

Factors that Impact Prospective Students' Decision on Choosing a Higher Education Institution: Case of Oman

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ABSTRACT

The article represents exploratory study of factors that impact prospective students' decision on where to gain higher education degree based on literature review. Based on refined results of studies and surveys done in different parts of the world, author conducted similar survey in Oman to fulfill the lack of studies done in and about this country. Despite many cultural, legal-political and economic specific features of Oman, which directly and indirectly impact the choice of HEI, the results of the study revealed that Omani respondents ranked targeted factors very similarly to other (mainly western) countries respondents.

Keywords: decision making, higher education, choosing a college, factors impacting decision.

1. INTRODUCTION.

The education sector in Oman changed drastically for last decade, especially in the higher education sector as the number of public and private universities and colleges increased in the country.

“The education sector has been expanding fast, growing from only 10 schools in 1970 to over 1800 in 2018.” (oxfordbusinessgroup.com/oman-2019/education-training, 2019)

“In 2016 724,395 pupils attended 18 public colleges, 20 private colleges, the state university and 7 private universities. Expanding the domestic higher education system is one of the primary goals of the government's plan to increase participation among 18-to-24-year-olds to at least 50% by 2020. Altogether, the number of students in private institutions reached 68,350 compared to 63,410 students in government institutions, which is 51.9% of the total number of students as per the statistical data released by the Statistics Department at the Admission Center for the academic year 2014/2015.” (ghedex.om/2018/en/oman-the-case-for-higher-education, 2018)

Such expansion is thanks to robust population growth, economic development and the policy of Omanisation, which seeks to reduce the country's dependence on foreign workers, technicians and managers. Despite a temporary slowdown caused by the oil price slump of 2014-16, education is set for further expansion, which will create new opportunities for private sector investment. (oxfordbusinessgroup.com/oman-2019/education-training, 2019)

Therefore, the competition among higher education institution in Oman is getting fierce. Even though each of higher education institutions has its own specialization and target market, the competition among them is strong. (Stalinska A., 2019)

Growing number of youth in the country (the youth in the age group of 15 – 29 years constitute 30% of the total Omani population, according to NCSI) (www.ncsi.gov.om/news/pages/newsct_20151201081743280.aspx, 2018), generous

governmental policy on providing subsidies to HEI and granting scholarship to students (oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/keys-success-focusing-quality-and-right-skills-meet-needs-economy, 2019) and developing industrial and service sectors of Omani economy (which took path of diversification) (oxfordbusinessgroup.com/oman-2019/economy, 2019) make this sector not only profitable for existing rivals but also very attractive for new entries.

But apart from all favorable PESTEL conditions, significant impact has forces within competitive environment on the competitiveness of any business and for higher education institutions also. (Thompson, 2012)

Among different forces of competitive environment, demand has critical significance. Analyzing demand for higher education services, many factors shall be considered, such as consumer behavior and decision making. (Olson, 2010) In particular, different factors and conditions that impact prospective students' choice of college or university shall be investigated in order to understand how a college or a university can approach prospective students, attract them and impact their decision on enrollment and gain certain competitive advantages.

There are many criteria for the choice of a college/ university and many factors which impact such choice. Great number of researches done in different parts of the world within last few decades reveal various factors that impact consumer decision about higher education institution and investigate different aspects of such decision making.

This article' aim is to discuss what are various factors that impact prospective students' decision of college or university choice based on analysis of researches and surveys done in different parts of the world and check if such factors have their importance for the same decision of Omani citizens, as there is lack of published studies done in/about this country. The author found that there is no published study on the factors that impact prospective students' decision about higher education institution choice done in Oman. This article significance is in to tackling this gap and contribute to the scientific research done about Oman. Author looked at how similar studies are done in other countries to adopt already existing frameworks and/or methodology for conducting a study in Oman.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW.

