

Chapter 24

Understanding University Choice Decisions of Turkish Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is designed to provide insights as to how different elements of university characteristics, campus visit, information sources, and students' personal characteristics influence their university behaviors directly and indirectly through their effects on university-related attitudes. Proposed relationships are tested with data collected from 421 respondents through structured questionnaires. This study enriches the university choice literature by investigating the effects of various university choice factors on both attitudinal and behavioral responses. As expected, it is found that while controlling other factors there is a positive relationship between students' attitudes toward university and preference for a university. Results provide evidence that some factors have a significant effect only on students' attitudinal responses, while some have a significant effect on behavioral responses. Unexpectedly, campus visit does not act as a moderator in the relationship between university perceptions and attitude toward university.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increasing demand for higher education in Turkey where, as in most other countries, the demand for higher education exceeds the places available. The Student Selection and Placement Center (SSPC) reported that almost one-and-a-half million students have taken Student Selection Examination (SSE)¹ in each year of the last decade. There are several reasons for the increasing numbers of students who want to enroll in higher education over the years. First, there has been a steady rise in the number of high-school graduates, and this has increased further after the introduction of the eight-year compulsory primary education in 1997. Secondly, there is a cumulatively increasing candidate group, including previous years' under-scorers (who did not perform satisfactorily on the initial entrance exam). Finally, a considerable number of students who succeeded in being placed into an

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academic programme re-take the entrance exam several times in order to enter their desired academic programme. These three groups of candidates constitute a significant ‘snowball effect’ each year. On the other hand over the last few years there have been noticeable increases in public and especially in private universities in Turkey, thus universities face a fierce competition. As of 2017, there are one hundred and eighty three higher education institutions in various cities, of which one hundred and twelve are public and seventy one are private universities. In response to the increasingly competitive environment, universities are searching for the means to recruit more students.

During the university decision process, many students and their families face an important and difficult life decision. Often, this is the first major financial, educational, social, and vocational decision for which they accept total responsibility. The complexity of choosing a university forces students to seek out and integrate information from various sources. Therefore, it is important for researchers to continue studying the university choice process both in practice and theoretical contexts (Galotti & Mark, 1994). Careful consideration of the consumer behavior influencing student university choice will not only address many challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) but also positively affect future institutional marketing strategies (Zusman, 2005).

Although there exist a well-defined body of evidence on student choice, research on institutional choice in Turkey is rather limited and none of these studies employs models of choice. Since the vast majority of studies dealing with choice criteria have used a US sample, it could be argued that there is very little cultural distance between these samples. Therefore one of the purposes of this study is to extend the literature on choice criteria in higher education from a different cultural framework-namely Turkey by exploring and determining relevant university choice factors among prospective Turkish students.

The overall aim of this study is to understand university choice decisions of prospective students through an integrative model that incorporates choice stage of the several university choice models (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This study will yield efficient enrollment management processes through better enrollment planning, student marketing, and recruitment. If universities can predict where applicants will come from and what they will value, scarce resources of universities can be focused on marketing areas that will give the highest return.

The chapter will be structured as follows. First the available literature on university choice that develops the theoretical background for this study will be discussed briefly and a model for evaluating university choice will be presented. Then the research design and methodology of the study will be explained and the results of the study will be reported. Finally the findings of the study will be discussed and the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings along with the limitations of the study will be presented.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The conceptual framework used for this study reflects the complex, multi-faceted process that is involved in university choice (see Figure 1). The model predicts that university characteristics, information sources and student characteristics are expected to determine student’s attitudes toward a university, which in turn affects university choice.

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