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## Strategic Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Universities in Kenya

Uzel Jean Mutindi Mzera

Senior Lecturer, School of Business, Technical University of Mombasa, Kenya

### **Abstract:**

*Purpose-Universities all over the world have increased in numbers and Kenya is not an exception. This state of affairs has made universities scramble for students to justify their survival as well as trying to stay afloat in the hard economic times. This research aimed at establishing the strategic factors that influence the choice of universities by students in Kenya.*

*Design/methodology/approach-The study employed Descriptive Survey research design which is useful in describing the characteristics of a large population. A sample of 385 form four learners was selected at random to fill the questionnaire. A Five-point Likert Scale Questionnaire was administered where students were to rank constructs according to their degree of influence on university choice. The questionnaire was piloted by using Cronbach's Alpha and factor analysis and all variables recorded values higher than 0.5 which is within the recommended threshold. Data was analyzed using ANOVA and hypothesis was tested using Multiple Linear Regression Analysis.*

*Findings- Decision maker variables were found to be key factors that were considered by students while selecting universities. The results indicated that information sources had a low influence on the choice of universities by students in Kenya.*

*Research Limitations/implications-The research findings would be generalized because they do support the existing knowledge on the strategic factors which influence university choice and would be a benchmark for the changing university choice trends among students in Kenya.*

*Practical Implications-The findings of this study would advance research knowledge in the area of strategic determinants of university choice by students in Kenya and could be used by universities in planning for future recruitment of students as well as providing guidance on marketing strategies for universities.*

*Originality/Value-The paper contributed to additional knowledge in the area of university choices and proposed the adoption of the strategic factors of information and decision makers in influencing university choice.*

**Keywords-** Strategic factors, information sources, secondary schools, decision makers, choice of universities

### **1. Introduction**

Paulsen (2015) highlighted education as a basic human right and the footstool for the development of any nation thus justifying the dependence of nations on trained and educated personnel to drive their economies. Lee (2015) identified education as fundamental in development of human resource capacities to achieve their full potential in preparation for future and better roles in their societies. Kusumawati (2013) concurs that the process of making a choice about the universities to study in is complex for each individual because it is determined by social and contextual factors within an individual's environment. Som (2016) stated that universities should be carefully selected and university choices carefully considered because they determine an individual's future with regard to their career.

University education is a key milestone in a student's future which necessitates consulted effort and time. These choices shape the daily activities, values and experiences that guide students' life while in the university and thereafter (Al-Ali, Abdel, Assaad and Haneen, 2018). Previous studies have confirmed that universities are increasingly getting low enrolments which have led to competition for students to scramble for their share of the market (Harden, Davis, and Mengersen, 2014). The results of the study would unearth the strategic factors that influence secondary school students while making university choices since universities can use such data for strategic decision making especially with regards to marketing activities (Agrey and Lampadan, 2014). In Kenya Universities have increased in number in the recent past and majority of them offer similar courses, hence increasing competition and necessitating strategic moves to cope with changing trends.

University education in Kenya has lately been threatened by various internal and external factors which have made their existence difficult because of the dwindling numbers of students' enrollment whereby some courses have failed to attract students for several consecutive years. One of the key detriments has been the government policy where all students who obtain C+ and above are sponsored for their university education. Students have also been given the freedom to choose the courses they are to take in their university of choice while previously they were being placed directly to any university (Maureen and Ibrahim, 2011). Kenyan Universities are also facing challenges from Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions among other middle level colleges which are supplied with

Government Sponsored Students. It is these challenges that have necessitated a study on the strategic factors which influence students' university choices because their identification would help universities to embrace such factors to attract and retain more students. Jacqueline, Rose and Jeremiah (2014) observed that factors that influence student choices vary from student to student; hence the study has hypothesized information sources and decision makers as influencers of university choice.