The report, produced by Eduventures, a consulting USA company, and written by Kim Reid, a principal analyst there, distilled insights from more than 100,000 high-school students nationwide. It identified seven key "decision segments" on the minds of aspiring college students: affordability, availability of a desired program, reputation/academic quality, career outcomes/job opportunities, value of education for cost, feeling of fit, and proximity to home. (Wyllie, 2018)

204 university counselors in 33 countries took part in an IE University survey designed to pinpoint the interests and preferences of the upcoming generation of university students with regard to study abroad and most popular degree programs. The survey shows students choose a university mainly to gain training and skills for a future job and choose a specialization because they feel there is job market growth in that field. When asked about the main reasons for choosing a university, counselors cited: Main drivers – Prestige, Location. Secondary consideration – Scholarships, Content. (Survey Identifies How Students Choose Their College or University , 2013)

The University of California—Los Angeles's survey, "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2012." In which the data is based on the responses of 192,912 first-year students at 238 U.S. four-year colleges and universities who entered college in fall 2012. The highly regarded annual survey asks new freshmen to rate which factors were "very important" in influencing their decision to attend a particular college. (Morse, 2013) Below are the 23 reasons for choosing a college that students were offered in the latest UCLA survey. They

are ranked in descending order, based on which factors students said were "very important" in influencing their final college selection.

1. College has very good academic reputation (63.8 percent)
2. This college's graduates get good jobs (55.9 percent)
3. I was offered financial assistance (45.6 percent)
4. The cost of attending this college (43.3 percent)
5. A visit to this campus (41.8 percent)
6. College has a good reputation for its social activities (40.2 percent)
7. Wanted to go to a college about this size (38.8 percent)
8. College's grads get into top grad/professional schools (32.8 percent)
9. The percentage of students that graduate from this college (30.4 percent)
10. I wanted to live near home (20.1 percent)
11. Information from a website (18.7 percent)
12. Rankings in national magazines (18.2 percent)
13. Parents wanted me to go to this school (15.1 percent)
14. Admitted early decision and/or early action (13.7 percent)
15. Could not afford first choice (13.4 percent)
16. High school counselor advised me (10.3 percent)
17. Not offered aid by first choice (9.5 percent)
18. Athletic department recruited me (8.9 percent)
19. Attracted by the religious affiliation/orientation of college (7.4 percent)
20. My relatives wanted me to come here (6.8 percent)
20. My teacher advised me (6.8 percent)
22. Private college counselor advised me (3.8 percent)
23. Ability to take online courses (3.2 percent)

International Student Survey carried out in 2017 by educational consultants Hobsons, questioned 62,366 students from 65 universities around the world. Of these, 27,955 students were considering studying in the UK. Students were asked a variety of questions about higher education including which factors were most likely to influence their choice of university, and why they chose to go to college in the first place. (Bhardwa, 2017) Results of the Survey provided below.

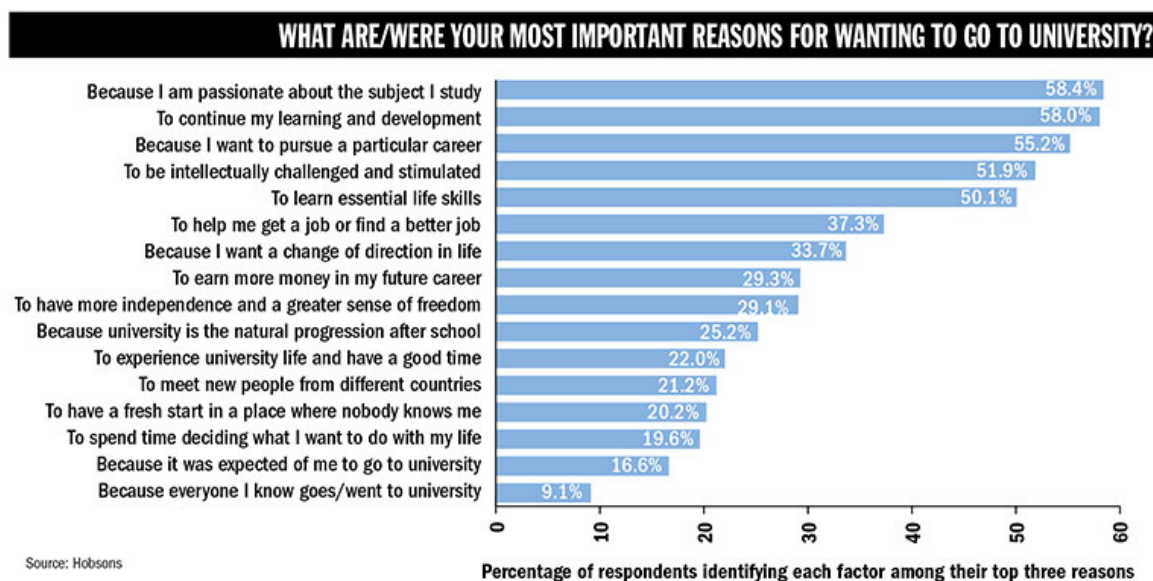
Table 1. Most important factors for choosing a university ranked by UK students, done by Hobsons (2017)

