

Aligning Strategies of Institutes with Student Expectations: An Exploration of External Factors Shaping Students' Choice of Private Higher Education Institutes

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Abstract:

Student enrollment and retention are critical aspects of the economic sustainability of a private higher education institute (HEI). However, due to the growing number of private HEIs worldwide, huge competition has been created among these institutes. This has resulted in institutes investing heavily in ineffective strategies because they are implemented without fully understanding student expectations. Due to this, student dropouts can also be observed. Failure to meet enrollment targets and dropouts not only creates revenue loss but also negatively affects the reputation of the HEIs, impacting the viability of the institute. Therefore, much interest has been generated in identifying the factors that motivate students when choosing an HEI. This study's main aim is to conduct a review of the available literature and identify the external factors, namely HEI-related characteristics and the communication methods that influence students when choosing a private HEI that directly impact the institutes. The inclusion criteria for the chosen literature consisted of studies conducted on the motivational factors of undergraduates and high school students who were in the process of choosing an HEI. The literature reviewed shows that students are influenced by HEI-related characteristics such as the reputation of the HEI, course fees, facilities offered, employability of graduates, academic quality, and quality of faculty and by the information gathered through communication methods such as websites and social media advertisements. HEIs can consider these findings to develop policies, improve their facilities and activities, and formulate and implement marketing strategies through the communication channels identified in this study.

Keywords: Private Higher Education Institutes, Student Expectations, Students' Choice, University Strategies, Economic Sustainability of Higher Education Institutes

1. Introduction:

The emergence of knowledge economies in recent times has increased the demand for an educated and skilled workforce, resulting in an increased student enrolment in higher education globally. The number of student enrolments in higher education was 100 million in the year 2000, but it significantly increased to 250 million students by 2020 (Calderon, 2018). By 2040, this number is expected to increase to approximately 600 million at a growth rate of 4.2% per year (Dojchinovska, 2021). This increase in demand for higher education has led to an increase in the number of new higher education institutes (HEIs) being established, and many of these new HEIs are private and currently outnumber public HEIs worldwide (Buckner 2017). Furthermore, it is believed that approximately 56.7 million students or one-third of all the students worldwide are enrolled in private HEIs (Bothwell, 2018; Dojchinovska, 2021).

Student enrollment and retention play a crucial role in achieving a private HEI's short-term and long-term financial goals and, thereby, its economic sustainability. Although higher education is a highly lucrative and thriving sector, with the growing number of players in the market, strong competition has emerged among these private institutes to attract prospective students. To address this issue, the HEIs invest heavily in formulating and implementing elaborate and ambitious policies and strategies to attract potential students to join their institute. However, despite spending large sums of money on these activities, sometimes HEIs realize that these activities do not yield the expected returns in terms of the number of student enrollments as a result of factors such as failing to design strategies that address student expectations and not selecting the right methods to communicate with students. Furthermore, once enrolled, students sometimes find that the HEIs do not meet their expectations, resulting in dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from the institute. While a private HEI's revenue can be greatly affected if the enrollment targets are not

met, a high student dropout rate for an institute can also, on one hand, create a loss of revenue for the institute and, on the other hand, can negatively impact the reputation of the institute through dissatisfied students, leading to serious consequences on the long term viability of the institute. Hence, HEIs are currently expressing a renewed interest in identifying the factors that motivate students when choosing private HEIs in the hope of developing policies, expanding and improving their facilities and activities, formulating recruitment and promotional strategies that align with student expectations, implementing them through the communication methods the students use to obtain information and thereby mitigate these issues.

Many studies have been conducted globally in this regard, and studies show that students are mostly influenced by two factors, namely student-related internal characteristics and external factors (Chapman, 1981). The internal factors include such as the student's abilities, personal preferences and socioeconomic status of the student and external factors include HEI-related characteristics such as the institute's reputation, influential individuals in the environment such as the student's parents who can influence the decision of the students and the methods used by the institutes to communicate with the students such as newspaper advertisements placed by the institute (Chapman, 1981). These studies also indicate that students are usually influenced by a combination of several internal and external factors. Since the external factors are directly related to the HEIs and their activities, the main objective of this study is to review relevant literature to identify the external factors influencing students' choice of a private HEI and more specifically focus on identifying the HEI-related characteristics, and the methods used by the HEIs to communicate with the students that can have an impact on the students' decision-making process.