## 2. Theoretical Constructs

Bermejo (2015) stated that University education has undergone tremendous changes in the past decade and this has affected student choices. The process of university selection has further been complicated by the increasing number of decision makers such as peers, teachers and relatives among others. The strategic factors that motivate or influence would be university students to make decisions on which university they would want to study in differs from student to student and country to country and therefore it is unlikely that one strategy will apply to all markets (Ma and Garcia-Murillo, 2018). On finishing secondary schools, many times students are usually in a state of dilemma about which universities they would wish to study in, the courses to study or whether or not to study in a university or follow other avenues (Rafi, 2018). Students who may find themselves in the wrong university for whatever reason may end up with bad experiences which may affect their friends, family or the society (Eisingerich, Auh and Merlo, 2013). Aydin (2015) stated that the study on university choices has lately aroused a lot of interest as a result of the transformations occurring in university education. These transformations have changed universities from being fully funded by their governments and fully supplied with learners to a different scenario where funding has reduced tremendously and governments can no longer compel students to choose a particular course or university.

Edward and Quinter (2017) support the notion that the commercialization of the universities has led to increased competition and forced universities to adopt marketing strategies that can help them to compete effectively. Aydin (2014) highlighted the global inevitable change in universities which has been prompted by the changing economic business environment forcing universities to embrace new business models to fight the threatening competitive forces. Mazzarol (2015) asserted that over expansion of universities in terms of their overall numbers, the number of students as well as the number of courses has left universities at the mercy of the competitive market forces of supply and demand. Avinash and Babli (2017) proposed that university management should have knowledge of how students choose universities as such information will assist in planning and adoption of the right strategies to enhance universities' competitiveness. Avran (2014) concurred with the notion that university managers need to know the drivers of university choices since a study of such factors may come up with essential strategies which could help in planning for future students' recruitment.

Okiror and Otabong (2015) confirmed that future careers of students are shaped by the universities which they attend which can either make or ruin their future life. Universities in Kenya have, therefore, been left with a few options but to operate like commercial entities and adopt suitable management models to attract and retain their students at the same time ensuring that they are able to meet their operational costs. University choice is a complex multi-dimensional and multifaceted as well as multifactorial process which is influenced by numerous factors. Students have also been left with wide choices further complicating the decision-making process which gives rise to university choices. Early theorists expressed university choices from the institutional, economic, cultural and ethnic parameters which are deemed to predict the probability of a student selecting a particular university over another. These theorists propagate that students are not able to make rational choices (Kimiti and Mwova, 2012). Economic theorists countered the non-rational decisional making theory by arguing that students are rational and they make rational university choices based (Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob and Cummings, 2012). Modern theorists have come up with models which highlight the relative importance of personality and subjective judgement while making decisions on university choices. They argue that decision making is a rational process which is based on a student's perception, expectations and personality (Khoo, Ban, Neng, Hooi & Joan, 2015). This study adopted the marketing model and the combination models as the choice models that guide the process that students undertake while making university choices (Absher and Crawford 2013). The Marketing Model had been gaining acceptance by researchers because it incorporates the Consumer Choice Models such as the cultural, social, personal and psychological aspects as well as the external influences such as social cultural, product and price stimuli (Obermeit, 2012). The consumer behavior models have been incorporated in the market approaches in the choice of university in form of brochures, internet, television adverts and newspapers which are the information sources selected for this study (Pascual, 2014). The Combination Model combines both the rational decision making process as well as a consideration of the sociological attributes. This approach influences student decision making through three stages which are predisposition, search and choice (Hosslen and Gallaghers, 1987). At the predisposition stage, the student has to make a choice of whether or not to continue with university. Those who choose not to proceed with university do not proceed to the next stage. At the second stage, students engage in searching for information about the various universities at their disposal while at the last stage the students select their universities of choice (Sabir, Ahmed, Ashraf and Ahmed 2013).