WHAT FIVE THINGS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU WHEN CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY?					
	1	2	3	4	5
It offers high-quality teaching	30.0%	22.4%	19.4%	15.7%	12.5%
It offers scholarships	29.9%	22.7%	18.4%	15.4%	13.7%
It is well ranked	23.5%	20.6%	18.6%	18.2%	19.1%
It is welcoming to international students	19.5%	21.9%	21.5%	19.7%	17.4%
It has a prestigious brand	16.1%	19.1%	18.3%	21.0%	25.5%
I have friends or family who have been to that university	14.3%	17.5%	17.2%	22.1%	28.9%
It was recommended to me	12.9%	15.1%	18.4%	21.6%	31.9%
It has a high graduate employment rate	12.8%	18.2%	20.9%	23.9%	24.2%
It has affordable university-owned accommodation	12.1%	18.6%	20.5%	23.7%	25.0%
It has a good careers service and links with employers	11.8%	18.2%	21.6%	23.6%	24.8%
Make friends with people from different countries	10.3%	15.3%	18.1%	24.3%	31.9%

Notes: Percentage of times each item was ranked 1 to 5, where 1 is most important. Source: Hobsons

Source: (Bhardwa, 2017)

Table 2. Important reasons for wanting to go to university, ranked by UK students, done by Hobsons (2017)



Source: (Bhardwa, 2017)

Table 3. Factors of good quality teaching provided by a university ranked by UK students, done by Hobsons (2017)

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Teaching staff are highly qualified	69%	22%	7%	1%	0%
A high graduate employment rate	52%	29%	14%	3%	2%
Up-to-date technology and online learning options	49%	28%	16%	4%	2%
The university is ranked well	44%	31%	19%	4%	2%
The university organises work placements	44%	31%	18%	5%	2%
High volume of face-to-face teaching hours	43%	31%	19%	5%	2%
The university responds quickly to my enquiries	34%	26%	24%	10%	6%
High graduate starting salaries	31%	27%	27%	9%	6%

Notes: Percentage of responses by factor and level of agreement. Source: Hobsons

Source: (Bhardwa, 2017)

Some studies done on consumer decision making related to higher education services investigate and highlight different important factors that higher education institutions shall consider within their approaching and attracting students.

Felix Maringe from University of Southampton, Southampton, UK, in his article “University and course choice: implications for positioning, recruitment and marketing” discussed “the factors students consider important in their decision making related to their choice of university and courses of study”. (Felix Maringe, 2006). The study identified “Two key signals: first, students seem to be adopting a consumerist approach to their HE decision making. The importance attached to labor market motives in terms of employment and career prospects significantly outweigh those related to pursuing HE on the basis of subject interest and a love for the subject. Second is that as a result of this, students consider

program and price related issues as more important than other elements of universities marketing mix”.

Various studies explore the issue from different perspectives. For example, Rick Seltzer in his article “Turning Down Top Choices” published on March 23, 2017 with INSIDE HIGHER ED, discussed why would students decline to enroll in certain college and “how much of a role costs play in turning students away from their top choice for college. Almost one-fifth of students who were admitted to their top choice of college or university in 2016 but decided not to go there turned it down because of the cost of attendance, according to new data (<http://www.eab.com/Blogs/Enrollment/2017/03/Why-Do-Students-Decline-Their-Dream-Schools>) from Royall & Co., the enrollment-management and alumni fund-raising arm of EAB (Seltzer, 2017).

