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# Student Choice Criteria for Selecting an Indonesian Public University: A Preliminary Finding

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**Description**

This research aims to explore the factors that influence student choice in the selection of an Indonesian Public University. The research design is conducted by mixed-method approach. For the first phase, semi-structured and focus-groups interviews were carried out with the same cohort of 48 first-year undergraduate students in five Indonesian public universities. Preliminary results revealed 25 choice criteria for selecting a university considered by Indonesian students. Finally, implications and recommendations are presented.

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# **Student Choice Criteria for Selecting an Indonesian Public University: A Preliminary Finding**

**Andriani Kusumawati**

## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the factors that influence student choice in the selection of an Indonesian Public University. The research design is conducted by mixed-method approach. For the first phase, semi-structured and focus-groups interviews were carried out with the same cohort of 48 first-year undergraduate students in five Indonesian public universities. Preliminary results revealed 25 choice criteria for selecting a university considered by Indonesian students. Finally, implications and recommendations are presented.

## **Introduction**

In the past decade, the governance of the Indonesian higher education system has changed considerably. The main driver of this change is the decreased role by government. Higher education has been transformed from the dependency of funding by government to the competitive markets (Maringe 2006). The transformation in higher education has also been influenced by intensifying global competition, declining funding and changing demand patterns (Kallio 1995; Jarvis 2000; Gibbs 2001; Veloutsou et al. 2004). As competition increases in the higher education institution sectors, public and private universities increasingly view students as consumers and try to market their institution intensively. As a result, the motivating factors for students in choosing a university have undergone change also.

Numerous pressures and changes in the higher education environment including increased competition, a decrease in government funding, as well as a restricted financial environment all impact on a university's endeavours to attract quality students (Mouwen 2000; Espinoza et al. 2002; Haigh 2002; Moller 2006). Universities as service providers require restructuring themselves in order to survive. Consequently, there have been calls to respond to such challenges by understanding and influencing the HEI choice process among prospective students (Maringe 2006; Briggs & Wilson 2007) and to develop a new marketing approaches (Simões & Soares 2010).

This research is one of the first consumer studies undertaken in the context of student choice criteria for selecting an Indonesian public university, therefore, it makes a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in this important area of research.

## **Research Gaps**

Previous studies have identified many factors contributing to a student's decision to study at tertiary level. However, the extant literature does not focus on student perceptions of choice criteria in the selection of an Indonesian public university, after the deregulation of Higher Education system in Indonesia in 1999. Much of the previous research in an Indonesian context (Kemp et al. 1998; Joseph & Joseph 2000) focused on student choice for studying overseas.

Studies on student choice criteria have been carried out, but none have addressed these in Indonesia, as these criteria may be unique to Indonesia. Therefore, this research will explore the most relevant factors that emerge in Indonesian higher education institutions context.

### **Research Question**

The research addresses three key questions:

1. What are the factors that influence Indonesian students' choices in the selection of an Indonesian Public University?
2. Which factors have the greatest influence on Indonesian students' choice in the selection of an Indonesian Public University?
3. Is there a difference in the student choice criteria of selecting an Indonesian Public University between an autonomous and non-autonomous university?

### **Literature Review**

Marketing in the higher education sector is not new. Marketing in higher education is needed to mitigate the effects of decreasing government funding and increases in competition (DesJardins et al. 2006). In order to survive and to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, higher education institutions should use a marketing framework (Hoyt & Brown 2003) and should satisfy the need of their customers by adding value (Kotler & Fox 1995). This can be achieved by applying effective marketing mix tools to influence the demand for the services that the university offers (Ivy 2008).

Higher education possesses all the characteristics of a service industry, for example that education is "people based", and emphasises the importance of relationships with customers (Mazzarol 1998). Shank, Walker and Hayes (1995, p. 74) also underlined that educational services are intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable from the person delivering it, perishable and the customer (student) participates in the process. As a service, higher education marketing is sufficiently different from the marketing of products (Nicholls et al. 1995). University management need to market their institution and establish a unique difference which highlights their strength and gives the students a reason to choose that university.

Models of student enrolment behaviour theory started to emerge in the early 1980s. These models are related to the various general consumer behaviour and decision making models as summarized on Table 1.

Several choice criteria for selecting a university occur from this current review. A range of research strongly discusses the dramatic effect parents have on a student's choice of college (Moogan & Baron 2003; Domino et al. 2006; Yamamoto 2006; Raposo & Alves 2007; Al-Yousef 2009). Studies in Asian countries predominantly found that reference groups such as siblings, friends, peers, relatives, teachers and other influential people influence a student's choice of a university (Ceja 2004, 2006; Yamamoto 2006; Pimpa & Suwannapirom 2008; Wagner & Fard 2009). Other research (Dawes & Brown 2002; Kim 2004; Nora 2004; Yamamoto 2006; Raposo & Alves 2007) claimed that personal factors show the greatest positive influences on student choice of a university.

