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Factors influencing South African undergraduate students' choice of a university: Mangosuthu University as a case study

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the factors influencing South African undergraduate students' choice of a university, using Mangosuthu University as a case study. A survey questionnaire was distributed among 190 First year Mangosuthu University students through convenience sampling. The data was analysed with the aid of basic descriptive statistics like frequency count, percentages, and mean analysis. The results of the study showed that all seven factors or constructs, as identified from the literature review, are important in influencing students' university choice. However, the constructs differ in the degree to which they influence students' university choice. The most important constructs influencing students' university choice are the reputation of the institution, the cost of education, influence of family, friends, and peers, and institutional infrastructure and facilities. The least important factors are location, programmes offered, and institutional information. These findings indicate that universities must focus their energies on building good reputations, excellent institutional infrastructure, awarding more scholarships, and seeking to influence other relevant third parties in order to attract undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

This study investigated the factors influencing South African undergraduate students' choice of university, using Mangosuthu University as a case study. It is hoped that it will help South African universities to come up with relevant marketing strategies to attract new undergraduate students.

Higher education is a booming sector of the education industry. From a relative few players in the early days of majority rule in 1994, it has now expanded rapidly to include hundreds of institutions that are spread across the length and breadth of the country. This rapid expansion is mostly due to the inability of public higher education institutions to absorb all the qualified applicants to their institutions largely because of capacity constraints stemming from scarce financial and human resources.

In view of the above, competition has become very fierce among the different players in the higher education field. Mangosuthu University of Technology doesn't only have to contend with competition from the traditional

players like UKZN, Durban University of Technology, and University of Zululand, but also from private players like Mancosa, Oval, Damelin, Regent, Boston Business College, PC Training and many other private higher education institutions. And with this competition comes the need for research to understand the major factors influencing undergraduate students' choice of a particular higher education institution. It's in this context that the researcher decided to carry out this piece of research to understand the salient factors that inform South African undergraduate students' choice of a university.

Higher education in South Africa (2007) reports that nearly one in five school-leavers who pass grade 12 enters a higher education institution, with over 700,000 students studying at 23 different higher education institutions across South Africa. Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) assert that with this development, institutions of higher learning will have to become more market- oriented in order to compete for students and funding.

Several factors have contributed to the increase in competition in the higher education market. Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) reports that the most important of these factors is the opening of Higher education institutions to all races. The second factor, according to the ministry of education report (2002) is the pressure exerted on colleges and universities to transform their student profiles to become more representative of the wider populace. Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete (2008) reports that one of the factors is changes in the funding formula for higher education institutions, which has placed greater emphasis on throughput. This has led to a quest for institutions to recruit high-achieving students who are likely to graduate in minimum time (Smit & Schonefield, 2000). Also, the increased pressure from government on greater tertiary education accessibility means that they must ensure that they recruit and attract students from previously disadvantaged groups.

The above marketing challenges have ignited interest in higher education institutions' student recruitment processes. Understanding the decision-making processes of undergraduate students in terms of how they select a particular college or university will assist these institutions to better target the student market. With this emphasise on recruiting the right calibre of students, and the right mix of students, many institutions of higher learning are putting a great emphasise on the recruitment process with a view to understanding the major factors influencing students' choices.

1.1 Research objective

The main research objective was to determine the factors that influence Mangosuthu undergraduate students' choice of a bank.

1.2 Research Questions

In order to accomplish the major research objective, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. Does the cost of education influence students' choice of university?
2. Does the type of programmes offered influence students' choice of university?
3. Does institutional infrastructure influence students' choice of university?
4. Does the reputation of the institution influence students' choice of university?
5. Do family members, friends and teachers influence students' choice of university?
6. Does location influence students' choice of a university?
7. Does institutional information influence students' choice of a university?

