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## **Socio-Demographic Factors as a Predictor of the College-Choice Process in International Universities: Some data from the United Arab Emirates**

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# Socio-Demographic Factors as a Predictor of the College-Choice Process in International Universities: Some data from the United Arab Emirates

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## **Abstract**

This is an exploratory study that seeks to identify socio-demographic factors that influence students' choice of college and college majors. The study was based on a survey of freshman students in a premier University based in Dubai, UAE. An extensive review of literature on the college-choice process provided the conceptual framework for the study. The results indicate that family, peer group, the possibility of getting a good job and acquiring job skills are factors that influence the college choice process. The study is among the first of its kind in this region wherein the HE environment is becoming increasingly competitive, and therefore results from this study has practical implications for university and college decision making authorities on the marketing strategies they need to adopt for strategic advantage.

**Keywords:** *College Choice, College Majors, Parental Influence, Peers Groups, Profession, Job Opportunities.*

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# 1. Introduction

The educational clusters that have developed in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, with the setting up of Dubai Knowledge Village (DKV) which was launched in 2003, places the Middle East on the map as a destination for learning excellence. This thriving educational hub was founded as a part of the long term strategy to develop the regions talent pool and accelerate its move into knowledge based economy. DKV has more than 300 partners which include training centers, professional centers and HR companies. In 2006 Dubai launched the Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) which will help Dubai to become a new global academic destination. DIAC will provide the opportunity for more than 150,000 students to receive education in some of the best local regional and global institutions.

In its Strategic Plan for 2015 for Dubai, underscores the importance of education and educational institutions for the development of manpower to meet the future challenge.

The population of Dubai has grown by 292,000 in 2006 bringing the total population to 1.422 million residents. This translates to 24,333 new people coming to Dubai every month or 800 a day. Nearly 80% of the population is foreigners and foreigners account for 90% of the workforce in the private sector in the country. This rapid increase in population has necessitated a considerable increase in investment in education. Today Dubai offers comprehensive education to all students from kindergarten to university level. The educational system in the country is diverse. According to the Dubai Statistics Department, during the academic year 2006-07 Dubai had 220 primary and secondary schools, 88 which were government and 132 private schools. There is also a number of Universities in Dubai both private and public that provide education up to Ph.D. level.

Key initiatives like setting up DKV and DIAC to bridge the talent gap in the region, coupled with Dubai's extensive economic growth and the effort made by the government to link and develop the skills and know-how required by industry has attracted large sums in domestic and foreign investment resulting in a recent boom in the educational sector which has witnessed a large influx of educational institutions during the last few years. Higher educational providers that have come to Dubai recently include world class universities from, Australia, India, Pakistan, UK and USA. According to DIAC estimates, the student population has grown from 1950 in 2003 to 9,480 in 2008 and is estimated to grow to 38,410 by 2015. The total number of universities in Dubai has grown from 4 in 2003 to 18 in 2008 and is estimated to grow to 37 by 2015.

Whereas on one hand, the educational infrastructure is in place and the focus is on ensuring that youth of the country are ready to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, on the other hand there are a large number of world class universities competing with each other for students. In order to develop a competitive edge in this scenario it is appropriate for universities to identify the factors that determine the choice of college.

## 2. Research Questions

Some of the research questions that guided this study are as follows:

- What is the percentage of variance contributed by student characteristics (high-school performance, student motivations and expectations), Family characteristics and Peer group to the college –choice process?

- What is the relative impact of family in comparison with peer group in shaping the expectations and motivations of students?
- Are there any differences between the various nationalities/cultures and subcultures with respect to student expectations and motivations?
- Does parental education and career profile have an impact on the student expectations, motivation, scholastic competence and choice of college /college major?

