CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Education System in Malaysia

Since the Nation’s independence in 1957, the rapid pace of national development has created a big demand for highly qualified graduates in many fields. It is the Prime Minister of Malaysia’s vision to ascertain Malaysia becomes a fully developed country by the year 2020. To achieve such a vision, “initiatives in the area of human resource development would not only need to focus on the development of a workforce with a broad skill base to meet the demand of the new and varied industries emerging in Malaysia, but should also focus on the inculcation of positive work ethics and a good culture” (Ahmad Sarji, 1993 : xx ). Such knowledge and skills, be they academic, technical, professional or social, are to be acquired by individuals through education.

The education system of the country has undergone many changes over the past four decades to meet the national aspiration, development and needs. The introduction of private education in the late 1950’s, is an alternative for students who were unable to enter the Government schools or institutions. The role of private education shifted in the early 1970’s when pre-university courses were predominantly offered by private providers. In the early 1980’s, the roles and responsibilities of private education underwent another significant change as most private institutions became providers of tertiary education, especially in offering undergraduate courses in collaboration with foreign universities. In the early 1990’s, private higher education escalated in its growth mainly due to (i) meeting the increasing needs of higher education as a result of a shortage of places offered by the local public universities, (ii) fewer Malaysians pursuing higher education abroad due to economic reasons, (iii) change in the Government policies, and (iv) globalisation.
Between 1995 and 1997, the Government of Malaysia passed six legislations to assure that a quality education system of international standard is established and to position Malaysia as the regional centre of educational excellence in the Asia Pacific region. These legislations which cover both public and private educational institutions are: The Education Act 1996, The Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996, National Council on Higher Education Act 1996, Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act 1996, National Higher Educational Fund Board Act 1997, and The National Accreditation Board Act 1996. The Education Act 1996 broadens the scope of education in Malaysia and ensures relevance and quality in the education system. The Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996 governs and makes provisions for the establishment of private universities, private colleges, and branch campuses of foreign universities. A body was set up under The National Council on Higher Education Act 1996 to determine policies and co-ordinate the expansion of tertiary education in the country. The National Accreditation Board Act 1996 ensures high academic standards, quality and control. The Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act 1996 aims to corporatisethe management and administration of public universities. The National Higher Education Fund Board Act 1997 is to establish and provide financial assistance and study loans to students in higher educational institutions in the country. Under the new education system, the Government seeks to enable institutions of higher learning to offer a broader range of programmes of quality. The establishment, management, operation and standard of programmes of private education are approved by the Ministry of Education and are governed by the above legislations. These initiatives undertaken by the Government for major educational reforms enabled the liberalisation of higher education in the country to meet the increasing demand for tertiary education and for a highly educated and skilled workforce.
Between 1995 and 2001, Malaysia witnessed a two and a half fold increase in the establishment of private colleges. The accelerated growth of private colleges places such institutions in a competitive environment in their course offerings in order to outperform others or to remain in the industry. “The educational establishments therefore, in addition to helping students to acquire useful abilities, are also engaged in a number of activities which do not become an essential part of the achievements of students” (Srivastava, 1983:3). Such activities like offering better service and administrative support to students, providing more comfortable and conducive learning environment, organising more interesting extra-curricular activities, and engaging better management teams are among those seriously adopted by private educational establishments to ensure that their institutions of higher learning will meet the expectations of students and will portray a positive image to students and parents, in order to attract enrolment and stay competitive in the industry.

1.2 Types of Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia

Institutions of higher learning in this country leading to the award of degree qualifications comprise public universities and private higher educational institutions. The public universities are funded by the Government while the private higher educational institutions are non-government subsidised and are either private or corporate entities. All these institutions provide tertiary education

The private higher educational institutions consist of (i) private colleges, (ii) private universities and university colleges, and (iii) branch campuses of foreign universities. While the private universities and university colleges confer their own degrees, the branch campus of foreign universities award degree qualifications that are identical to those of the host university. As private colleges in the country have not been granted ‘university status’, the degree programmes offered by private colleges are not developed
internally, but are adopted from either local public universities or foreign universities which collaborate with these private colleges. Consequently, the degree qualifications awarded are conferred by the partner universities in collaboration with these private colleges. This is a unique feature of private colleges in Malaysia conferring tertiary degrees.

At present, there are approximately 516 private colleges, 15 private universities and four foreign university branch campuses in the country offering a wide range of courses in collaboration with overseas universities or adopting the higher education systems of the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada or the United States of America (Challenger Concept (M) Sdn. Bhd, 2002).

