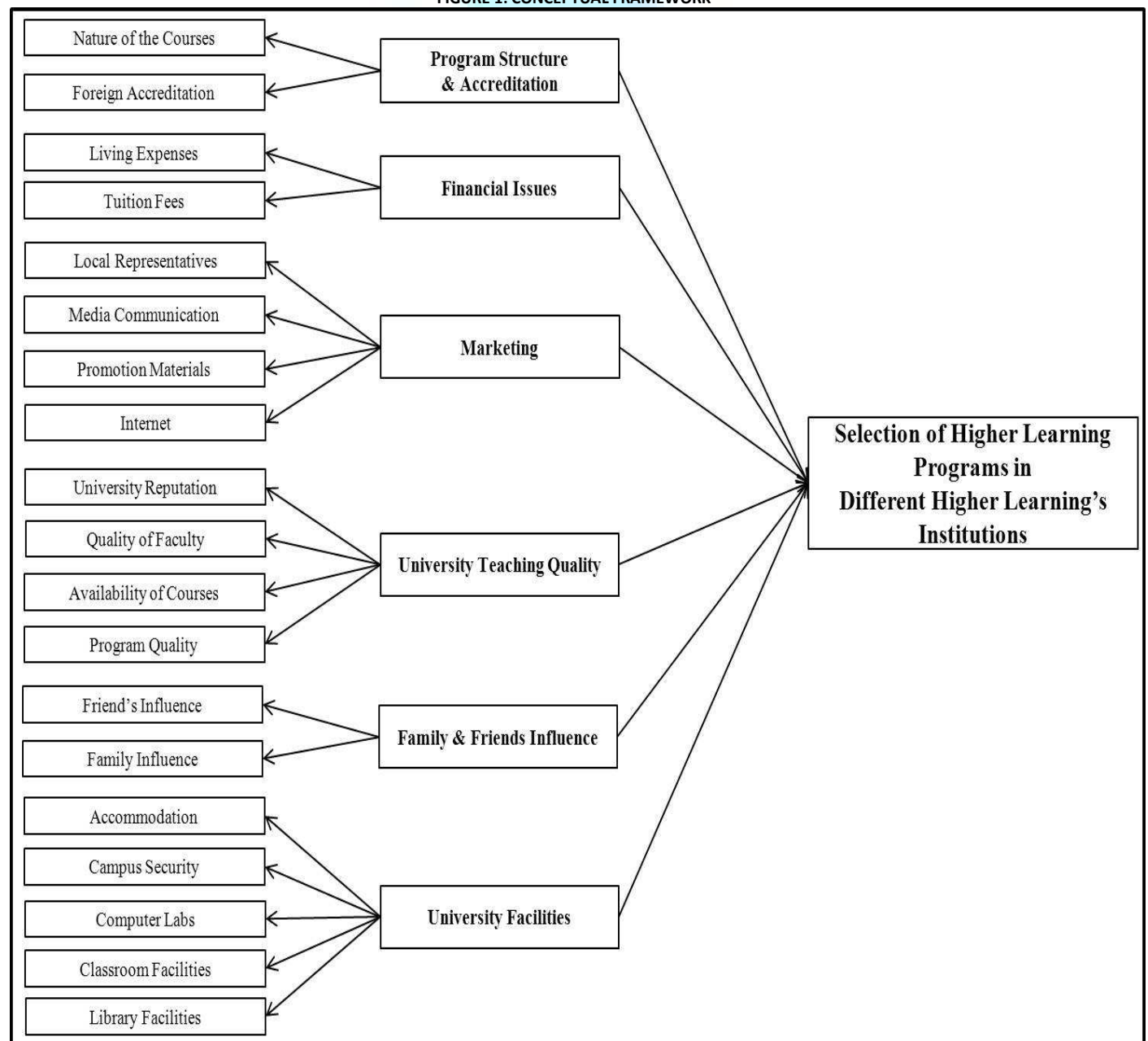
Past research suggests that friend’s influence on the final decision is not highly significant, but they do play a more active role as a credible information sources (Banning and Banning, 2006). On the other hand, family influence extensively reported as a key push factor affecting the choices of international education (Lawley, 1993). Another study conducted on Thai students has found that, expectation from parents and other family members had a great impact on the student’s decision to study abroad, and their choices of country, academic course, and of university (Pimpa, 2003).

