

Chapter 13

How Students Choose the University: Personal and Institutional Factors

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to provide a literature overview about factors that affect students' choice of university. All factors can be divided in two types – individual or personal characteristics of students and institutional factors. Individual characteristics include students' age, gender, ethnicity, family background, ability, interests and motivation. Institutional factors describe university ranking, reputation, potential outcomes and benefits for students, as well as geographical location and costs for student (tuition fee, financial aid and scholarship). The combination of students' individual characteristics determines university choice. However, the quality of teaching, reputation and ranking of university are the most influential characteristic of university.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a course in university is one of the most important and complex decisions students have to make. Students choose an area of studies - it could be humanities, social science or natural science. In each area there are many different majors (languages, literature, psychology, politics, mathematics, and computer science). When students have identified an area of studies, the next step is to choose the university. It seems very easy to choose an appropriate university when students know their desired area of studies but this is not always the case. Different factors can influence the choice including the fact that students differ from one another. Each student would like to find a university suitable to his/her ability, interests, budget, and motivation.

How students choose a university is a crucial question for institutions because each university tries to attract prospective students. Universities exist in a changing world and they have to adapt to new circumstances. For example, changes in the educational system and a decrease in the number of potential

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prospective students due to the general demographic situation forced German universities to analyse the higher education market more intensely and to look for new strategies to attract students (Horstschaer, 2012). However, the development of such strategies is only possible when universities have a clear vision of their “ideal” prospective students and understand which factors influence their choice of university the most.

Sometimes universities require a high level of achievement from prospective students; sometimes students do not have these levels of achievement or it is not the strategy they choose. Usually, universities with good reputations have a chance to select high ability students, which makes their position stronger. However, for some universities, the number of students selected is crucial, especially in cases when the budget of the institution depends on student fees. In such cases, the requirements are not so strict. Therefore, different strategies in terms of student selection can influence students’ opportunities to choose a particular university.

In the following parts of this chapter, the focus is on two important standpoints. Firstly, from the standpoint of students some important factors being considered by them in their choice of university will be elucidated. Secondly, from the standpoint of a university, how its characteristics potentially influence an increase in student enrolment will be highlighted. Therefore, it will be demonstrated that it is a combination of the individual characteristics of the students and the characteristics of the universities which ultimately impacts upon student choice of university.

There is a difference among countries in how institutions are named. For example, in the United States, there are two terms describing higher education – “university” and “college”. The term “college” can be applied to a part of a university and the term “university” describes a larger institution that could include colleges and schools. Usually universities offer undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate degrees; colleges mostly offer only undergraduate degrees. There is also another use of the term “college” which refers to a two-year school that offers lower-level tertiary education. In some other countries like New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland, they often use the term “college” to refer to a secondary school. As the main focus of this chapter is undergraduate education, the term “university” will be used, although some studies described in the chapter are conducted in colleges.

Students’ Individual Characteristics

The characteristics of individual students can be divided into ‘innate’ characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, and ability; and ‘environmental’ characteristics such as socio-economic and cultural background, parents’ education and financial considerations. Some of these characteristics are a combination of both innate and environmental factors such as achievement level, motivation and interests. However, even if we can distinguish different individual characteristics, they all are interrelated. For example, highly educated parents of middle socio-economic status will probably support the more non-gender specific interests and abilities of their children, compared with families from other backgrounds. Likewise, two students with similar abilities but with different socio-economic backgrounds and/or host versus immigrant status have different possibilities to enter a highly ranked university. Each combination of innate and environmental characteristics can lead to different decisions about students’ choice of a university. In the next paragraphs each characteristic will be observed in more detail.

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