8. What are the most important, and least important, factors influencing students' choice of a university?

2.0 Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory is the process of determining what options are available and then choosing the most preferred one according to some consistent criterion. (Levine, 2004) In rational choice theory, the individuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their preferences. They act within specific, given constraints and on the basis of the information that they have about the conditions under which they are acting. As it is not possible for individuals to achieve all of the various things that they want, they must also make choices in relation to both of their goals and the means for achieving some these goals (Scot, 2000)

The relevance of Rational Choice Theory is easy to see in respect of bank selection. Rational Choice theory in bank selection posits that customer's act as rational agents, selecting a bank based on a calculated, self-interested evaluation to maximise benefits and minimise costs. Within this framework, bank selection criteria are driven by the search for the highest utility, such as security of funds, low fees, and convenience- based on available information. In general consumers will choose the bank that they perceive to provide the greatest reward or benefits at the lowest cost.

3. Empirical literature review

A number of scholars have written extensively on students college/ university choice criteria. The analysis of this extensive body of research indicate that cost of education, programmes offered, reputation and image of the institution, institutional infrastructure, location, institutional information, and the influences of family, friends, and teachers, are the most cited factors influencing students' choice of university.

3.1 Cost of education

Economics-based approach are assuming that students are rational and make a careful cost/benefit decision considering the benefits and costs of all possible alternatives. This factor embraces several aspects like fees for studies, scholarship opportunities and financial aid, accommodation fees, living expenses, and family budget.(Rudhumbu & Tirumalai, 2017).

Tillery and Kildergaard (1973) state that cost plays a major role regarding whether a student attends college or not. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) point to research that shows a negative relationship between enrolment and tuition fees increases. Moreover, Leslie and Brinkman (1988) state that the overwhelming majority of students were sensitive to tuition cost.

Hossler et al (1989) assert that financial aid and support are important ways that institutions communicate that they want their students to be part of their community. Thus, financial support becomes a means of attracting learners to specific institutions of higher learning.

Foskett et al. (2006) state that flexibility of fee payment, availability of financial aid, and reasonable accommodation costs play significant roles on students' choice of higher education institution. Yusuf et al. (2008) conclude that financial assistance offered by universities is one of the four very important attributes expected from a particular higher education institution of choice.

3.2 Reputation of institution

Institutional reputation had a powerful influence on future student attitudes toward choosing a university. The reputation of the institution is influenced by many factors. The most important of these are the age of the institution, university accreditation, competitiveness of admission, brand name, staff quality, the perception of teaching quality, research output, course diversity, and quality of curricula.

There are many surveys where institutional reputation has been ranked highly among the various students' choice criteria. Lay and Maguire (1981), Web (1993), Kallio (1995), Soutar and Turner (2002), Pampaloni (2010), Kim and Gosman (2011), Blaga (2019), and Yusuf (2024) have all noted a very high correlation between institutional reputation and student choice criteria.

3.3 Programmes offered

Students' selection of an institution is also related to the type of programmes offered by the institution. Hooley et al. (1981) suggested that the suitability of programmes is the most important consideration in students' college choice. Ismail et al (2010) state that prospective students compare programmes offered by various institutions to assess their suitability. Students evaluate programmes based on the following criteria: selection of courses, availability of courses, entry requirements, quality and variety of education, and the quality and flexibility of degree/course. Krone et al. (1983) point out that the flexibility of the programme, the length of programme, and the programme entry requirements are all important criteria in students' choice of higher education institutions. Web (1993) and Blaga (2019) also postulate that the programmes offered by institutions are one of the most influential factors in students' choice of a university.

Krampf and Heinlein (1981) state that many prospective students compare programmes offered by competing institutions in order to check their suitability. They further assert that the aspects that influence the evaluation process are the quality of the courses offered, availability of courses, and entry requirements. Brennan (2001) states that admission criteria as a proxy for quality is potentially more important than the programme offering.