1.3 Twinning Programmes

To enhance the accessibility of higher education to all strata of societies, private education system in Malaysia had at the beginning of the 1980's, first adopted an innovative model - the twinning programmes. This twinning model involves an arrangement between a local private college and a foreign university or a consortium of foreign universities to conduct a split-degree programme which is partially taught at the local college whilst the final year(s) of the study is/are completed at the twinning university.

The establishment of twinning programmes in Malaysia came about to overcome (i) the financial constraints of lower income group of having to send their children abroad to receive the entire undergraduate education, (ii) the parents' concern about sending children away from home at an impressionable age when they are sometimes subject to unhealthy influences, and (iii) the limited places offered by the local public universities to meet the demand for tertiary education.
The twinning programme structures vary from programme to programme depending on the arrangement between the local private college and its twinning partner university. Twinning can be on a 1+2 arrangement (one year in the local private college and two years at the twinning university abroad), or 1½ + 1½ (one and half years in the local private college and one and half years at the overseas twinning university), or 2+1 (two years in the local private college and one year at the twinning university abroad), or 2½ + ½ (two and half years at the local private college and half a year in the overseas twinning university), and 3+0 (three years at the local private college). The 3+0 structure allows students to complete their entire degree at the local private college without having to study at the twinning university abroad at all.

All twinning programmes offered in Malaysia are subject to the approval of the National Accreditation Board, which is the academic quality assurance arm of the Ministry of Education.

Todate, twinning programmes have gained popularity in the country as this educational concept has made foreign tertiary education accessible to larger segments of students at a more affordable cost. This concept allows a foreign degree qualification to be acquired with substantial savings on tuition fees and living expenses as the number of years a student needs to spend overseas is reduced. Apart from economic reasons, to curb the unhealthy influences which may affect these young students if they are granted independence too early, is another important factor why some parents prefer the twinning programmes. The delay in sending their children overseas in the final part of the study allows parents to exercise close monitoring of their children’s academic progress and emotional development for a longer period of time. Furthermore, twinning programmes serve as a gateway to students who are unable to gain entry into the local public universities.
1.4 Background To the Research

Since 1996, the post-legislation era, private colleges have grown rapidly in number in this country, to help generate the necessary manpower to meet the demands of national development in achieving the Nation's Vision 2020.

The total number of private colleges competing for the same pool of student population in the country has forced some smaller colleges to close down. This situation has worsened since the economic downturn in Malaysia started in 1997. The decrease in student enrolment in private colleges has direct negative impact on the financial status of such institutions and this is evident in the affected institutions downsizing, having their staff retrenched or being made to accept a pay cut, and/or having their resource investment reduced or having their institutions closed down. As a result of this adverse impact, students have been disadvantaged in receiving poorer quality education, inadequate resources and possibly in the worst situation having their education interrupted.

To minimise or eradicate such adverse impact on the students and the affected private colleges, the enrolment-threatening situation needs to be rectified. Hence, an understanding of why students choose to attend one particular private college over another is important to the management and students of private colleges. This will shed light on market expectations and aid in course planning as well as the development of recruitment strategies to cater to the prospective students' needs. By understanding and fulfilling the prospective students' needs, it is envisaged more educational opportunities will be created for students to further their education at post-secondary level. This in turn, is expected to increase the enrolment of private colleges which can best meet the market's needs.
In order to stay competitive in the same industry, private colleges are trying to identify and to understand factors which influence parents or students in their college choice process. It is with this insight that private colleges will be able to cater to the needs of the public and in turn, to outperform its competitors or survive in the educational sector. As for the public, when private colleges cater to their needs and preferences (lowering tuition fees, offering scholarships/financial aids, and others), it is envisaged larger segments of the population will be able to receive the higher education of their choice and to graduate from institutions which best fit their needs. Ultimately, with higher graduation rates, a better educated and skilled workforce is produced in the varied professions to fulfill the nation’s manpower needs.

1.5 Potential Contribution of the Identification of the Influential Factors

Findings on enrolment behaviour and the identification of choice factors have been useful in understanding the demands of students and parents and in the establishment of effective course planning and enrolment management. In 1990, Braxton had highlighted the importance and the role of enrolment management to ensure the vitality of individual universities and colleges.

Today, institutions of higher learning are facing a challenging environment, partly stemming from competition due to a rapid increase in the number of institutions (Thou, 2000), globalisation, rapid technological changes and demographic diversity of the student market (Coccaro and Javalgi, 1995). Confronted with prospects of reduced enrolment, organisational deficits, and closure of colleges, college management is compelled to pay more attention to enrolment management (Chapman, 1979; Paulsen, 1990; Coccaro and Javalgi, 1995; Thou, 2000). To manage enrolment effectively, a college needs to focus on attracting prospective students and retaining its existing enrolment. Hence, since the 1980’s, the study of enrolment behaviour and college
choice determinants has been the focus of institutions of higher learning (Paulsen, 1990; Hossler and Bean, 1990; Kohn, 2000).