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the influential factors. Several reputed peer-reviewed journals and research databases were

searched to collect the articles using keywords such as “influential factors in student college choice”, “students’ private university choice” and “external factors influencing students’ private university choice”. Studies conducted on university undergraduates and high school students who were in the process of choosing an HEI for their higher education were considered as the inclusion criteria for choosing the literature and studies conducted on postgraduate students and international students were excluded. Next, the findings were synthesised, summarised and finally, the identified influential factors relating to the HEI-related characteristics and the communication methods presented.

2. Higher Education Institute- Related Characteristics Influencing Students:

Studies conducted in numerous private HEIs have identified that various HEI-related characteristics can have an impact on students when they select a private HEI and their decisions are influenced not by one factor, but a combination of many different factors.

2.1. Reputation of the Institute:

Many studies have extensively discussed the impact of reputation on the selection of a private HEI. These studies have shown that the reputation of an HEI plays a significant role in the selection process, with some studies stating that it is the most influential factor in the decision-making process, while others have considered it to have a moderate or high impact. For example, the studies conducted by Adila & José (2021), Agrey & Lampadan (2014), Awale (2021), Connie et al. (2018), Echchabi & Al-Hajri (2018), Gille et al. (2021), Hidayat et al. (2018), Islam and Shoron (2020), Le (2020), Lien et al. (2015), Manoku (2014), Nor (2018), Proboyo & Soedarsono (2015), Rudhumbu et al. (2017), Ryan et al. (2019), Sabir et al. (2018), Sedahmed & Noureldien (2019), Shah et al. (2013), and Somarathne (2020) have all revealed that the reputation of the institute has a significant impact on the students while studies such as those conducted by Lien et al. (2015), Nor (2018), and Sabir et al. (2013) have all highlighted that this is

the most influential factor for students during their selection process. On the other hand, studies conducted by Abeygunawardena (2018) and Adila & José (2021) have observed that the reputation of an institute has only a moderate impact on students but still indicates that it is one of the influential factors that students consider when they select a private HEI.

2.2. Economic Factors:

Studies have identified that students consider economic factors such as affordable course fees, financial aid such as scholarships and student loans offered by the HEIs and cost of living during their stay at the campus as decisive factors when they select a private HEI. When considering the course fees, it was observed that the studies reviewed had mixed results. Most of the studies indicated that affordable course fees were an influential factor, while a few studies stated that they did not have a significant impact on the students. For example, studies conducted by Adila & José (2021), Awale (2021), Connie et al. (2018), Dao & Thorpe (2015), Dhaliwal et al. (2019), Hidayat et al. (2018), Islam & Shoron (2020), Kusumawati et al. (2010), Manoku (2014), Nor (2018), Proboyo & Soedarsono (2015), Ruslan et al. (2014), Somarathne (2020), and Wulandari (2020) claim that students tend to select an institute that has affordable tuition fees while Abeygunawardena (2018) and Adila & José (2021) states that affordable course fees have only a moderate influence on the students. Contrary to the above, Mehboob et al. (2012) and Rudhumbu (2017) in their studies argue that course fees may be considered one of the least influencing factors for students when they select an institute.

In addition to affordable course fees, studies such as those of Dao & Thorpe (2014), Islam & Shoron (2020), and Mehboob et al. (2012) have also identified other economic factors such as financial aid in terms of scholarships and student loans as having an impact on the students when they chose a private HEI. Wulandari (2020), in his study, has highlighted that the availability of easy payment schemes to pay the course fee also has a significant

effect on the students during their selection process. However, Bajar & Gopun's (2021) study contradicts this view by stating that economic factors such as the availability of scholarships and discounts on course fees have a low impact on the students. However, this may be because this research was conducted with a sample of students coming from middle-income families. Moreover, Islam & Shoron (2020) in their research have also specifically noted that students tend to consider the cost of living during their study period at a chosen institute as significant when they select a private HEI.