### 2.1. Information Sources and University Choice

Damala, Mustafa, Halil and Iman (2015) identified information sources as important influencers of students' choice of university because many prospective university students search for information by use of internet, websites and social networks. Publications have also been cited as influencers of university and especially when they are shared to potential students and guardians as promotional materials. The media has also been used by universities to advertise for programs and facilities and hence electronic channels such as social media play a key role in the decision-making process of would-be university students (Zhu, 2019). University websites have been viewed to be key influencers of students while selecting the universities; they are to study in as they are easily accessible and they contain the basic information about

universities (Bermejo, 2015). This is necessary for the current crop of students who are generally digital and who have easy access to online platforms (Gregory 2014). Students normally would look for information related to the mission and vision of the university as well as courses offered in the university. Universities ought to enhance their presence in their website so that they can influence students' perceptions to influence the possibility of being the University of Choice for students. Ruttger, Ropper and Lettice (2015) highlighted a positive effect on students' enrollment as a result of university websites and suggested that universities should capitalize on their website to attract more students.

### 2.2. Decision Makers and University Choice

Wilkins, Shams and Huisman (2013) highlighted decision makers as influencers of students' choice of universities although they have no final control over students' final choice. Decision makers can include family, friends, teachers and any other persons who may be playing any important role in the students' life (Kimiti and Mwova, 2012). Parents influence student university decisions especially if they are the ones responsible for fee payment (Bowers and Pugh, 2014). Teachers and mentors play a key role in the future careers for students by giving them the interactions and experience that are required to propel them to their future career choice. Wadhwa (2016) studied the influencers of university choices and concluded that word of mouth, environment and social conditions influenced students' choices positively. Oldfield and Baron (2014) proposed that universities should create the required networks with students and schools in order to supply them with the required information. Sardoke, Asare and Asare (2020) postulate that university students have wider choices as compared to the past because of the increase in the number of opportunities for universities both locally and abroad and this creates a problem for students while making up a choice on the university to study in. Universities have also been caught up in a crisis where they have to fight for their survival to warrant attraction of more students. Kiuru (2018) grouped the factors which influence universities choice under academic, personal, social, financial, parental and peer among others but this study grouped such factors as information source factors and decision makers factors.

## 3. Conceptual Framework

### 3.1. Methodology

The research philosophy that was employed was positivism because it determines the cause-and-effect relationship as well as being deductive (Creswell, 2014). Descriptive survey design was used which refers to procedures and methods that are used in description of variables. It further involves gathering data to describe events by answering the 'who, what and how' questions. Descriptive survey is more reliable for a large population with diverse characteristics. This design was used to ensure accuracy of the study results considering the large population of secondary school students. The design allowed more accuracy to gather data and to draw conclusions that will make informed choices. The respondents were secondary school students who were sampled through simple random sampling which is a probability method which ensures that subjects from a population have an equal chance of selection (Mugenda, 2009). A sample of 385 students was used in line with the minimum sample for large populations. Students were sampled from a list of population of 126 National Schools in Kenya. A questionnaire was used to collect data from a minimum of two respondents who were selected using simple random sampling from every school. Schools that had a high number of students were represented by more than three students. Data was coded, analyzed and presented through descriptive statistics and inferential statistics such as chi-square, correlation and multiple regression analysis using SPSS.

## 4. Reliability and Validity Results of the Instrument

Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2010) supported the importance of reliability test to gauge if study results would give consistent results if the same study was conducted by another researcher or if it was repeated at a future date. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test reliability as shown in Table 1. From the results above, the Cronbach's Alpha for information sources, decision makers and university choice constructs were more than 0.5 which was an indicator of a good and acceptable reliability. All the factors were found to be internally consisted and well-defined by the variables of measurement.

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
Information Sources	0.816	10
Decision Makers	0.789	10
University Choice	0.762	9

Table 1: Reliability Results

The questionnaire was subjected to content validity by giving it to experts for critique and comments on its structure and suitability which helped in making improvements before the pilot to ensure content validity. Westhuizen (2014) supported the use of Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to test for construct validity; therefore, for this study Factor analysis was done to determine the factor loadings for each construct (Table 2). The results showed that eight (8) factor loadings for the constructs of information sources had met the basic threshold of a value of 0.5 which was evidence of construct validity. The two constructs that did not meet the threshold were expunged from the questionnaire. The constructs of decision makers and as well as the constructs of university choice were above the recommended threshold value of 0.5 which was an indicator of construct validity.