Table 1. Models of the Stages in Consumer Decision Making and Student Choice

Authors	Consumer Decision Making and Student Choice Model				
Engle, Blackwell and Miniard (1995; 2001)	Need Recognition	Information Search	Evaluation Process	Outlet selection and purchase	Post purchase process
Schiffman and Kanuk (2007)	Need Recognition	Prepurchase Search	Evaluation of Alternatives	Purchase	Post purchase evaluation
Kotler and Keller (2009)	Problem recognition	Information Search	Evaluation Alternatives	Purchase Decision	Post purchase behaviour
Perreault and McCarthy (2005)	Need-want awareness	Search for information	Set Criteria and evaluate alternative solutions	Decide on solution	Purchase product Post purchase evaluation
Chapman (1981)	Pre-search	Search	Application	Choice	Enrolment
Hanson and Litten (1982)	Deciding to go to College	Investigating Colleges	Application, Admission and Enrolment		
Jackson (1982)	Preference		Exclusion	Evaluation	
Hossler and Gallagher (1987)	Predisposition		Search	Choice	
Kotler and Fox (1985)	Initial decision to investigate college	Information gathering	Evaluation and elimination of choices to generate set of options	Choice	

Source: Kusumawati (2010)

Previous research also considered geographic location as important factor (Veloutsou et al. 2004; Wagner & Fard 2009; Beneke & Human 2010) as well as institutional characteristics include teaching quality, prestige, infrastructure, library, computer facilities, location, quality of the curricula, scientific research quality, administrative support, extra-curricular factors (sports, leisure, canteens, etc.) and the availability of exchange programmes with foreign universities (Tavares et al. 2008). Price *et al.* (2003) noted that for many institutions, facilities, where provided to a high standard, were perceived as having an important influence on students' choice of institutions. In terms of closeness, Paulsen (1990), Raposo and Alves (2007), and Dawes and Brown (2005) pointed out that proximity to home is one of the strong influences in the choice process of selecting a university.

Academic reputation is one of the college choice factors that determines the success of university marketing strategies (Hoyt & Brown 2003; Ho & Hung 2008). Indeed, the reputation of the institution was found to be the most important factor in a student's decision of a place of further study (Moogan & Baron 2003; Briggs 2006; Ancheh et al. 2007; Wiese et al. 2009; Afful-Broni & Noi-Okwei 2010; Beneke & Human 2010) in addition to the variable of courses and campus (Veloutsou et al. 2004). Pupils also considered job prospects when selecting their faculty (Băcilă et al. 2006; Băcilă 2008; Wiese et al. 2009) along with the enjoyment of the subject, need for a degree for a career, better job, new subject areas and the enjoyment of student life (Soutar & Turner 2002; Tatar & Oktay 2006; Whitehead et al. 2006). However, based on Tavares, Tavares, Justino *et al.* (2008), 'vocation' or specialization was a stronger reason for programme choice than employment prospects.

Many scholars have investigated the influence of price in the choice of a university (Domino et al. 2006; Wagner & Fard 2009; Beneke & Human 2010), in which high discounts were viewed more favourably than low discounts (Quigley et al. 2000). However, Domino, Libraire, Lutwiller's *et al.*(2006) found that price is the most important factor from parents' point of view rather than a student's perception. The impact of financial aid or packages that include scholarships and grants was examined thoroughly by Kim (2004), Govan *et al.* (2006) and Hoyt and Brown (2003), while Beneke and Human (2010) found that financial aid offered is only listed as the fifth important factor to study at university in South Africa. Although it was found that there are numerous important factors considered by students when selecting a university, these factors have different level of importance for each country and each student.

## **Research Methodology**

Given the nature of research questions, the research design is conducted by mixed-method approach in a sequential process and adapted from Creswell and Clark (2007).

### *Phase 1. Exploratory Research Methods*

As this research has not been studied in the Indonesian context, an exploratory approach to the research seems logical and justifiable (Aaker et al. 2007), as there was a need to collect preliminary information, validate the themes found and the theoretical constructs that will help identify problems and suggest hypotheses (Kotler et al. 2006). This initial phase involves a detailed review of literature and followed by semi structured and focus group interviews to refine and validate these themes and the theoretical constructs before the research hypotheses are formulated.

In order to assure evaluating the most current set of criteria used for selecting a public university, first-year undergraduate students in both autonomous and non-autonomous universities in five Indonesian Public Universities in Java and Sumatera were chosen as potential participants. As the study requires to understand the criteria the students considered in the selection of a public university before the process they were involved in, the administration of individual questionnaires before the commencement of focus-group discussions were conducted with the same cohort of 48 first-year students with seven up to fifteen students for each focus group.