3.4 Infrastructure and Facilities

Chapman (1984) cites that fixed college characteristics are one of the external factors that influence a student's intention to study at a particular higher education institution. He asserts that modern classrooms, computer facilities, quality of library infrastructure, use of technology, campus size, hostel facilities, and excellent canteen facilities are integral parts of an institution's infrastructure and facilities. Ritesh and Mitesh (2012) state that, restaurants, beauty salons, commercial centres, fitness centres, and medical centres can also be considered as part of the infrastructure of an institution. Quresh (1995) also states that availability of computers, quality of library facilities, and the availability of conducive study rooms for self-study are important infrastructural concerns that influence a student's choice of a university. Other scholars have also noted the importance of infrastructure and facilities in regard to university choice (Yusuf, 2024).

3.5 Location

The location of an institution, or its proximity to home, is another factor that has bearing on students' college choice (Funeka & Govender, 2024). Kohn et al (1976) state that an important predisposition to attend college is the close proximity of the higher education institution to home. He asserts that a nearby college is an important

stimulator of a student's decision to further his or her education. Shanka et al. (2005) reveals that the location of an institution has a significant influence on the college/university choice decision-making process. He postulates that a nearby university gives learners the emotional security of remaining close to family and friends.

According to Wajeed and Micceri (1997), the location of the higher education institution plays a significant role on high school students' choice of college/university. They assert that location or proximity to home is a primary motivating factor for students choosing to attend a particular college. Their research reveals that over 62% of students indicate that the desire to study near home or residence was the highest ranking factor influencing college choice.

Archer's et al (2003) state that students consider their overall wellbeing and security while participating in the risky and unfamiliar world of higher education by choosing a nearby university, especially for those who are first-generation educated and from working-class families. They also postulate that going to a nearby university allow students to easily maintain ties with family members, friends, and significant others.

3.6 Influence of family, friends, and peers

Studies of the college and university choice process have shown that a person's decision to attend college is influenced by individuals with personal or social ties to the student. Sheppard et al (1992) states that parents, other family members, and peers had the largest influence on students' college aspirations.

Research done by Hossler et al (1999) reveal that about 53% of respondents reported that they got advice from friends, teachers, counsellors, and parents when contemplating on which college to choose.

According to Hayden (2000), opinions of friends and peers play an important role when prospective students decide between colleges. He asserts that the more a high school student interacts with other students with college plans, the more likely they are to consider going to college.

Maringe et al (2006) reveal that approximately 27% of students turn to their friends and neighbours for their Higher education institution choice. They assert that this is mainly because formal sources of interpersonal information such as agents, experts, university staff, and counsellors are less easily accessible than informal sources such as friends, family, neighbours, and relatives.

Kusumawati et al. (2010) mention that the influence of parents is an important factor for undergraduate students in their choice of university. They assert that since the majority of students are dependent on their parents for financial support, they have little option but to take in their input relating to decision to study at university, choice of city, and choice of academic course. This result is consistent with the findings from Ceja (2006) and Adeyanju et al(2020), who reveal that parents were instrumental in encouraging their children to pursue higher education.

3.7 Institutional Information

Cleopatra (2004) cites that in order to increase participation and assist students in their choice of institution, information are needed that will change the attitude of the potential students and facilitate their decision-making. He further asserts that information regarding their career prospects and area of study for a course is significantly important to students in their choice of study. He states that career prospects information such as the average

earnings of the graduates, and the percentage of graduates who are employed within a year of their graduation, play important roles in the final decision-making process.

Joseph and Joseph (2000) report that course and career information are by far the most important information sought by learners during the selection of a specific higher education institution. Moreover, Felix (2006) reveals that potential students place a strong emphasis on the need to collect and compare academic information such as area of study and career opportunities after graduation before a making a final selection decision. Blaga (2019) also mentions that sound institutional information plays a role in undergraduate university choice.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The research design for this study is the quantitative research paradigm. The reason for choosing the quantitative research design is that there is an abundant of information relating to the topic, and the theories are also well-developed. Thus, one can easily test previous research findings among the target population in the form of hypothesis statements or research questions. Moreover, it is also helpful to make generalisation about the findings to the broader undergraduate student population in South Africa.