		Component	
		1	2
IS1	Television Adverts influenced my choice	.705	
IS2	Newspapers influenced my choice	.776	
IS3	Open days influenced my Choice	.661	
IS4	The University outreach programmes influenced my choice	.668	
IS5	The University Literature e.g., flyers, brochures influenced my choice	.704	
IS6	University Website Influenced my choice	.591	
IS7	School visits by university influenced my choice	.710	
IS8	Higher Education Exhibitions influenced my choice	.456	
IS9	Social Media influenced my choice e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp		.724
IS10	The University reputable Brand influenced my choice		.487
DM1	My father influenced my university choice	.681	
DM2	My mother influenced my university choice	.738	
DM3	Relatives influenced my university choice	.530	
DM4	Peers influenced my university choice		.600
DM5	Religious advisors influenced my university choice	.526	
DM6	Former Students recommendations influenced my university choice		.746
DM7	University representatives influenced my university choice	.623	
DM8	School counsellors influenced my university choice	.775	
DM9	Mentors influenced my university choice e.g., political leaders, administrative leaders, local leaders	.708	
DM10	Alumni influenced my university choice	.633	
UC1	High international ranking	.673	
UC2	Attracts high number of students and staff	.520	
UC3	Good brand name		.740
UC4	Attraction of funding	.542	
UC5	High quality research		.590
UC6	Good reputation	.639	
UC7	Excellent facilities	.761	
UC8	Good networks	.753	
UC9	High quality alumni	.653	

Table 2: Component Matrix

#### 4.1. Findings and Discussions

##### 4.1.1. Correlation Results (Strategic Factors and University Choice)

Correlation was used to find out the bivariate correlation between the study variables using Pearson's correlation. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) established that person correlation analysis was useful in indicating the strength, direction and significance of relationship among variables and this was indicated in Table 3. The results revealed a strong positive significant relationship between information sources and university choice ( $r=0.604$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). The results further indicated a very strong significant relationship between decision makers and university choice ( $r=0.988$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). From the results the null hypothesis is rejected for the independent variables and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

		Information Sources	Decision Makers	University Choice
Information Sources	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	385		
Decision Makers	Pearson Correlation	.601**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	385	385	
University Choice	Pearson Correlation	.604**	.988**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	385	385	385

Table 3: Correlation Matrix of Strategic Factors and University Choice

\*\* Correlation Is Significant at the 0.01 Level (2-Tailed)

#### 4.1.2. Multiple Linear Regression Results

The study used multiple regression analysis to find out the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable and to help generate an equation which helps to statistically estimate the relationship using SPSS. The results in table 9 indicate that R is the correlation coefficient which explains the relationship between the dependent and independent variables and at a value of (0.988). The observation is that there exists a strong positive relationship between the dependent and the independent variable. The coefficient of determination  $R^2$  highlights the extent to which changes in the choice of universities can be explained by changes in the information sources and decision makers or the percentage of change of the dependent variable which is university choice that is explained by the two independent variables. The two independent variables in Table 4 explain 97.6% of the change in university choice as explained by  $R^2$ . This implies that 2.4% of university choice is influenced by other factors which have not been studied in this research and thus forming a future study area.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.988 <sup>a</sup>	.977	.976	.12661	1.956

Table 4: Coefficient of Determination

a. Dependent Variable: University Choice

b. Predictors: (Constant), Information Influencers, Decision Influencers

##### 4.1.2.1. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The overall model fit was tested using ANOVA (Table 5) and the results indicated that the model was acceptable and significant in predicting how information sources and decision makers influence the choice of universities. This is evidenced by the p-value test of 0.000 which is less than the critical value of 0.05. The fitness of the model implies that information sources and decision makers significantly influence the choice of universities. These results support studies done by researchers which found a statistically significant relationship between constructs of informational and decision-making factors on learners' choice of universities. Sukhawattanakum (2016) postulated that the students, before choosing universities, consult their parents who have a great influence on their choice. Sarkode, Asare and Asare (2020) established that parents' aspirations influence students' choice of a university.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	46.830	2	23.415	1460.734	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	1.106	383	.016		
	Total	47.936	385			