Timothy C. Johnston, Murray State University, USA, in his work “Who And What Influences Choice Of University? Student And University Perceptions” examined “the phenomenon of peer-to-peer communication via social media in the context of student choice of a university: What is the relative influence that various sources of information have on students’ choice of university? How does the influence of friends and family members compare to the influence of non-personal media? How do high-touch tools like campus visits compare to high-tech tools such as social media sites? Results of a survey of students showed that parents, along with other family and friends, were the most influential sources of information. Outside of personal contacts, a student’s visit to campus was highly influential. Surprisingly, social media was not rated as highly influential compared to traditional media. Results of a second survey of university employees generally predicted student responses well, although employees underestimated the influence of university representatives (faculty members, staff, and coaches) and underestimated the impact of a visit to campus as sources of information for prospective students. (Timothy C. Johnston, 2010)

“First year student expectations: Results from a university-wide student survey” paper, done by group of authors (Geoffrey Crisp, Edward Palmer, Deborah Turnbull, Ted Nettelbeck, Lynn Ward, Amanda LeCouteur, Aspa Sarris, Peter Strelan, and Luke Schneider) “provides additional insights into the expectations of students at an Australian university and highlights areas in which students’ expectations may not necessarily align with the realities of common university practices.” (Geoffrey Crisp, 2009). Such expectations are also a part of prospective students’ choice of higher education institution and a part of their decision to drop out or quit the college.

Jacqueline Douglas, Alex Douglas and Barry Barnes, Faculty of Business and Law, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK, conducted a study “Measuring student satisfaction at a UK university”, where they found that “The most important aspects were those associated with teaching and learning, while the least important were those associated with the physical facilities.” (Jacqueline Douglas, 2006).

Price, I., Matzdorf, F., Smith, L. and Agahi, H. in their work “The impact of facilities on student choice of university” examined different factors of university choice decision and found that study subject and cost are still in prior significance, and facilities has less importance. (Price, 2003).

Neil Granitz, Steven Chen and Kerrit K. Kohli in their work “Choosing Business as a College Major: A Survey of High School Students” surveyed high school students to understand their decision-making process. The findings show that the decision process starts rather early, in high school. The choice is primarily made by the students, but they rely extensively on parents and family for information and are heavily influenced by them. They choose majors that offer rewarding careers and require skills that match their strengths. (Neil Granitz, 2014).

Even though, majority of published studies are undertaken in USA and UK, there are studies of same and related issues done in other countries, such as: Exploring factors influencing international students' decision to choose a higher education institution: A comparison between Chinese and other students, by Melissa James-MacEachern, School of Business, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Canada, (James-MacEachern, 2017); Socio-economic, environmental and personal factors in the choice of country and higher education institution for studying abroad among international students in Malaysia, by Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh, School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Georgetown, Malaysia, (Singh, 2016); 12th grade students' behavior in the decision making process of educational choices by Mihai-Florin BĂCILĂ, Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, (BĂCILĂ, 2008); Briggs, S., Wilson, A. "Which University? A Study of the Influence of Cost and Information Factors on Scottish Undergraduate Choice" (Briggs, 2007); James, D.L., Baldwin, G. and McInnis, C. (1999), Which University? The Factors Influencing the Choices of Prospective Undergraduates, (James, 1999); Drewes, T. and Christopher Michael "How Do Students Choose a University?: An Analysis of applications to Universities in Ontario, Canada" (Drewes, 2006); "The Type of Career Decision Change and Prediction Variables of Korean Youth" by Dong-Yul Jung and Seojung Lee, published in Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research, Vol. 8, Issue 4, 2019 (Dong-Yul Jung, 2019) , etc.

Demetris Vrontis, Alkis Thrassou, Yioula Melanithiou in their work "A contemporary higher education student-choice model for developed countries" "utilized existing models, interrelating them and distilling the important parameters affecting student behavior, to develop an integrated preliminary generic higher education student-choice model. Subsequently, refinement and conceptual development of the preliminary model takes place through an extensive literature review of generic developed-country consumer behavior theories. These theories provide the practical and theoretical parameters that stipulate and regulate the environmental and behavioral context of developed-countries' student choice. They combine with the preliminary model to produce a contemporary higher education student choice model for developed countries and to accordingly recommend a new higher-education institutions' marketing direction and approach." (Demetris Vrontis, 2007)

Casey Slide in her article "33 Factors for How to Choose a College" discussed consolidated from various sources long list of factors that play role in decision about college or university and they are divided into few areas, such as Academic Life (admission rate, graduation rate, freshmen retention rate, student to faculty ratio, school size, graduate/professional school options, jobs right out of school, curriculum, course availability, quality of professors, quality of department of study, teaching assistance, study abroad opportunity, accreditation, course of study); Student Life (on-campus living, Greek life participation, location, size of campus, meal plans, extracurricular activities, sports participation, safety, party life, alumni network, demographics, transportation, spirituality); Financial Factors (cost, financial aid, working students, application fees, graduating class indebtedness) National College Ranking. (Slide)

3. RESEARCH METHODS.

Considering specific features of Oman culture, economy, governmental regulation of higher education institutions and scholarship, the framework described by Casey Slide was adopted as a basis for conducting and survey with the use of questionnaire crafted for Oman population.