As like as the other Asian countries, in Malaysia, the influence of family on the students are also very high. Malaysia, a country integrated with multiracial; still uphold the culture of joint-family. Therefore, in any decision, the influence of family comes first. We may find out that, Malay students are more concuss about the family opinion where as the other races are a little less. Beside this, friends’ influence is also important as they get much information from friends those are either studying or completed the course from the same university.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Based on the literature review, following research framework is developed.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHODOLOGY

The research is based on primary data collection approach. For this purpose, a survey using self-administered questionnaires carried out by using cluster-sampling technique. A questionnaire designed with a view to collect data on the university selection criteria of the postgraduate students in Malaysia. Questionnaire survey deemed best for this study, as it is exploratory in nature, less time consuming and can reach larger population. The questionnaire in this research based on the Likert-style scale that anchored using descriptors (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree). These descriptors were chosen to neutralize any tendency to over-report difficult conditions. This method helped to ask respondents on how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement or series of statements on a five-point scale. The series of statements in the questionnaire was maintained in the same order of response in order to avoid confusion. Probability sampling technique was used so that every person had chance of being chosen as subject in sample. Negatively and positively worded statements were also included interchangeably to ensure respondent reads through each statement carefully before ticking the selected answer. Respondents were assured that their responses would be treated as confidential and will be analyzed at the aggregate level only. Total 300 questionnaires were distributed and 145 found to be valid for further analysis.

As the main purpose of this analysis is to identify factors that influence students in selection of different universities, descriptive analysis has done to fulfill the first objective of the study. To fulfill the other objectives, we conducted ANOVA test, as this is the most appropriate analysis for our study (Cuevas, Febrero and Fraiman, 2004). Although the mean and standard deviation are the most basic tools for statistical analysis, they are inadequate for measuring the statistically significant differences. For this reason, ANOVA should be more powerful tools in exploring the significant differences.

FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor analyses were performed to develop items for the measurement of the selection criteria. This analysis has carried out to summaries the structure of a set of variables into a few principal factors. Seven factors (7) were extracted through EFA and it indicates that 68.75 percent of the variance would be explained.

TABLE 1: ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX

Factors	Loadings
University Teaching Quality	
Admission staffs are knowledgeable	0.718
The academic staffs are helpful	0.643
The university maintains a high standard of teaching	0.603
Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field	0.562
University Facilities	
The library resources and services are adequate	0.678
Tutoring service are readily available	0.671
Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available	0.648
Computer labs are available and accessible	0.579
Comfortable and well equipped classrooms	0.570
Campus Facilities	
You feel a sense of belonging here	0.561
The campus is safe and secure for all students	0.560
Faculty are available after class and office hour	0.543
University is located nearer to my home	0.502
Living condition in the residence hall are comfortable	0.392
On the whole, the campus is well-maintained	0.366
Marketing	
Attracted through talking to the lecturers	0.474
Attracted through agent	0.395
Attracted through advertisement in the newspapers or websites	0.312
Friends and Family Influence	
I'm here because my parents want me to	0.666
Came to know about it through my friends who all are studying here or have already finished	0.483
My parents or relatives had studied here	0.471
Program Structure and Accreditation	
The assessment and course placement procedure are reasonable	0.723
Course duration is flexible	0.654
There is a good variety of courses offered every semester	0.603
The institution in my major field is the best	0.591
Method of entry to the university is Flexible	0.511
Method of teaching is English	0.511
Accredited with foreign university	0.402
Method of teaching is exam based	0.373
Financial Issues	
The tuition fees are affordable	0.388
Billing policies are reasonable	0.377
Adequate financial aid is available for all students	0.368

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

Reliability tests were conducted for all the variables studied as a measure of the internal consistency of the research instruments employed to measure the concepts. Minimum α value of 0.60 for variables means that the variables are internally consistent and are good measures of the concept studied (Yusuf, Gunasekaran, Adeleye and Sivayoganathan, 2004). All the variables (except fourth one) have α values more than 0.60. Results indicate that the variables studied are internally consistent and each of the variables is unique and not a repetition except the no 4.

