

*The Drivers Of
University
Programmes Choice
In Tanzania*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the reasons that drive students to choose University programmes taking into account the human resource needs of Tanzania as well as the current number of University students in the country.

Methodology: Two hundred and thirty one (231) students voluntarily participated as respondents in this study. The study involved a survey questionnaire based on a 4 point Likert scale and included 11 items similarly ranked to identify factors influencing University programme choice. Simple descriptive statistics and pie charts are used to identify the factors students consider most important in choosing a programme.

Findings: Students seem to be driven highly by interest in programmes, career opportunities and programme prestige. Other motives are performance in the programme, staff profile, career advice and easiness of the programme. This shows that students are driven by their own interests and have their own plans for their future. Students also feel that the main obstacle to their future development is Tanzania Commission of Universities (TCU) as they have no voice in deciding what programme to pursue. Students also admit that there are choices in the forms given by TCU but too vague in that limits their choice of programmes as well as Universities students want.

Limitations and implications: The small convenient sample of participants employed in the study may not be used to generalize the conclusions. Though the researcher assumes students regardless of an institution have same concerns and characteristics, the use of one University and few programmes may not reflect the reality to a certain extent but gives a true picture of students' behavior in the University programmes choice.

Practical implications: The findings have implications for the Universities to know what make students to choose one programme over another. Universities have to ensure that interested students know better what is happening to the Universities for them to make informed decisions. Also, TCU has to revise its role of recruiting students and leave it for Universities to position themselves in this diversifying recruitment market, so that students can be free to choose programmes as well as Universities they want. This will make Universities compete for students. In doing so, quality of education and University facilities will be improved.

Originality/value: The study determines the factors influencing students in choosing their University programmes in Tanzania within the context of limited technology and University information to potential students while they are in secondary schools. The paper gives Universities and the government the environment within which students choose University programmes. It also shows how competition among universities can improve the quality of education.

Keywords: Tanzania, University, Programme, Choice, Students

1. Introduction

This study is motivated by the complaints from some of the continuing University students who pursue "difficult" programmes. Some students claim that he programmes they pursue are not of their choice but they

were allocated by the Tanzania Commission of Universities (TCU). Students think their difficulties in the University are man-made and will affect their future careers prospects and lives. Students feel their dreams end when the TCU interfere with their choices.

Students indicate that sometimes they choose programmes without knowing whether they are related to their future lives as well as their programme combinations. They also indicate that sometimes partial information is obtained at the time of application from friends; and due to that application pressure, they simply accept and fill the forms without taking into consideration the source or authority of the information.

Generally, students have mentioned various factors affecting their choice of the programmes. These are: job market and career opportunities, easy programmes to do, interest in programme, programme prestige, staff profile, and advice from friends, teachers, parents, careers and sponsors. Finally they show that lack of information in their Ordinary and Advanced levels of education as well as the where to get information contributes to wrong choice of programmes even though usually TCU considers their first choice. 40% of the respondents think that TCU kills their dreams and affects the quality of education by taking admission/enrolment as its role, instead of leaving it to the Universities.

Higher education environments have become increasingly competitive and institutions have to compete for students in the recruitment markets. With the introduction of TCU as a central unit for admission in Tanzania, students now have no power in choosing the University and the programme they want but they can tell factors motivating them to choose certain programmes though the TCU may decide otherwise.

2. Literature Review

There is a lot of research done on choice of University and programme of study though the results differ depending on cultural, national, political and economic factors. Price et al, (2003) states that five distinct motivational factors were derived from a survey of 427 Sixth Form, College students in Leicester (UK). For all ethnic groups, the student's career is the most important motivating factor. The influence of the family was most important among Pakistani and African students. Indian and "other" Asian students were strongly associated with academic and social motivators. White applicants, on the other hand, had no relative strengths with regard to common motivators. What was perhaps more apparent was how unimportant family was on influencing choice. There were also differences between the ethnic groups and the university type applied for Kim et al, (2009) indicates the results from the research suggest that Chinese cultural values have an impact on "Little Emperor's" choice of international tertiary education and their preferred communication sources for university choice. The study shows that New Zealand society appeals for its low corruption and high level of

honesty and fairness which are attractive to these “Little Emperors” because these values help to reinforce group harmony, a prominent characteristic of Chinese society. The “Little Emperor's” preference for using education fairs, university open days and representative agents as sources of information for university enrolment is consistent with the high context nature of Chinese society.