4.2 The Target Population

Many research types require one to specify the target population. The population is the total collection of elements about which we wish to make some inferences (Cooper and Schindler, 2014). Kolb (2008) asserts that a target population always needs to be clearly defined so that the correct individuals that form the subject of the study can be chosen correctly.

The target population for this study are first year university students enrolled at Mangosuthu University. It's hoped that this will include students who have recently graduated from high school and had to make decisions relating to their choice of university. Such students are seen as better placed to respond accurately to the survey questions, as their memories about the decision-process are still fresh on their minds.

4.3 Sampling Method

The sampling method used for this research is nonprobability sampling. This is mainly due to practical considerations as well as cost and time factors. Though probability sampling is superior to nonprobability sampling, it's generally accepted that carefully controlled nonprobability sampling also gives acceptable results (Cooper and Schindler, 2014).

The nonprobability sampling method used for this research is the convenience method. With this method, the researcher chooses whoever among the target population that are easily accessible (Cooper and Schinder, 2014).

4.4 The Sample Size

190 survey questionnaires were distributed at two Mangosuthu university hostels in South Beach, Durban. 170 of these questionnaires were returned, indicating a response rate of 94%. According to research experts, a sample size of 100 is large enough for statistical analysis of the data (Anderson and Garbing, 1984) Also, the researcher is of the view that the 190 questionnaires will be small enough for practical data collection.

4.5 Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument for this study is a self-administered survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire asks questions relating to undergraduate choice of a university. The questions require respondents to indicate to what degree they agree or disagree with the statements relating to their university choice criteria. The responses were grouped into five options, in accordance with the Likert scale format. These options are strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

4.6 Data Analysis

Basic descriptive statistics like frequencies, percentages, and mean analysis were used to analyse the data. And the information is presented with the aid of tables.

5. Research Findings and Discussions

The research findings in relations to the research questions are as follow:

Research Question1

Table 1: The influence of cost of education on university choice

| No | Variables | Mean |
|----------------|--|------------|
| 1 | University provides education at a reasonable cost | 4.6 |
| 2 | University provides financial aid to its students | 4.8 |
| 3 | University provides scholarships to its students | 4.9 |
| 4 | University allows flexible payment of fees to students | 4.3 |
| 5 | University provides accommodation to students at reasonable cost | 4.6 |
| Average | | 4.6 |

The average mean value for all the statements under the cost of education construct is 4.6. This is close to the maximum mean value of 5.0. This shows that university students view cost of education as very influential in their choice of university education. The statements with highest mean values under education cost are those 2 and 3.

This research result is in line with the findings of other scholars. Lay and Maguire (1981), Sevier (1986) and Keling (2006) all agreed that the cost of education has a tremendous influence on students' college choice.

Research Question 2

Table 2: The influence of reputation and image on university choice

| No | Variable | Mean |
|----------------|---|------------|
| 1 | University boasts of excellent teaching and lecturing staff | 4.8 |
| 2 | University has an excellent research output | 4.7 |
| 3 | University programmes are highly recognised by employers | 4.6 |
| 4 | University programmes are highly recognised by professional bodies | 4.8 |
| 5 | University programmes are highly respected by the public for high quality standards | 4.9 |
| Average | | 4.7 |

The average mean value for all statements under reputation is 4.7. This shows that university students almost strongly agree that this construct plays an important role in influencing their choice of university. The statements with the highest mean values under reputation of the institution are those of 1, 4, and 5.

The findings regarding the reputation of the institution mirrors the findings of other researchers. Lay and Maguire (1981), Murphy (1981), and Keling (2007) discovered that there was a positive relationship between the reputation of the institution and students' college/university choice. Moreover, Kallio (1995), Bartl (2009), and Pampaloni (2010) agreed that reputation and image of the institution are important factors influencing students' university choice.