TABLE 2: RELIABILITY STATISTICS

FACTORS	CRONBACH ALPHA
Factor 1: University Teaching Quality	0.738
Factor 2: University Facilities	0.812
Factor 3: Campus Facilities	0.652
Factor 4: Marketing	0.469
Factor 5: Friends and Family Influence	0.623
Factor 6: Program Structure and Accreditation	0.748
Factor 7: Financial Issues	0.682

FINDINGS

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to investigate the differences between the various factors with regard to their perception of the student’s university choice criteria. Answers are tabulated below.

TABLE 3: MEANS AND ANOVA

Factors	Mean	Rank	F value	Sig
University Teaching Quality	3.72	1	68.75	0.000
Program structure and accreditation	3.68	2		
University Facilities	3.59	3		
Campus facilities	3.54	4		
Financial Issues	3.34	5		
Marketing	2.69	6		
Friends and family influence	2.44	7		

The ANOVA table above indicates that there is a significance difference amongst these seven factors with a significance difference at 0.01 level. Students placed a high degree of importance on all items in the seven factors. All factors have a mean score of above 3.3 except for two items “Marketing” (2.69) and “Friends and family influences” (2.44).

Now, we can see that the factor university teaching quality (3.72) is very important to the respondent. When choosing to apply to a university, the importance of the perceived overall academic quality is unquestionable. This study result strongly supports the past findings by Keskinen *et al.* (2008), Veloutsou *et al.* (2005) and Coccari and Javalgi (1995). According to the past findings and the finding of our study, it proves and supports that the university teaching quality is the most important factor for any students while choosing their destinations.

Program structure and accreditation is also an important factor to the students in selecting their universities. Accreditation often used to characterize and apprise subjects of interest in a wide range of human enterprises, including the Arts, business, education, engineering, etc. Actually, it is very difficult to define which criteria students follow to evaluate a higher learning institute. It varies student to student. As with the past findings, our study also shows that program structure and accreditation (3.68) is another major factor that influences the students in selecting their universities.

To some students, university facilities are also very important in choosing the higher learning institutions for their higher studies. Some of the students choose the university basing on the university location, facilities they provide and university reputation. According to our findings, university facilities (3.59) have also a great importance for some of the students in their university selection criteria.

Campus facility also plays a vital role in their university selection process. For some of the students who do not have residence nearby especially for those local students who are from other states or the foreign students, campus facility is very important. We also found in our findings that campus facility (3.54) is also important to the students in their university selection criteria.

Past studies have found financial issue related to tuition fees and living as the most important factor for any students before choosing their universities (Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Steffen & David, 2011; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004). According to our findings, this not the main factors that influence the students in selecting different institutions for their higher studies, but it play a key role in the university selection process. The reasons may be that the past research conducted mostly in the UK or USA universities to the undergraduate students for whom the value for money is higher comparing to a postgraduate student as majority of the postgraduates are jobholders or the differences in cost of living in Malaysia comparing to those countries.

The factor marketing plays an important role in the university selection process. A student, who does not know either about a university get the information from the local representatives or from the internet (Baaken, 2005; Farr, 2003; Hawkins and Frohoff, 2010; Tucciarone, 2009). To assist students in making their decision, universities employ a wide range of communication tools in an effort to reach and influence potential students (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999). However, surprisingly, our findings do not match with the past findings. This may be due to the negligence of the Malaysian higher learning institutions in promoting themselves to the future students or their lack of knowledge and interest in this sector.