Content validity (face validity) was decided upon as the most appropriate method for pre-testing of both the qualitative instruments of this study by discussing and gaining approval from experts in the area of research as pointed out by Zikmund (2003). Reliability were checked during or after the first interview by modifying current questions and/or to generate new questions (Silverman 2005). The focus group discussions were recorded using audiotape, with permission from the participants to ensure the accuracy of the information provided by the participants. All the results were transcribed verbatim by researcher and initially recorded as specific themes and indicators that are related. Data analysis used thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Silverman 2005) and followed the guide provided by Creswell (2007). Thematic categories were used to construct the survey for phase two of the research.

### *Phase 2. Explanatory Research Method*

Explanatory research will then be used for discovering and measuring the association and relationships of the marketing variables to provide a plausible explanation for observations (Hussey & Hussey 1997; Kinnear & Taylor 2006). It will be conducted by developing a structured survey questionnaire to gather quantitative data from respondents. This phase will be followed by a factor analysis to discover which factors are involved when student choose a particular university.

The study will use a stratified random sampling of first year undergraduate students enrolled in eleven autonomous university and non-autonomous university in Indonesia. The sample size is calculated using Taro Yamane's formula (Yamane 1967). As the number of students in Indonesian public universities is more than 100,000, the sample size should be around 400 to obtain reliable data (at 95% confidence level and a 5% error level) (Yamane 1967). Therefore, 400 responses are

sought to study the factors influencing choice criteria of a university. Proportional allocation will then be used to allocate the total sample size among the strata in proportion to the strata sizes. Analysis data will use multiple regressions analysis to answer the second research question and independent samples t-test to answer the third research question.

### **Preliminary Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the preliminary results of the semi-structured interviews conducted on first-year undergraduate students in the five public universities in Java and Sumatera, Indonesia. The exploratory study consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with first-year undergraduate students. This paper reports only the responses from semi-structured interviews. This study involved 48 participants from Economics and Business study program. Of 48 participants, 37 were female and the remaining were male students. Of the total participants, half represented Sumatera region and the other half represented Java region. Among the total participants, 22 students represented two autonomous universities, one each from Java and Sumatera, and the remaining 26 students represented two non-autonomous universities in Java and one non-autonomous university in Sumatera. Overall, participants age were 18 years and over.

Indonesian students revealed that they made decisions based on a combination of several factors. Each participant mentioned at least three factors that affected their decision to choose a university. The study initially resulted 37 factors. Similar factors were placed under one category, which ultimately resulted 25 factors. The result indicates that total expenses (cost) (40), reputation (36), proximity (33), job prospect (20), parents (18) are five most importance choice criteria for Indonesian students. The next five factors that respondents mentioned most frequently to be, in order of decreasing frequency are academic quality (17), friends (15), psychological (pre-selected motive) (13), facilities (11) and campus environment (11). Each of the top five factors is presented in the following part of this paper.

One of the important factors that influenced Indonesian students' perceptions of their university choice process was total expenses (cost). Students took into consideration cost and affordability. Students made a rational decision by considering their social economic factor before making a choice. The cost included tuition fees and other expenses incurred while studying at the university. The result supports earlier findings in most of developing countries such as in Thailand (Pimpa & Suwannapirom 2008), in Malaysia (Wagner & Fard 2009), in South Africa (Beneke & Human 2010), and in Turkey (Tatar & Oktay 2006).

Indonesian students were also influenced by the academic reputation of the university. The need to study at the prestigious university is related with interest in studying at the public university rather than to the private ones. This finding is consistent with expectations in that if one's desire is to study at a reputable university, there is an opportunity to find a job easily after graduated or a guarantees for the students obtain a well-paid job in their area of study after graduation. This remains true as indicate by earlier studies (Conard & Conard 2000, 2001; Nguyen & LeBlanc 2001; Coetzee & Liebenberg 2004; Standifird 2005; Braddock II & Hua 2006; Bowman & Bastedo 2009; Brewer & Zhao 2010).

The location of the campus was significantly important for respondents. Not surprisingly, the factor was of highest importance to those students who are first-

generation in their family or female students. They may prefer the emotional security of remaining close to family and friends while participating in the university. Going to a nearby college also allows students to maintain more easily ties with family members, friends, and significant others, as supported by earlier studies (Pimpa 2003, 2004; 2005; Turley 2006, 2009).

Career preparation was also an important factor. Even though many students were still vague about their career or job plan after graduation and many appeared to be realistic about how “good” a job they might get in the short term, there was an overwhelming view that higher education was a necessary vehicle to a better paid and more secure job was through obtaining more qualifications. This result confirms findings in several studies (Soutar & Turner 2002; Hoyt & Brown 2003; O'Brien et al. 2007).