Research Question 3

Table 3: The influence of programmes offered on university choice

| No | Variables | Mean |
|----------------|--|------------|
| 1 | University has reasonable entry requirements for programmes of study | 4.3 |
| 2 | University provides wide range of courses for students | 4.1 |
| 3 | University provides students with flexibility in selecting courses | 4.4 |
| 4 | University provides students with specialised programmes | 3.9 |
| 5 | University offers degrees with reasonable completion period | 3.9 |
| Average | | 4.1 |

The average mean value for this construct is 4.1. This means that university students barely agree that it is important in influencing their choice of university. However, two statements under this construct fall below the minimum 4.0 threshold to agree that it's important in influencing university students' choice of university. These statements are 4 and 5 respectively.

This research finding is supported by a number of scholars. Holey and Lynch (1981), Houston (1979), and Web's (1993) all agreed that the nature of the courses and programmes offered are important factors influencing students university choice.

Research Question 4

Table 4: The influence of institutional infrastructure on university choice

| No | Variables | Mean |
|----------------|--|------------|
| 1 | University has modern and sophisticated lecture rooms | 4.7 |
| 2 | University has excellent library facilities for students | 4.4 |
| 3 | University has very good accommodation facilities for students | 4.6 |
| 4 | University has excellent computer and laboratory facilities | 4.4 |
| 5 | University has excellent canteen facilities | 4.5 |
| 6 | University has very good sporting and recreational facilities for students | 4.6 |
| Average | | 4.5 |

The average mean value for institutional infrastructure and facilities construct is 4.5. This indicates that university students are in agreement with the assertion that the construct is important in influencing their choice of university. The statements with the highest mean value for this construct are 1, 3, and 6.

This finding has been buttressed by Price et al (2003), Veloutsou et al (2004), and Ritesh and Ritesh (2012). These scholars concluded in their various researches that institutional infrastructure and facilities are very important in influencing students' choice of university.

Research Question 5

Table 5: The influence of location on University choice

| NO | Variables | Mean |
|----------------|--|------------|
| 1 | University is located within close proximity to family | 4.0 |
| 2 | University is located within close proximity to friends | 4.2 |
| 3 | University is located within close proximity to my surroundings | 3.9 |
| 4 | University is located within close proximity to vibrant social setting | 4.2 |
| Average | | 4.1 |

The average mean value for this construct is 4.1. This means that university students view it as important in influencing their choice of university. The statements with the highest mean values are 2 and 4.

This research finding is similar to the research findings of Webb (1993), Donellan (2002), and Shanka et al (2005). Their research findings showed that location is an important factor that influences student's university choice.

Research Question 6

Table 6: The influence of families, friends and teachers on university choice

| No | Variable | Mean |
|----------------|--|------------|
| 1 | University relies on the advice of my parents and family | 4.8 |
| 2 | University relies on the advice of my friends and peers | 4.5 |
| 3 | University relies on the advice of my teachers | 4.4 |
| Average | | 4.6 |

The average mean value for this construct is 4.6. This indicates a high degree of agreement among university students about its importance in influencing their choice of university. The statements with the highest mean are 1 and 2.

This finding is in line with the research findings of Murphy (1981), Shanka et al (2005), Joshi et al (2009), and Briggs and Wilson (2007). All these scholars agreed that families, friends, peers, and teachers play important roles in influencing students' university choice.

Research Question 7

Table 7: The influence of institutional information on university choice

| No | Variables | Mean |
|----------------|--|------------|
| 1 | University gives students sound information about the application process | 4.2 |
| 2 | University makes vital information easily available to students | 4.0 |
| 3 | University gives sound information to students about career opportunities | 4.0 |
| 4 | University provides sound information to students about their field of study | 3.9 |
| Average | | 4.0 |

The average mean value for this construct is 4.0. This shows that university students view it as important in influencing their choice of university. However, the mean value for institutional information is the lowest among all the seven constructs that are likely to influence students' choice of a university.

This finding mirrors that of other scholars that have carried out similar research. Cleopatra (2004) found out that information regarding career prospects and area of study were important factors influencing students' university choice. Moreover, Joseph and Joseph (2000) reported that information about courses and programmes offered are the most important categories of information considered during the selection of a specific higher education institution.