According to the past findings, the friends and family influence is a major factor in the mind of the students in their university selection process (Banning and Banning, 2006; Hawkins and Frohoff, 2010; Pimpa, 2003; Wittmeyer, 2007; Yamtim *et al.*, 2009). However, in our case, the scenario is totally opposite may be because the past studies were conducted mainly on the undergraduate students for whom taking decision alone is quite heavy. Nevertheless, our study is conducted on the postgraduate students who are more mature and can take their own decisions.

TABLE 4: RACE AND INSTITUTE TYPE COMPARE

		Institute type				Total
		Local public	Local pvt	Foreign pvt with affiliated prog	Foreign university branch	
Race	Malay	23	22	9	0	54
	Chinese	2	18	10	1	31
	Indian	7	11	8	1	27
	Others	12	9	12	0	33
Total		44	60	39	2	145

According to the races, 23 Malay respondents (42.59%) prefer the local universities. Among the other races, 2 Chinese (6.45%) respondents and 7 Indian (25.93%) respondents prefer local university. Total 12 foreign students or other races (36.36%) prefer local universities. So, seeing the above percentage, we can assume that most Malay students prefer local universities may be due to the environment, lower tuition fees, suitable living conditions, language or some other reasons. Out of 145 respondents, only 2 (1.38%) prefer to study in foreign university branches. This may be due to higher tuition fees, or some other reasons. In our study, we have also found that, students doing higher studies in private universities are more satisfied with the teaching quality (92.31%) compare to the students doing higher studies in local universities (84.09%). However, this does not prove that the teaching quality in private universities is better. Nevertheless, we can say that, the quality of the teaching in private universities has improved a lot, as the students are satisfied with it. Therefore, the public universities should make an effective plan to uphold their reputations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study attempts to understand the different choice criteria of the postgraduate students in selecting their institutions. This study reconfirms that the university teaching quality still plays the most important roll in selecting different institutions by different students. But what is new is the empirical evidence that suggests that, the impact of the friends and family influence in university selection is not so important for the Malaysian students compared to other past

findings. The reason may be that, the past researches were done mainly to the undergraduate students. However, we conducted the study on the postgraduate students. As most of the postgraduate students are quite mature, so the factor "friends and Family Influence" is no more too important to the postgraduate students in Malaysia.

This study suggests that, a proper policy need to be implemented if educational institutions are aiming to attract a sustainable share of the market. They should imply competitive strategies by understanding their customers, their needs and how to fulfill those needs.

This study also emphasizes the need for universities to have attractive and clearly understood webpage with readily navigable information on such characteristics as programs, course offerings, location, and relevant accreditations.

The comparison of mean responses between races and universities in the sample indicates that Malay students place more importance in the public university comparing to other races. The policy makers of the higher learning institutions while addressing potential students must keep these elements in mind.

Finally, all higher learning institutes should increase their residential facilities, as it will help them in increasing the number of the students who are from far distance.

SCOPE OF FURTHER RESEARCH

This study researches on the recent debate concerning the different choice criteria affecting the students and their university selection. The findings of this study may or may not represent the overall impacts of the Malaysian postgraduate students. In fact, this immense topic needs to be studied considering the various types of components of selection criteria that are related with the student's choice. The present study has considered just few components of university selection criteria such as university teaching quality and various facilities provided by the universities, although there may be many more important components. On the other hand, past researchers considered too many dimensions of choice criteria, only some indicators of those have been considered in this study. Therefore, future research on the linkages of the remaining components that address more broadly will contribute towards a greater understanding of what actually are the reasons behind of the various choice criteria. Similarly, future research needs to be done on the overall students' choice criteria to understand it better.

LIMITATIONS

Sample size for this study is only 145. Due to the time limitations and problem faced in getting the respondents (postgraduate students), it was not possible to cover a large number of institutions. This study is also conducted only in Kuala Lumpur. For future studies, it is recommended that researchers should include more respondents from more different universities from all over Malaysia. In this way, it would allow researchers to test for similarities and differences among students from various public and private universities.

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