2.3. Facilities Offered by the HEIs:

The studies reviewed revealed that facilities offered by the HEIs, such as modern lecture halls, laboratory and library facilities, extracurricular activities offered by the institute, such as sports and availability of various clubs and societies, convenient location of the HEI and hostel facilities, have an impact on the students when they select a private HEI. For example, when considering the infrastructure facilities, Abeygunawardena (2018) in his study has noted that these facilities have the highest impact on students when they choose a private HIE, while studies such as those by Adila & José (2021), Agrey & Lampadan (2014), Awale (2021), Bajar & Gopun (2021), Bezuidenhout et al. (2016), Connie et al. (2018), Dao & Thorpe (2015), Hidayat et al. (2018), İlgan et al. (2018), Manoku (2014), Mehboob et al. (2012), Nor (2018), Rudhumbu et al. (2017), Ryan et al. (2019), Sedahmed & Noureldien (2019), and Sidin et al. (2003) all state that such facilities have a high influence on the students while Adila & José (2021) and Meštrović et al. (2019) indicate that facilities such as lecture hall facilities have only a moderate effect on the students however, still indicating that infrastructure facilities should be improved and maintained by HEIs in order to attract and retain students. A few studies such as those by Agrey & Lampadan (2014), Kumar et al. (2021), Mehboob et al. (2012), and Somarathne (2020) have also identified hostel facilities as important. Agrey & Lampadan's (2014) study has

further noted that facilities such as bookshops in the vicinity of the HEI and guidance and counselling offices also influence students in their decision-making process.

Studies reviewed showed mixed results regarding location being an influential factor where some studies indicated that it is a decisive factor for students, while a few others suggested that HEIs being in convenient locations has very little impact on them. For example, studies conducted by Abeygunawardena (2018), Awale (2021), Bajar & Gopun (2021), Dhaliwal et al. (2019), Islam and Shoron (2020), Kaur (2018), Kumar et al. (2021), Kusumawati et al. (2010), Rudhumbu et al. (2017), Shah et al. (2013), Walsh and Cullinan (2017), and Wulandari (2020) have identified location with easy access to public transport and HEIs that are closer to the student's homes as an influential factor. Moreover, some studies such as Abeygunawardena (2018) and Bezuidenhout et al. (2016) have further explained that students are mainly attracted by HEIs located in a safe and friendly environment. However, while many studies supported the view that location is an influential factor, studies by Connie et al. (2018), Echchabi & Al-Hajri (2018), and Nor (2018) have contradicted this view by observing that location has very little influence on the selection process of students while Agrey & Lampadan (2014) and Kusumawati et al. (2010) in their study have noted that a safe environment is a weak decisive factor for students since students expect all HEIs to provide this as a basic requirement. Adom (2015), Agrey & Lampadan (2014), Connie et al. (2018), Kumar et al. (2021), and Sidin et al. (2003) have further noted in their study that numerous extracurricular activities offered by an HEI, such as sports, events and clubs of the HEI have a positive impact on the students during their selection process.

2.4. Programme-Related Factors:

The literature that was reviewed indicated that programme-related factors such as academic quality, reputation of the degrees offered, range of degrees offered by the HEIs, employability of the

graduates, reputation of the faculty and flexible entry requirements have a significant impact on the students when they choose an HEI to pursue their higher studies. For example, research conducted by Dhaliwal et al. (2019), Echchabi & Al-Hajri (2018), İlgan et al. (2018), Nor (2018), Ruslan et al (2014), Ryan et al (2019), Sedahmed and Noureldien (2019), and Wulandari (2020) have all shown that academic quality has a significant influence on the students when they choose an HEI. In line with academic quality, Bajar & Gopun (2021), Connie et al. (2021), Gille et al. (2021), Kusumawati et al. (2010), Lien et al. (2015), Rudhumbu (2017), Sabir et al. (2018), Somarathne (2020), and Walsh & Cullinan (2017) have noted that academic reputation also motivates students when they select an HEI. In addition to the aforementioned factors, research by Adila & José (2021), Bajar & Gopun (2021), Dao & Thorpe (2015), Islam & Shoron (2020), Mehboob et al. (2012), Rudhumbu et al.(2017), Sabir et al. (2018), and Sedahmed & Noureldien (2019) have shown that students are influenced by institutes that offer a range of degree programmes in different disciplines since then they have the opportunity to choose a degree programme based on their personal preferences, ability and future aspirations.