Ian et al, (2010) argues that the perceived attractiveness of Mauritius as a vacation destination is based on the fact that tourists picture the island as one which offers good value for money and cheap travel. Both information sources are found to have an influence on perceived destination image and destination choice intention. Perceived destination image is found to predict destination choice intention.

According to James et al., (1999) quoted in Maringe (2006) who form the basis for this study, higher learning environments in most developing countries have become competitive and institutions increasingly have to compete for students in the recruitment markets. This argument works where Universities are free to recruit students. The presence of central admission unit in Tanzania contradicts the whole idea of competition as Universities wait students from TCU. Universities in Tanzania in this case have no reason to position themselves in the recruitment market. A useful way to gain understanding of these recruitment markets is to have a clear grasp of the choice and decision making processes of intended applicants. There is however insufficient research basis upon which we can build that understanding.

Maringe (2006) argues that knowing the reasons for which applicants choose Universities and programmes of study is central to developing institutional positioning in an increasingly competitive higher education environment. This take has mutual benefits to both institutions and students because students fulfill their dreams and Universities develop to attract more students. How the University is offering its programmes should be well known by intended students. This position is supported by the argument that higher learning has become a positional good in which some institutions and degrees they offer are seen, in the eyes of students, parents and employers, as offering better social status and lifetime opportunities than others Hirsch (1976). The remainder of the paper is followed by literature on theory of choice/ theoretical constructs of choice and decision making in higher learning, methodology of the study, empirical evidence in the field of choice in higher education, discussion of the findings, conclusions and the way forward for factors influencing students to choose University programmes and the environment surrounding the intended students in Tanzania.

3. Theoretical Constructs

Soutar and Turner (2002) quoted in Maringe (2006) lay the foundation for theoretical constructs. Choice and decision making in higher learning is an area of growing research interest primarily because higher learning

has been transformed from a domesticated, centrally funded non marketised entity to a highly marketised and competitive environment. Many authors have shown how higher learning is competitive in the world. Smith et al., (1995) and Mazzarol (1999) classify market forces in three categories as global, national and institutional scale; this transformation has been driven by world economies which have tended to embrace the idea of the market forces.

Earlier separate economic models about choice and decision making using purchase behavior of consumers agree that choice is rational in decision making influenced by family background, culture and history. (Gambetta (1996), Roberts (1984) Ryrie (1981), Foskett, (1999), Becker (1975), Hodgkinson et al. (1996), Payne, (2003) and Hemsley-Brown (1999)).

Though the models concur on rationality of the chooser, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) have developed an integrated model which brings together elements of these models in which they argue that while choice is never a completely rational action, it is nonetheless not irrational or random and involves three broad elements of the context of choice, the key choice influencers and the choosers themselves into a complex dynamic in which decision making becomes a reflexive process.

A study by Maringe (2006) shows that decision making is broadly seen as a problem solving process undertaken by applicants in the process of making choices. Models of decision making have been developed around what is commonly called the purchase behaviour of consumers. As the focus is to find out what cause students to choose one programme another Chapman (1986) suggests that in selecting an institution or programme of study, students and their parents will pass through a number of uniquely definable stages as application of buying behavior theory in education.

Pre-search behavior: At this stage students use available information to compare with their future expectations on higher learning. It is the time for Universities to capitalize in this early decision as attitudes and views of applicants are made. Universities should make sure that they are visible to the minds of choosers as the strategy to the recruitment market.