As would be expected the influence of parents was an important factor for undergraduate students in deciding a university. Interestingly, most of respondents mentioning parental influence claimed both their father and mother were equally influential in the family, in terms of the decisions to study at a university. This result is consistent with the findings from Ceja (2001; 2006) who revealed that that parents were key in encouraging their children to pursue higher education.

When respondents were asked on their perceptions of influential people in the decision to select a university, they mentioned six types of influential people with seven different roles. The six types of influential people that respondents mentioned are parents and family (47), friends (including peers, boyfriend and community) (35), teacher (26), promotion (4) and others (including senior in high school, current students at the university and alumni) (3). The roles that those influential people played are funding, motivator (encourager), advisor, role model, decision maker, siblings/friends studying in the same university, friends. Students believed that parents' major roles related to the source of funding, besides encouragement in their choice of a university. The cost of undertaking study at a university is an important issue for undergraduate students. This is consistent with prior remark that for undergraduate study the burden of fees and living expenses falls on the parents. This findings also inline with previous research (Hossler et al. 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa 2000; Kim & Schneider 2005) that parental encouragement as the strongest factor predicting students' planning for university. Further, participants mentioned that even though the decision was influenced by others, the final decision to select a university was decided by their own decision.

Prior research shows that three variables are consistently rated as important to prospective students (Moogan et al. 1999; 2001; Price et al. 2003; Veloutsou et al. 2004; Domino et al. 2006; 2007). These are course, location and reputation. While these factor are considered by students of Indonesian Public Universities in this current research, they cited other factors to be critical. These are cost, reputation and proximity. The course suitability in this research only placed in position 12 out of the 25 factors that influence the decision to choose a university. This result is contrast with earlier findings by Price et al. (2003), Maringe (2006) and Whitehead et al. (2006) who revealed that the course is often cited as the most important reason for choosing a university.

Several factors that influenced students' choice of university with different level of priority have been found from previous studies. For example, Briggs (2006) identified academic reputation, distance from home, location, own perception, graduate



employment, social life nearby, entry requirements, teaching reputation, quality of faculty, information supplied by university, and research reputation as the top ten of the most crucial factors. Pimpa and Suwannapirom (2008) found the five key influencing factors were personal attitude, curriculum, potential employment, attractiveness of campus, and tuition fees. Raposo and Alves (2007) found that proximity to home, cost, parents and school teacher's recommendation are the four most essential factors. Yamamoto (2006) found that personal preference, parents, university entrance exam scores, university ranking, advisors, and friends as the six most influential factors. Veloutsou et al. (2004) found university reputation, course and campus as the three most critical factors. Soutar and Turner (2002) found that course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects and teaching quality as the four most important factors. Even though some of those above findings matched attributes found in the current research, respondents in this current research mentioned an extra factor that influenced them to choose a university. This extra factor is that by studying in the public universities it would make easier to students to do postgraduate in overseas.

Findings of this research signify that expectations held by undergraduate students that choice criteria are influential in the choice stage of selecting an institute of higher education. According to the result, present and future students expect good quality products and have specific views on what characteristics are important to them. Relevant literature supports these findings.

### **Implication of the Findings**

These results suggest that the antecedents to studying at a public university for potential undergraduates are vary and complex. As expected from the literature review, the respondents in this study exhibited several similar responses for choosing a university as other countries, cost, reputation, and proximity were key drivers to consider selecting an institute of higher education. The other common antecedents are job prospect, parents and quality. The implication is that universities may addresses those important attributes more effectively so that can influence the choice process among potential students. The results, however, do not imply that all Indonesian university reveal the similar of their student choice criteria.

Although, this study has revealed several important factors considered by Indonesian students when selecting a university that both support and contradict previous research, these factors have different level of importance as these criteria may be unique to Indonesia. In addition to determining what is important to Indonesian students when they choose universities, it will help universities to promote their institutions and to have a greater knowledge about the underlying motivations of students for furthering study in higher education.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research has limitations that restrict the generalisation of its findings and open up directions for future research. Firstly, only public universities in two of the most populated regions in Indonesia were investigated. This means that the information gathered and the conclusions reached may require further testing in less populated regions. Secondly, the study only conducted at public universities and did not cover institutes and other higher education institutions because they are different type of higher education institution.

This study findings were exploratory in nature, therefore deeper analysis of qualitative interviews followed by quantitative study are planned in addition to addressing a number of related research questions such as to determine factors that have the greatest influence on Indonesian students' choice in the selection of an Indonesian Public University. It is also important to determine if there is a difference in the student choice criteria of selecting an Indonesian Public University between an autonomous and non-autonomous university. This attribute is specific to the both type of universities. Future research in this area is recommended to determine if there is a distinctive factor occur.

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