Table 5: ANOVA

a. Dependent Variable: University Choice

b. Predictors: (Constant), Information Influencer Decision Influencer

##### 4.1.2.2. Regression Coefficients

The general model of the regression equation was derived from Table 6 to predict university choice based on information sources influencers and decision makers influencers whereby,  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \epsilon$

The model equation for the study was as follows:

$$Y = 0.031 + 0.974DM + \epsilon \dots \dots \dots 1$$

The results indicate that when independent variables are constant at zero, university choice will increase at 0.031. One unit change in information sources will lead to 0.014 increase in university choice, while a one unit change in decision makers will lead to 0.974 increase in university choice. The results indicate that there is a positive significant relationship between decision makers and the choice of universities. The test of significance of each independent variable was tested at 5% level of significance, whereby information factors had 0.505 and decision makers had 0.00 concluding that decision makers factor was the most significant and information sources insignificant. The results indicate that a unit increase in information sources results to a positive 0.014 increase in university choice. Information Sources had insignificant effect on the choice of universities by secondary school students because the observed t value ( $p = .505$ ) is greater than the critical value ( $p = 0.05$ ) thereby accepting the null hypothesis and concluding that information sources have an insignificant effect on university choices. This is contrary with studies by Bowers and Pugh (2014) who established a positive relationship between information sources and choice of universities. Damla, Mustafa, Halil and Iman (2015) established that electronic and published sources were relied on by students to obtain information about the choice of universities. Decision makers had a highly significant effect on university choice as the observed t value ( $p = .000$ ) is less than the critical value ( $p = 0.05$ ) leading to the conclusion that most students were influenced by decision makers while making university choices. The results showed that a unit increase in decision factors would result to 0.974 increase in university choice.

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.031	.049		.640	.524
	Information Sources (IS)	.014	.021	.015	.670	.505
	Decision Makers (DM)	.974	.023	.979	42.775	.000

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

a. Dependent Variable: University Choice

#### 4.3. Discussions and Implications

The study found out that other factors also influenced university choice to a low extent and this is similar to other researches that established a few other determinants of university choice. Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton (2015) stated that the reputation of a university influenced its choice because students select universities based on the credibility of their brand. Mazzarol (2016) highlighted University Reputation and world ranking as the factors which make their graduates gain employment. Pimba (2017) established that parents influence the choice of universities and programs selected by their children especially because of the occupation of the parents as some tend to prefer their children studying a similar course to theirs. Kaneez and Medha (2018) found out that parents bare a positive and significant effect on the choice of programmes and universities for their children and recommended that universities should take advantage of this knowledge to influence more parents (Cabaniyas, 2021). Kiuru (2018) expounded on the importance of peer interaction which had a potentially strong impact on university choice. Okior and Otabong (2015) revealed that peer interactions influenced the choice of study programmes in a university. These results indicate the need for further studies to establish the other determinants of university choice.

#### 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the study was to identify the strategic factors which influence university choice by students in Kenya and the data analysis results revealed a range of information on decision factors which were predictors of university choice. The results further demonstrated that decision maker factors were the most important predictors of university choice although information sources also gave a positive and significant influence on university choice. The results provided evidence that information and decision maker factors are important determinants of university choice. The results highlighted the need for greater and transparent information and decision maker factors as important predictors of university choice. The findings of the study provide valuable insights for university management and policy makers in Kenya. The results call for the need for supporting students' choices. They also call for decision makers to fully play their role in preparation of students for university entrance. The study confirms that Decision makers perfectly influence university choices and recommended that decision makers should assume a key role in discussing matters to do with university choices with potential university students. The results of the study have added to the area of knowledge by proposing decision makers as strong influencers of the choice of universities. It is recommended that universities should engage decision makers as strategic partners in order to market themselves because decision makers have a great influence on their choice.

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