Search behavior: During this stage applicants use variety of information to make a short list of potential Universities and make up their minds as they are making decision. At this stage, Universities have to provide more information to facilitate search process.

Application stage: Students submit their application to the selected Universities at this stage. According to Surgeant (1999), Universities which provide high standard of customer care and quick responses to communication will clearly be advantaged.

Choice decision: Students accept the offer. Since the offer is not contractual in education, students tend to make multiple offers and thereafter choose Universities which maintain dialogue with them. Dialogue therefore helps to seal a psychological bond between applicants and Universities.

Registration: Finally the applicant turns up for registration, but this is not the end as often some turn the offer down after a few days in the University. This is similar to the early post purchase feelings where applicants have at the time of committing themselves to the University. Universities therefore can put up exciting fresher's weeks with a variety of support services marketing to the needs of students as far as possible to ensure students settle for study.

“Clearly a sound grasp of the above ideas is a necessary first step in developing a recruitment strategy that allows the institution to compete favorably in the recruitment market. Seeking to know the reasons students choose the institution provides a solid foundation for building this understanding and for positioning the institution strongly in the competitive recruitment market” Maringe (2006).

3.1 Evidence In Higher Learning Choice

Broadly, there are three levels at which choice and decision-making research in higher education has been conducted. First is the global level, which shows why students choose to study abroad. Second, is a national level where students' choice of University is the main focus. The third level which has received relatively little attention is the choice of programmes of study in the University.

James et al., (1999) identifies belief that school results will allow entry to the programme; the reputation of the programme among employers; graduate satisfaction from the programme; graduate employment rates from the programme; the quality of teaching in the programme; approaches to teaching, learning and assessment on the programme including opportunities for flexible study as factors influencing choice of programmes by students. Maringe (2006) finds that students seem to be adopting a consumerist approach to their higher learning decision making where fees and funds for study and returns on their investments on education are the key drivers. The importance attached to labour market motives in terms of employment and career prospects significantly outweigh those related to pursuing higher learning on the basis of programme

interest and a love for the programme and students consider programme and price related issues as more important than other elements of Universities' marketing mix.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

The study uses a case approach where one University is chosen. In the same University 231 first year students in the three different programmes were given questionnaires equivalent to 55% of all students responded. The approach was chosen by assuming that, University students all over the country share a lot of characteristics. The researcher is confident that the study is replicable and can give similar results if it is conducted in any other University in the country.

4.2 Data Collection

The principal data instrument was a questionnaire developed around factors known to influence applicants' choice (James et al., 1999; Price et al., 2003). Participants were required to rank 11 factors on a scale of 1 -4 to show the importance they attached to each of them. Attaching a factor of 1 meant that it was considered least important while 4 meant it was extremely important to the applicant. The factors were then ranked from the first in importance to the last i.e. 1-11. Simple descriptive statistics based on mean, standard deviation and variance were used to estimate differences in the importance attached to the factors. In addition, participants were asked to identify additional factors they had considered in the choice of University and programmes not covered in the questionnaires. The questionnaires also solicited biographical information of participants including their sex, intended programmes, and the main reasons for choosing them and the name of the selected University.

5. Findings

Profile of the surveyed respondents

The sample was evenly balanced in terms of characteristics as all of them were students, and with 65% of students being male and 40% female.

Factors influencing Programme choice

Following previous research (Price et al., 2003; Ivy, 2002; James et al., 1999), participants were asked to rank eleven factors on scores ranging from 1 to 4 to indicate the extent to which they considered those factors as being important in their choice of programme of study. Each category is considered independent for analysis purposes. A mean score is calculated for each score. Using mean scores for each factor, clearly, interest in

programmes considerations have the greatest impact on students' choice of programme of study at University. Based on mean scores, the factors can be shown in Table 1.