The faculty of an academic institute plays a pivotal role in attracting and retaining students, as it directly affects the academic quality of an HEI. Hence, the reputation of an institute’s faculty has been highlighted as an influential factor in the selection of an HEI in several studies such as those of Aydin & Bayir (2016), Bajar & Gopun (2021), Echchabi & Al-Hajri (2018), Manoku (2014), Nor (2018), Proboyo & Soedarsono (2015), Rudhumbu et al.(2017), Shah et al. (2013). and Wulandari (2020).

One of the most important aspects of an academic or professional programme is how closely it is aligned with industrial requirements. Hence, for example, several studies such as those by Agrey & Lampadan (2014), Aydin & Bayir (2016), Bezuidenhout et al. (2016), Connie et al. (2018), Dhaliwal et al. (2019), Kaur (2018), Kusumawati et al. (2010), Mehboob et al. (2012), Meštrović et al. (2019), Nor (2018), Rudhumbu et al. (2017),

Shah et al. (2013), Wulandari (2020), and Walsh and Cullinan (2017) have all stated that employability of graduates is an important aspect students consider and therefore, have a significant influence when they choose an HEI. Kumar et al. (2021) and Shah et al. (2013) have further explained that other than the employability of graduates in the industry, internship programmes offered by the HEIs to gain experience while studying also influence the decision-making process. Collaborating these findings, Proboyo & Soedarsono’s (2015) and Shah et al.’s (2013) studies also indicate that students are motivated to choose an HEI with a successful alumnus. In addition to the aforementioned factors, Agre & Lampadan (2014) in his research has noted that students are influenced by HEIs that have flexible entry criteria, such as the availability of credit transfers from one institute to another. However, this has been contradicted by Meštrović et al. (2019). Similarly, Shah et al. (2013) in his study has identified that students are motivated to select HEIs that have flexible multiple pathways to join their degree programmes for students with other qualifications, such as a diploma, while Aydin & Bayir (2016) in their study have noted that HEIs that have exchange programmes also influence students in their selection process. A list of the influential HEI-related characteristics identified in the review is presented in Table 1 as shown below.

Table 1: List of the Influential HEI-related Characteristics Identified in the Study

Influential HEI-related Characteristics
Reputation of the Institute
Affordable course fees
Scholarships and student loans
Cost of living
Modern lecture halls, laboratory and library facilities
Extracurricular activities
Convenient location
Academic quality
Reputation of the degrees offered
Range of degrees offered

3. Methods Used by the HEIs to Communicate with the Students:

Many studies have been conducted in the recent past to determine the communication methods that influence students when choosing an HEI. The studies reviewed show that HEIs use traditional offline communication methods such as newspapers, university brochures, open days, television, and radio and online methods such as websites, social media advertising and online videos to carry out their marketing campaigns to promote their institutes and the degrees they offer.

3.1. Online Methods of Communication:

The studies reviewed show that due to the widespread use of online communication, especially by students, HEIs have begun using their institutes' websites or other websites, such as government websites and social media platforms, considerably to carry out their marketing campaigns. When assessing the effectiveness of these communication methods, it can be observed that many of these studies indicate that the information gathered through these modes has a major impact on students when they choose a private HEI, while a few studies, however, indicate otherwise. For example, studies conducted by Adeyanju et al. (2020), Bajar & Gopun (2021), Chiparo (2021), de Jager & du Plooy (2010), Fernandez (2010), Kumar et al. (2021), Meštrović et al. (2019), and Songan et al. (2010) have all stated that the information gathered by students through websites and social media platforms has a high influence on the students while studies by Abeygunawardena (2018) and Manoka (2014) have noted that a moderate influence can be observed still suggesting that students find the information gathered through these modes of communication helpful in their decision-making. However, in contrast to these studies, research by Dao & Thorpe (2015), Echchabi & Al-Hajri (2018), Ko Ko (2019), and Yamamoto (2006) state that advertising through websites and social media has less impact on students. Dao & Thorpe (2015) in their study have further explained that this may be because students perceive the information they

gather through websites and social media as unreliable.