### **3.Review of Literature**

Research into the college –choice process has identified a host of dimensions that significantly impact the manner in which students opt for higher education. One of the earliest models of students' college choice as proposed by Chapman (1981) provides a framework for continued research on college choice. Among the many factors identified by Chapman, the background and current characteristics of the students and student's family was suggested to play a major role in influencing students' choice of which college to attend. Later research by Litten (1982) and by Stage & Hossler (1988) revealed that parent's influence on student's aspirations were both complex and varied. Litten (1982) for example proposed some refinements in a Model of Student College Choice and suggested that parental education has stronger effects on the conduct of the college selection process than attributes such as race, or gender. Among various background characteristics studied by Stage & Hossler (1988), which includes but is not limited to family income and parent's education, the level of father's education was found to exert the strongest effects on students' postsecondary education plans. Lam (1982) found that socio-economic factors play dominant roles on the type of school activities students engaged in which in turn had an impact on their educational plans and aspirations. A study by Schmitt (1991) examined the early stages of the college choice process among high school students and concluded that although male students receive more parental support than female students, female students appeared to have stronger commitments towards their after-school plans. In a similar vein Hearn (1987) reported that academic performance and parental supportiveness play a more significant role than freshman-year background characteristics on outcomes. More recently, Leppel (2001) has reiterated the significance of the impact of parental occupation and socio-economic status on choice of college majors.

Although several models and frameworks have highlighted the role-played by various factors in the college choice process, data across cultures, racial and ethnic populations have been rare with data coming predominantly from the West.

More recently however there have been some positive attempts to understand the impact of class and ethnicity on the college decision-making process and destinations for various subpopulations among Asian Pacific Americans (Ternishi et.al (2004). This study revealed that parental income played a different role among different ethnic groups in terms of the types of colleges that students attended. Pimpa (2003) revealed that of all the familial influencing factors, financial support from the family had the maximum impact on not only the choice of University, but also the choice of academic course and the decision to study abroad. Data from Thailand, Turkey, Indonesia and Taiwan have reported that the decisions regarding University selection and enrollment and to study abroad is often a family decision involving several decision-makers (Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Pimpa, (2003), Yamamoto (2008),). Word-of-mouth referral as provided by parents and relatives who have graduated from a particular institution and enjoyed the experience carried a higher weighting as compared to other information in international

student's decision to study overseas ( Mazzarol & Soutar ( 2002 ) ). The impact of parents as information sources however seems to decrease when their own understanding of the college application process is limited because of having limited education or career opportunities , with siblings replacing parents as information sources in such cases ( Ceja (2006) ). Dhesi (2008) studied the formation of expectations and their relationship to post-school choice in India, and found that the higher achievers belonging to families with relatively higher levels of income are motivated to join college and have expectations of better career possibilities and comparatively higher income gains after graduation. The results also revealed that students having mothers with lower levels of education and from families with lower S.E.S expect greater improvement in social prestige than others. This finding is similar to Schmit (1991) wherein he found that fathers with lower level of education provide more encouragement for their child's educational plans. One possible explanation according to Dhesi (2008) is that such families being conscious of their low positions in society are particularly concerned with improvement in social status and consider education as a viable route to achieve social mobility.

Empirical studies to identify relative influences of family and peer group on adolescent aspirations and achievement offer another perspective to the college choice process. Classic studies by Haller (1968), Kandel and Lesser (1969) and Alexander & Campbell (1964) highlighted the significance of the influence the peer group had on each other in not only forming their occupational and educational aspirations but also educational attainments such as choice of college. Felsman and Blustein ( 1999) reported that as compared to parental attachment, the role played by 'peer relatedness variables' such as attachment to peers, intimacy and mutuality, was more with respect to environmental exploration and progress in committing to career choices . More recently a study by Fass & Tubman (2002) studied the influence of parental and peer attachment on academic achievement in a multiethnic sample of college students. Findings revealed that perceived attachments to both parents and peers were positively correlated with psychosocial competences in early adulthood which in turn were significant predictors of scholastic competence in college. Once again although research from the west, notably the United States has found that peers and parents play an important role in shaping the aspirations of students, data revealing differences in these dimensions across cultures, have been few. Buchmann and Dalton (2002) examined the effects of peers' and parents' attitudes regarding academic performance on students' educational aspirations in twelve countries and results revealed that more than interpersonal effects, student aspirations are largely determined by the type of school the students attends.