It is clear that: Interest in programmes associated with higher education study closely followed by career consideration and programme prestige in the programmes currently under study exert the greatest influence on programmes students choose to study at University. Mean scores for those who indicated these factors were 3.6, 3.2 and 3.1 respectively. Thus, students choose programmes they intend doing at University primarily on consideration of interest in programmes, future job opportunities and on the basis of programme prestige in those programmes.

Performance in programmes and staff profile are the third and fourth most powerful influence on choices of University programmes by students. The mean score influence for those who considered these to be a moderate influence was 3 and 2.7, respectively.

TABLE 1

Factors	Number	Rank	Mean Score
Programme prestige	231	3.00	3.1515
Interest in programme	231	1.00	3.6537
Performance in programme	231	4.00	3.0000
Career opportunities	231	2.00	3.2857
Staff profile	231	5.00	2.6797
Easy programme to do	231	7.00	2.4935
Friends on programme	231	8.00	2.2424
Advice from teachers	231	9.00	2.1861
Advice from parents	231	5.00	2.6797
Advice from careers	231	6.00	2.5108
Advice from sponsors	231	10.00	1.7835
Programme knowledge	231	10.00	1.7965

(University Survey 2012/2013)

Other factors considered to have weak influence are advice from careers, easy programme to do, friends on programme and advice from teachers. This may suggest that students are using their personal efforts to choose

University programmes with very minimum help from Universities and people who are aware about the importance and benefits of each programme.

Advice from sponsors and knowledge on the programme are factors which have no influence at all. The implication here is that majority of respondents are fresh from schools where information about programmes is limited hence no or little knowledge on the same. Also sponsors may have no influence as they are not employed yet and majority of them are (Higher Education Loans Board) HELB beneficiaries. This contradicts Maringe (2006) who states that teachers are considered to be the strongest factor in students' decisions regarding choice of programme, while parents are the least important. Also it diverts from Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) who found that parental influence on schooling decisions seems to wane as the children become older. It also shows that though secondary school teachers could be Universities' greatest allies in helping students' decision making about higher learning study they are ranked very weak i.e. 2 score. Formal career guidance in schools is considered of much less value in students' higher learning decision making. This also is supported by Foskett et al. (2004) who found that students were more likely to be influenced by factors other than schools' career services.

The study shows a promising trend that 60% of respondents obtained information from the University websites. This may show how students struggle to get information about their programmes they want to study. 60% of students agree that TCU selected for them the programmes they wanted. They think that it is better for the TCU to help them on the programme to study. This may suggest that there is a total struggle for a student without help hence they end up using University websites and "blind" choices so that the TCU can decide for them. The study also determined the role of TCU in the students' University choice. 53% of students were selected and sent to the University they did not like. Only 47% of students were sent to the Universities they wanted most. Though generally 60% of students are happy with the presence of TCU, 40% of students are unhappy with the role of TCU as a recruiting body. They propose that it should have all regulating activities except recruitment so that students can choose the University and programmes they want as well as allow Universities compete for students so that quality of education can be improved. The general acceptance of TCU by students may be because students think it better for somebody to decide on their behalf as there is no enough information about programmes at Universities.

6. Discussion

The three top reasons which make students choose programmes of study are related to intrinsic motives of interest and love for the programmes of study. This contradicts Maringe (2006) who finds that the three top reasons are not related to interest and love on programme; and selection of programmes of study shows

greater sensitivity towards anticipated benefits as reflected in a keenness to align HE study to potential career paths.

The Tanzanian environment in HL education may not help students to achieve their dreams. Though students seem to be driven by interest in subject, career opportunities and programme prestige, their choices may be adversely affected by the surrounding environment. The study shows that advice from teachers, and programme knowledge before students join universities do not influence their choice. If students are not advised by their teachers and careers where do they get information from? Can they be able to choose the relevant programmes? Can they have significant power to make decisions over the programmes they wish to study? This study contradicts Maringe (2006) who shows that teachers have strong influence on students' choice of programmes as they know well their students.