Previous studies have also shown the importance of segmentation studies on prospective students. Segmentation entails the identification of distinguishing factors among prospective students (Grabowski, 1981). According to Kotler (1982), markets consist of prospective students who are likely to differ on one or more factors. To effectively target marketing and recruitment strategies, market segmentation is required.

The marketing and recruitment strategies are then targeted at each identified segment (Grabowski, 1981; Braxton, 1990). Among the segmentations by demographic factors, social class is found to be the most potent segmenting variable (Kotler, 1982), followed by parental educational level (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989). Other demographic factors which have been studied and found to have effect on the college selection process are gender (Holland, 1958; Litten and Hall, 1989), age (Thou, 2000), and academic ability (Lewis, Morrison, Penz, and Wicinas, 1974; Gilnour, Spira, and Dohich, 1978; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983, Carnegie Foundation, 1986; Chapman and Jackson, 1987; Wanat and Bowles, 1989; Galotti and Mark, 1994).

It has been shown that research on student market (students' needs and wants), enrolment behaviour and identification of the influencing choice factors are essential information to the policy makers of government and institutions of higher learning to develop a foundation for more effective course and enrolment planning, student marketing and recruitment (Chapman, 1979; Paulsen, 1990; Coccaro and Javalgi, 1995; Thou, 2000).

With the identification of the college choice factors, institutions of higher learning can (i) strategise their marketing, recruitment, and financial grants to influence prospective
students (Chapman, 1979; Braxton, 1990; Paulsen, 1990). (ii) recruit students with attributes consistent with the institution’s characteristics, also known as student-institution fit (Manski and Wise, 1983; Chapman and Jackson, 1987; Paulsen, 1990;), (iii) adjust the institution’s characteristics to be more in line with students possessing attributes desired by the college, such as high socioeconomic background, good academic ability, and others (Paulsen, 1990; Thou, 2000). The above activities are believed to enhance college recruitment. Institutions which can meet the majority’s needs will be perceived by the public to be more sensitive and comprehensive in their provision and in turn, are envisaged to be competitive or successful in the market place (Chapman, 1979; Paulsen, 1990; Braxton, 1990). Similarly, with preferences being met, it is anticipated that prospective students’ learning opportunities will be enhanced and their educational experience will be more satisfying, thus optimising students’ graduation rates (Hossler and Bean, 1990).

This section has presented the importance of the identification of the college decision-making determinants in the arena of enrolment management. Although some findings are available for usage by the policy makers of government and institutions, more in-depth research is required to compare the validity and implications of previous findings. It is noted that certain aspects of enrolment management are lacking in research findings such as the parental effect in the college choice process, the comfort levels of students with their chosen institutions (Quade, 1994), and the effect of some demographic variables (location, year-of-study, academic ability, socioeconomic status, parental educational level, and others) of students in Malaysia (Thou, 2000).

1.6 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are (i) to gain insight into institutional and individual factors influencing the college choice process of students and parents, (ii) to compare
the college choice process of students and parents, (iii) to identify and establish the influential factors affecting the college choice process. As parents play an important role in influencing their children in college selection, this study has included the parent component to gain a comprehensive understanding of various factors which affect students in the college choice process. Over the past four decades, the issue of college choice has been studied as a matter of determining the characteristics of students and institutions that affect the decisions to apply to, be admitted by, matriculate at, and graduate from a specific type of university (Kohn, 2000). Extending from previous findings, this study seeks to identify and establish the influential factors affecting the college choice. This may be used to remedy the inequity of educational opportunities, to anticipate more accurate enrolment prediction, and to achieve more effective resource planning by private college management as well as to assist students in selecting a suitable institution from which they will succeed and graduate (student-institution fit). It is hoped that the relevance of this research will elicit interest from not only students, their parents, institutions of higher learning, but the statutory bodies in the country as well. A successful graduate armed with knowledge and skills, will become a contributing member of the society, thus fulfilling the national human resource development objective.

1.7 Summary

This study lays the framework for the identification of college choice determinants. Such identification is envisaged to create more learning opportunities when institutions of higher learning and government policy makers learn more about the interests and needs of the public, without deviating from the government policies to achieve the nation's vision of producing more educated, trained and skilled workforce.