Clearly the research literature demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between the various socio-demographic factors and the college –choice process. While the family and peer group plays a significant role, the impact is not simple and direct and requires further research to be of assistance for Universities to strategically position themselves in the market. This is especially significant in the context of emerging educational hubs such as the U.A.E wherein the nature of the student demographics is unique and distinct. This research aims to fill this gap in understanding about the various psychosocial factors that play a significant role in the students' college-choice process in this region.

#### **4. Data and Methodology**

The population of the study consisted of undergraduate students from one of the oldest foreign universities in Dubai. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed among the

freshman students. The number of responses received was 200, a 92 per cent response rate, out of which 164 were used and the remaining excluded for missing data (or other mistakes), resulting in a 64.5 per cent response rate. 43.6 percent of the respondents were males, 61 percent of the sample belonged to the age group 19 to 25, only 6.1 percent of the respondents were UAE nationals, the rest of the respondents were from other countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, Asia and a number of western countries. Practically 77.4 percent of the respondents reside with their parents in Dubai.

The aim of the study was to explore the factors that determine the choice of a college. Accordingly the questionnaire was designed to examine the factors that had an impact on the choice of college. The first part of the questionnaire included a number of socio-demographic and socio-economic variables such as gender, family income, educational qualification of parents and parent's profession. The second part included questions on the sources of information, reasons for choosing the institution, preference for work after graduation, family influence and student's expectations. Besides this, important monetary and non-monetary benefits from education were classified into four categories, investment motive, academic credibility, employment motive and family motives. These variables were measured on a four point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

The dependent variable, 'college majors' included eight categories, BBA, B.Com (Finance), B.Com (Accounting), B.Com (Management), B.Com (Marketing), B.Com (HRM), Bachelor of Computer Science and Bachelor of Internet Science and Technology. Consistent with the theoretical framework the study assumes that enrollment in the courses is influenced by family socioeconomic status, professional and educational level of parents, familial expectations and achievements and peer group influence.

## **5. Data Analysis**

The frequency distribution showed that 36 percent of the respondents preferred to undertake courses in business administration and 24.4 percent showed their preferences for specialisation in finance, this was followed by specialisation in marketing (14%) and accountancy (9.1%). These responses are in synchrony with the trends in development in the region.

The Ethnicity of students in the region is unique, in that institutions have students from a number of nationalities and ethnic groups. This is seen clearly in our analysis which showed that merely 6.1 percent of the respondents were UAE nationals. The majority, practically 40 percent were Asian followed by 35 percent from other MENA countries, these factors contribute to the strong multicultural environment in the region. All the students speak English and a majority speaks more than two languages.

The socio-economic status of the respondents showed that a majority 50.3 percent belongs to the upper middle class and 47.7 percent of the respondents belonged to families that were from financially well-to-do families. The educational background of the parents of the respondents showed that 22.2 percent of the mothers and 32.5 percent of the fathers had master's degrees and that 60.4 percent of the fathers were businessmen compared to 25.4 percent who were technicians, engineers or lawyers. Familial income, education as well as profession were found to have important implications for choice of

college as well as college majors as also reported earlier by Pimpa, 2003. Consistent with earlier research by Fass & Tubmann (2002) and Dhesi, (2008), cross tabulation of the family income with the scholastic ability of students (Appendix 2) showed that students from families that have a higher family income also had a higher scholastic ability.