In addition to websites and social media platforms, a study by Manoka (2014) has identified the use of other modes of online communication such as online advertisements and online videos while Dao & Thorpe's (2015) study has mentioned the use of email communication by HEIs in their promotional activities. However, these studies indicate that the influence of these modes of communication is moderate to low.

3.2. Offline Methods of Communication:

Despite the popularity of online communication, research shows that HEIs still widely use traditional offline communication methods to conduct their marketing campaigns. However, it is important to note that when examining the effectiveness of these methods, in the studies reviewed, mixed opinions have been expressed with regard to their effectiveness. It is also observed that a wide array of methods has been identified among these studies, such as newspaper advertisement, television, radio advertisements, open days, campus visits, and university printed materials as been used by the HEIs for their promotional activities. When considering the printed media, for example, studies conducted by Somarathne (2020) and Yamamoto (2006) note that the information communicated through newspaper advertisements has a high impact on students, while studies conducted by Abeygunawardena (2018), Chiparo (2021), and Rayan et al. (2019) states that a moderate impact can be observed. However, contrary to this view, studies by Bajar & Gopun (2021), Dao & Thorpe (2015), de Jager & du Plooy (2010) and Songan et al. (2010) have all noted that the impact newspaper advertisements have on students is low. Studies have also found that HEIs use other printed materials such as university publications, brochures, magazines, recruitment handbooks and leaflets to communicate with students. However, again, contradicting views can be observed concerning their impact on the decision-making process. For example, studies conducted by

Somarathne (2020), Songan et al. (2010), Wulandari (2020), and Yamamoto (2006) state that such methods of communication have had a high impact on the students during the selection process, while Chiparo's (2021), Dao & Thorpe's (2015) studies indicate that these modes of communication have only a moderate effect. Furthermore, Chiparo (2021) explains in his study that printed materials are sometimes preferred because they provide detailed information about the HEIs and their programmes. They are also a more effective means of communication, particularly in rural areas of countries where digital media are limited or unavailable, making them a popular mode of communication among prospective students living in such areas. But Rayan et al. (2019), Sabir et al. (2018), and Manoka (2014), on the other hand, have expressed that printed materials such as promotional booklets, university brochures, leaflets, posters and billboards have very little impact on the students.

Studies have also found that HEIs use traditional electronic media such as television, radio, telephone calls, and short message services to communicate with prospective students, but contradicting views have been expressed with regard to the influence they have on students. As an example, while research by Islam and Shoron (2020) and Yamamoto (2006) state that the information gathered through television advertisements has a significant impact on the students, in contrast, studies by Bajar & Gopun (2021), Dao & Thorpe (2015) and de Jager & du Plooy (2010), and Songan et al. (2010) all state that both the television and radio advertisements and documentaries on HEIs broadcasted through these channels have a low impact on the students. In her study, Yamamoto (2006) further explains that even though television advertisements have a high impact, radio advertisements do not, since radio advertisements are not commonly used in Turkey where the research was conducted. Similarly, studies such as those by Chiparo (2021), Dao & Thorpe (2015), and Islam and Shoron (2020) have pointed out that some HEIs conduct their

marketing activities through telephone and short message services, and they have identified that the information obtained through these means to be helpful to the students in their selection process and the impact is moderate to high. Dao & Thorpe's (2015) study has further noted that in addition to these electronic means, information communicated with prospective students through direct mail has also been identified as helpful and having a moderate influence on the students. However, a study by Songan et al. (2010) has contradicted this view by stating that the influence of telephone messages is low among students.