Sample for questionnaire distribution included students who already chose the college (4 private colleges and 2 public colleges) and pupils (from various private and public schools during higher education exhibition).

Likert Scale was used for ranking each of factors in terms of its importance. Summarizing method was used to present results. Respondents were offered to rank each of the listed factors (from “not important” to “a must”) in order of importance when choosing a university. The reason rated most important in each category is indicated in green color. Something that appeared to have the least importance to prospective students is indicated in red color.

4. RESULTS.

Academic Life

	<i>Not important</i>	<i>important</i>	<i>very important</i>	<i>a must</i>
Admission Rate	23%	40%	23%	14%
School Size	51%	25%	16%	8%
Jobs Right Out of College/University	3%	15%	51%	31%
Course Availability	5%	20%	62%	13%
Quality of Professors	10%	25%	35%	30%
Quality of Department of Study	0%	22%	26%	52%
Teaching Assistants	0%	5%	55%	40%
Accreditation	0%	11%	63%	26%

Student Life

	<i>Not important</i>	<i>important</i>	<i>very important</i>	<i>a must</i>
On-campus living	45%	25%	22%	8%
Location	42%	34%	24%	0%
Size of Campus	36%	19%	36%	9%
Meal Plans	25%	37%	30%	8%
Extracurricular Activities	6%	27%	54%	13%
Sports participation	36%	18%	36%	10%
Safety	9%	32%	45%	14%
Transportation	9%	40%	42%	9%

Financial/Ranking factors

	<i>Not important</i>	<i>important</i>	<i>very important</i>	<i>a must</i>
Cost	10%	62%	19%	9%
Application fees	5%	52%	33%	10%
Scholarship	5%	57%	24%	4%
National Ranking	5%	57%	38%	0%
International Ranking	10%	43%	43%	4%

5. CONCLUSIONS.

Course availability, quality of department of student, teaching assistants and accreditation were the most important factors within Academic Life category. The two reasons rated most important were “course availability” (62 per cent) and “accreditation” (63 per cent). “Teaching assistants” came third, with 55 per cent of students stating that this was the most important factor. For 51 per cent of respondents to get the job straight after graduation is very important factor.

School size appears to be not important for Omani students, as 51 per cent respondents ranked it as not important.

For Student Life and more related to facilities of a college or university, such factors as On-campus living, Location and Size of Campus were ranked as not important, respectively having 45%, 42% and 36% of responses.

But Extracurricular Activities, safety and transportation got highest per cent as very important – 54, 45, 42 respectively.

Surprisingly 36% of respondents ranked Sports participation as not important, however 36% of respondents ranked it as very important.

All Financial factors are mainly ranked as important, but much less percent of respondents give higher priority to such factors.

There is some correlation between data received by research done in UK/US and in Oman, despite big differences of PESTEL and competitive environments in these countries. For example, majority of respondents in all surveys still consider costs as important factor for decision. Extracurricular activities also are ranked as important by respondents of many countries. Results of high importance ranking for such factors as quality of department of study, getting jobs after graduation are also common for Oman with the western countries.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS.

This study was conducted as trial and by single efforts of Marketing Department of one of private colleges in Oman and has its limitations. The data gathered via questionnaire is limited only to the ranking of factors as questionnaire did not include general population statistics like age, gender etc. The questionnaire was adapted to the social, cultural, legal and ethical specific features of Oman society. The questionnaire was distributed only among pupils and students, and did not target parents and working students, or sponsors who has significant impact on the decision of university choice. The questionnaire was distributed only in Muscat area and did not include other cities and willayats of Oman. The analysis of results is limited by the shortage of gathered data.

The results may not be generalized to the whole Omani youth as the sample is very limited. There are many directions and ways of required further investigation of targeted issue, like expanding the survey to national level (geographically and demographically), including all decision makers of such choice like parents, working students, sponsors (public and private organizations), extending the scope of survey to include data of influencers of such decision, include data of communication channels for such decision, investigating different factors of such decision separately and in depth etc.

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