The data analysis showed that expectations from family have a stronger impact on choice of academic course when the students are financially dependent on their parents. Expectations from the family have a stronger impact on the choice of academic course when the foreign degrees are perceived by the community as more valuable. According to Dhesi (2008) a possible explanation is that it enhances the social standing of the family within the community. The correlations were found to be statistically significant in both cases as seen in Appendix 1. This correlation holds true when the students are financially dependent on the parents.

The data analysis also indicates that the information collected by the family about university education was valued more when the students wanted to come up to the expectations of the family and also when they were financially dependent on the family; hence the family approval was necessary for their choice of college. Persuasion from family members was an important factor in choice of college especially in cases where a foreign academic qualification was perceived by the family to carry weight with respect to getting better job opportunities in the United Arab Emirates.

There was a significantly high correlation between information collected by the family and the choice of country and college (Appendix 1). The significance of parents as information sources has been reported earlier by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) and Ceja (2006).

Analysis of the reasons for joining a particular college showed that 34.8 percent of the respondents found that the recommendation of their peer group was very important in their decision to join a particular college or major and 45.7 percent of them said it was an important factor in their decision to choose a college or major. Similarly, 49.4 percent of the respondents said that the most influential source of information was the information given to them by their friends.

A cross tabulation of scholastic ability of the respondents with the sources of information shows that the peer group influence is high for students in general, this is a reflection of the earlier studies by Felsman and Blustein (1999) that concluded that when students move from secondary level to tertiary level peer pressure assumes importance in the process of choosing a college.

Respondents placed heavy emphasis on the opportunity of acquiring skills. Irrespective of the income group to which a respondent belonged, there was an emphasis on acquisition of skill when deciding on a college or a major.

Approximately, 32.2 percent of the respondents belonging to the middle income group said that they had taken up higher education only because of the employment opportunities that it gives them after they completed their education. Comparatively 43.2 percent of the respondents belonging to the upper socio-economic status were motivated to choose a college and major because it enhanced their employment opportunities.

Another important influence on the choice of the college and major was the possibility of doing well professionally in the future. A large majority took up education as an investment. This was particularly true of students who belonged to the higher middle and the rich income groups. These results are consistent with earlier research by Dhesi (2008) which has highlighted the impact played by family in the formation of student expectations of better career possibilities and comparatively higher income gains following a college education.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion this research clearly illustrates the significance played by family background characteristics in the college choice process across gender and nationalities. Direct and indirect involvement of parents and peers in the processes of higher education, and student expectations of better career opportunities has important implications for strategically positioning the University in-order to gain an advantage in the extremely competitive higher education in this new global academic destination.

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### Appendix 1: Correlation of Parental Influence on College Choice

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I believe that expectation from my family has a strong impact on my choice of academic course	1	.325(**)	.416(**)	.342(**)	.031	-.130(*)	.220(**)	.327(**)
I am financially dependent on my parent. Hence their approval was important for my choice of University	.325(**)	1	.445(**)	.152(*)	-.068	-.026	.131(*)	.253(**)
A degree from a foreign university is perceived to be more valuable in my community thereby enhancing my social standing	.416(**)	.445(**)	1	.320(**)	-.072	-.041	.181(*)	.262(**)
A foreign academic qualification is perceived by my family to carry a higher weightage with respect to getting better options in the job market in UAE	.342(**)	.152(*)	.320(**)	1	.081	-.111	.315(**)	.237(**)
Getting a foreign degree enables me to be at par with my cousins and siblings in terms of academic achievements	.031	-.068	-.072	.081	1	-.100	.038	.039
Getting a foreign degree enables me to be in competitive situation vis a vis my cousins and siblings when applying for a job	-.130(*)	-.026	-.041	-.111	-.100	1	-.104	.027
Persuasion from my family members was an important factor in choice of country/university	.220(**)	.131(*)	.181(*)	.315(**)	.038	-.104	1	.446(**)
The information collected by my family about university education proved very helpful in my choice of university	.327(**)	.253(**)	.262(**)	.237(**)	.039	.027	.446(**)	1



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