Apart from printed materials and traditional electronic media, studies have further identified that other activities such as campus visits, open days, career fairs, school visits, and exhibitions are also carried out by HEIs to promote their institutes and the programmes they offer. Dao & Thorpe (2015), Islam & Shoron (2020), Ismail et al. (2007), Messah & Immaculate (2011), Rudhumbu et al. (2017), and Somarathne (2020) in their studies have identified campus visits, career fairs and open days attended by prospective students as helpful to students during their HEI selection. Dao & Thorpe's (2015) study has further explained that students found the information gathered through face-to-face recruitment sessions conducted by counsellors during these visits helpful. Furthermore, Ismail et al. (2007) and Wulandari (2020) have noted that the students found the information gathered through exhibitions useful for them. However, contradicting these views, Bajar & Gopun's (2021) and Songan et al.'s (2010) study stated that activities such as educational visits and events such as open days organized by HEIs have a low influence on the students. In addition to these promotional activities organized by the HEIs, studies such as those by Ismail et al. (2007), Messah & Immaculate (2011), and Rudhumbu et al. (2017) have stated that visits to schools by the institutes have helped them attract potential students.

In addition to these opinions expressed by the researchers, some researchers have generally

agreed that the overall impact of all marketing activities is moderate to low. For example, the study by Lien et al. (2015) has stated that the information disseminated through all communication methods such as mass media, alumni networks, and direct contacts has only a moderate influence on the students while the studies by Awale (2021), Aydin & Bayir (2016), and Echchabi & Al-Hajri (2018) have noted that despite the HEIs invest large sums of money in advertising, it does not help them to attract potential students. A list of the influential communication methods identified in the review is presented in Table 2 as shown below.

Table 2: List of the Influential Communication Methods Identified in the Study

Influential Communication Methods
Websites
Social Media Platforms
Online advertisements/ Online videos
Newspaper advertisement
University publications, brochures, magazines, and leaflets
Television, radio, telephone calls, and SMS
Campus visits/ open days/career fairs
School visits by HEIs
Exhibitions

4. Conclusion:

This study was conducted to review the existing literature to identify external factors namely HEI-related characteristics and communication methods that influence students when selecting a private HEI. Based on the literature reviewed, it was identified that students are influenced by a combination of factors, and for certain factors, there was agreement among the researchers, while for others, contradictory views were expressed. The findings revealed that many of the studies expressed that the HEI-related characteristics such as the reputation of the institute, affordable course fees, infrastructure facilities, academic quality, academic reputation, the reputation of the faculty, and employability of graduates influence students when they select a private HEI. When considering

the methods used by the HEIs to communicate with the students, it was observed that many of the studies had identified that the information obtained through online communication methods such as websites that include the institute's website and other websites such as government websites that carry information on HEIs and social media platforms as having an impact on the students during the selection process. On the other hand, there were many contradictory views regarding offline communication methods such as newspaper and television advertisements, printed materials of the HEIs such as brochures and leaflets, and events organized by the institutes such as open days and exhibitions. However, some studies have stated that offline communication methods also have their own benefits, such as the ability to communicate more information as compared to online methods, and are more effective, especially in areas where online communication is not available or limited.

The identified HEI-related critical factors would assist HEIs in determining the areas that they need to focus on, improve, or expand when formulating their institutional strategies, and allocate funds, to ensure that these strategies are well-suited to meet the requirements of the students. By addressing the needs and expectations of the students that they consider as critical when choosing an institute, for example, by improving or expanding the institute's facilities, or by improving the academic quality, the HEIs will be able to easily attract potential students to enrol in their degree programmes and in turn will ensure that enrollment targets are met. Moreover, as a result of the efforts made by the HEIs to improve their academic standards, students will be able to have a better student experience and therefore meet their expectations, resulting in HEIs being able to retain the students and thereby reducing the dropout rates. In addition to these benefits, HEIs would be able to maximise the impact of their marketing efforts by employing the key communication methods identified in this study to carry out their marketing activities, which would once again assist them in achieving their enrolment targets. With these efforts, HEIs would

be able to successfully face their competitors and ensure their long-term economic sustainability.

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