Students have their choices and are driven by their own perceived future developments. Tanzanian HL industry is not competitive and therefore students lack information and therefore can't decide precisely what and where to study. The TCU has taken the role of students' recruitment and in doing so it kills students' dreams. This role of TCU contradicts James et al (1999) who states that, HL in most developing countries has become competitive and institutions have to compete for students in the recruitment market. This is not happening in Tanzania and the practical implication of this is deterioration of the quality of education and students.

The buying behavior by Chapman (1986) is very important for students in HL application process. Pre-search and search processes in Tanzania are not effective due to limited information. There is only one stage used by students when the TCU decides. Programme choice decision process under TCU and registration limits students' decision and therefore no room for conversation for what one wants to study.

To measure sources of information for students' decision making on programmes choice, the open question was given to students to mention sources of information. Though students get information from different sources, the weight of each source was presented. Findings indicate that 60% acquired information from University website; 19% were informed by their teachers; while 70% were informed by their friends. Students see parents and sponsors to be not significant sources of information. This may be due to the fact that parents in rural areas are not aware about education opportunities. This is because most of them are peasants and farmers with no formal education and some have low levels of education. University websites which could be a major source of information to students seem not to have a major influence. This may be due to the nature of where many students come from rural areas. This is in line with Maringe (2006) who shows that students

do not see promotional tools such as the websites, prospectuses and other written material as playing a significant role in their choice and decision making over programme choice and the university to study at. This may be due to inadequate or misleading information acquired by students, they just do not find these sources as trustworthy in their decision making Bennet, (2006); or it could also be that the internet is not available to everyone as many students from disadvantaged communities either have limited, or unreliable or intermittent access to the internet Ivy (2002).

Maringe (2006) suggests that Universities may need to consider other ways for promoting themselves to the recruitment market. University promotional messages need to lay emphasis on issues students find most important to them and not issues Universities think are most important to students.

7. Conclusion

Competition in higher learning will rescue education in Tanzania. This will be there if Universities are to freely compete in the students' recruitment market.

Students are strongly influenced by interest in programme, programme prestige, career opportunities and advice from sponsors. They are moderately influenced by performance in programme, staff profile, and easy programme to do. Factors which seem to have no influence are friends on programme, advice from teachers and advice from sponsors. Generally, the mentioned factors influence students to choose programmes though they differ in the extent as shown in the results section.

Majority of students seem to have knowledge on the programmes before admission. The main sources of information to students identifying programmes are friends and University websites. Teachers seem not to provide information to students waiting to join Universities. TCU guidebook also seems to be a good source for students though it is obtained in Dar Es Salaam and only at the time of application, and hence, less helpful.

The enrolment should now be left to the Universities so that the TCU can perform other regulatory roles. The claim that centralized application saves the application costs of students is unfounded and is shortsighted. The costs saved by TCU per each student are far less than long-term implications to our higher learning education. Quality of education is compromised and the dreams of students are shattered on unfounded grounds. The TCU's role in programme choice for students is supported by the majority of students yet it sends students to the Universities they didn't choose. Finally, students support the role of TCU regardless of the weaknesses it

has. This support may be due to the fact that they lack information and hence prefer a third party to make choices for them.

The TCU has to leave enrolment to the Universities or direct students to make their first choices and what or where they want to study; narrow the number of choices from nine (9) to three (3); there has to be education in secondary schools to prepare students for higher education. This should be done by teachers, Universities and TCU. This can be done through visiting secondary schools and supplying them with written documents about career choices.

For the improvement of higher education in the country, TCU has to enroll only students who want to join public universities and those seeking admission to private universities should be left freely choose programmes and Universities of their choice. It has to find ways to foster competition among Universities. This will ensure quality products and therefore more admissions. The system used by TCU currently can't help to improve the quality of education because whether a University improves the quality of its services and products or not, at the end of the day, TCU will allocate students to them. Therefore Universities have to be autonomous and students have to be free to choose the programmes and Universities they want.

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