In conclusion, the result of the data analysis relating to objective one shows conclusively that all seven constructs, as identified from an extensive literature review, are important in influencing students' choice of university. However, some of the constructs are more important than others in influencing students' university choice.

Research Question 8

Table 8: The most important and least important factors influencing university choice

| No | Factors | Mean |
|----|---|------|
| 1 | Reputation and image of institution | 4.7 |
| 2 | Cost of education | 4.6 |
| 3 | Influence of families and friends | 4.6 |
| 4 | Institutional infrastructure and facilities | 4.5 |
| 5 | Geographic location | 4.1 |
| 6 | Programmes offered | 4.1 |
| 7 | Institutional information | 4.0 |

From the table above, reputation and image of institution, influence of families and friends, cost of education, and institutional infrastructure and facilities are the most important constructs influencing students' choice of university. The least important ones are location, programmes offered, and institutional information.

6. Conclusions

Evidence from the research findings indicate that all seven constructs are important in influencing students' choice of university. However, the various constructs differ in the degree to which they influence students' university choice. The most important constructs influencing students' university choice are the reputation and image of the institution, the cost of education, the influence of families, friends, and teachers, and institutional infrastructure and facilities. The least important ones are location, programmes offered, and institutional information.

There are important implications stemming from the findings or results of this study. Thus, the following recommendations are made to accommodate the research findings.

With regards to reputation and image of institution, which is the most important construct influencing students' university choice, Mangosuthu University should go all out to ensure that they hire and retain competent and excellent lecturing staff who can give students excellent support in their studies. Moreover, it should put in place

mechanisms to increase the research output of the institution. Also, it should work hand and hand with employers' organisations to structure out their programmes and courses according to the requirements of the market, and to secure appropriate accreditations.

With regards to cost of education, which is the second most important construct influencing students' university choice, Mangosuthu University should keep their tuition and other fees competitive in comparison to other universities. It can also offer full or partial scholarships to students. Another option is to offer students flexible and extended fees payment arrangements, or to help them apply for loans with financial institutions. Mangosuthu University can also offer subsidised accommodation and catering to students to mitigate the financial pressure of studying at the institution.

With regards to infrastructure and physical facilities, Mangosuthu University should ensure that the institution has modern and sophisticated lecture classrooms, excellent library facilities, excellent computer and laboratory facilities, good quality accommodation, a range of sporting and recreational facilities for students, and excellent student canteen facilities.

With regards to influence of family, friends, and teachers, Mangosuthu University should provide information about their programmes not only to potential students but also high school teachers, friends, and family members of potential students. Information should also be made available to social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other similar networking sites. This is because the social media have become popular sources of information for young potential students, their peers, and friends. Also, though to lesser extent, teachers and parents are increasingly relying on social networking sites these days to get valuable information on different aspects of life.

With regards to location, Mangosuthu University should emphasise convenience and accessibility in its marketing positioning. Research has shown that potential students are more inclined to study at a university conveniently located and easily accessible to family, peers, friends, and significant others. However, this strategy should only be used for students living in Durban and its immediate surroundings.

With regards to programmes offered, Mangosuthu University should not only offer programmes and courses that are in line with market demand, but also offer wide range of courses for students to select from. Moreover, the institution should give students some amount of flexibility in selecting courses/subjects during their study.

With regards to institutional information, Mangosuthu University should hold "open day" events on an annual basis whereby potential students can visit the institution to experience the campus and communicate with the current students and staff. This gives the opportunity for the potential students to obtain further information on programmes offered by the institution. During such events, the institution should provide vital information about the application process, the availability of scholarships and other student support grants, the variety of courses on offer and the qualifying criteria, career opportunities after graduation etc.

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Conflict of interest declaration

I wish to declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research authorship, or publication of this article.

AI Declaration

The author declares that this work was prepared independently, and that no AI-based application or tools were used to generate any part of the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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