

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study involves the investigation of the institutional and individual choice factors influential in the college selection process of students and parents. From the findings, it appears that students and parents in this study hold similar opinions about the importance of the 29 choice factors except “Country of the Twinning University”, which seems to be more important to parents. In general, students and parents regard the 29 choice factors to be important (mean ratings of above 2.50) except for the “Availability of Dormitory” (student : 2.19; parent : 2.31) which is considered not very important in the college choice process. Students and parents are generally concerned about college education with the same emphases on academic quality, prestige, student’s/child’s decision, study options, and financial consideration. It is interesting to note that student and parent respondents in this study concur, not only on the most important institutional and individual choice factors, but they also hold the same opinion on the least important factor - “Availability of Dormitory”. These similarities between student and parent college choice criteria appear to indicate good communication between students and parents in this study.

This study further investigated five institutional factors which are relevant to the local context, but have not been examined before : “Recognition of Programme of Study”, “Reputation of Twinning University”, “Availability of 3+0 Option”, “Timing of the Starting of the Programme of Study” and “Country of the Twinning University”. Findings show that students and parents consider these five locally relevant institutional factors important in the college selection process. This implies that these five factors have significant impact on the local students and parents and that they are choice

variables significant in the college choice process, in addition to those which have been examined by previous researchers. This suggests that private colleges need to bear in mind the significance of these five choice factors in their planning and development of courses as these have impact on the enrolment. Private colleges should ensure that the programmes offered are recognised and that programmes which have received approval by the Statutory Bodies are publicised to gain the confidence of the public. When considering partnership with a new twinning university, private colleges may wish to consider the reputation and country of the twinning university. In terms of country, it appears that countries with shorter distance from home and with lower currency exchange rates tend to be favoured by students and parents. To the local students and parents, the successful completion of the course of study in the shortest time possible is the best return on educational investment. Hence, students and parents will prefer to start the degree study as quickly as possible after the completion of a pre-university course. Hence, private colleges should consider planning course commencement periods not too long after the release of major examination results. The offer of 3+0 Option will enable financially lower income students to gain a foreign degree by completing the entire course of study in Malaysia to save cost. To the private colleges, offering this option will open up an additional market segment and hence, increase student enrolment.

In terms of differences in the emphasis between institutional and individual factors as a function of student background : gender, age group, year-of-study and academic ability, preferences for different choice factors are noted against various demographic aspects of students. In terms of gender differences, significant differences are noted in the institutional factors with females tending to be more concerned about academic factors than males whilst males emphasise more on "Extra-curricular Activities". Hence, private colleges may wish to highlight academic factors when counselling prospective

female students. Male students are also concerned about academic factors and are additionally interested in the extra-curricular activities, which the private colleges may wish to take note of. As a function of age group, private colleges may wish to highlight both institutional and individual factors with emphasis on 'field varieties', and class size while some alumni could speak to the younger prospective students. Although the 3+0 option (institutional factor) is emphasised more by the oldest age group in this study, institutions could communicate the availability of this option to all prospective students as a cost saving alternative to gaining a foreign degree. In terms of year-of-study, private colleges may want to emphasise on institutional factors such as 'field varieties' offered by the college, and "College Environment" to the youngest prospective students as these variables have been emphasised by Year 1 students. Consistent with the findings as a function of age group, the Year 1 students seem to be influenced more by individual factors such as 'significant others' and they have indicated "High School Counsellor's Influence" to be more important than do students from higher levels. This suggests that institutions should keep a good rapport with high school counsellors as their advice to students seems to be influential. As for the offer of scholarships and financial aids, although Year 1 students have emphasised more on this choice factor than higher level students, the awareness of the availability of this resource should be created to as many prospective students and their parents as possible. In terms of academic ability, students of different academic abilities show no difference in their emphases and they regard the same choice criteria – "Quality of Lecturers" to be most important. Hence, institutions should highlight their quality academic faculty to all prospective students regardless of their academic calibre. Generally, findings in this section as a function of student demographic background suggest that while some students (males and females of different academic abilities and older students) remain primarily concerned with institutional factors, others, especially the youngest age group

and lower year-of-study students, tend to consider a combinations of institutional and individual factors in their college selection process.

The last section of this study examines the satisfaction levels of each choice factor relating to the chosen college. Findings indicate that both students and parents in this study are satisfied with the choice of College A. Parents in this study are more satisfied with factors concerning the local situation such as the recognition of programmes offered at College A and the reputation of the College, whilst students regard aspects concerning the twinning university such as country and the reputation of the twinning university to be more satisfactory. Overall, students and parents in this study are satisfied with their chosen college.

Whether the emphasis on a particular institutional or individual factor indicated by students or parents is a good predictor of the total satisfaction towards their chosen college remains inconclusive. Although findings in this study seem to suggest one institutional (Recognition of Programme of Study) and two individual (Family Members' Influence and Peers' Influence) factors are regarded by students as significant predictors, no significant predictor has emerged in the results of parents' study. Students in this study appear to be aware of the importance of programme recognition and they are satisfied with College A having all its programmes approved by the local statutory bodies. Although family members' and peers' influences had not appeared to be the most important factors in the earlier section of this study, however, findings derived from Multiple Regression suggest that those students who have consulted their family members or peers during college choice process before enrolling at College A then, have found these influences to be satisfactory.

From the findings in this research, it appears that while each student or parent may be attracted to a combination of institutional and individual factors, these differences in emphasis reflect more of demographic differences between students and among parents.

From this study, various institutional and individual choice factors and the demographic background have shown different degrees of impact on a student's college selection process. Such effects appear to interweave and to impact throughout the College Search, College Application and College Selection stages in the Model put forth by the researcher (Figure 2.1). Consistent with students' college selection activities described in the Search and Selection Phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase-Model, institutional and individual factors influencing college choice process identified in this study appear to have greatest impact at these 2 phases of the Hossler and Gallagher Model. Comparing with Hanson and Litten's (1982) Expanded Model of the College Choice Process, which illustrated the entire college choice process, from 'Development of College Aspiration to Enrolment', Hanson and Litten (1982) tended to place the effect of 'Influence/ Media Used' at the 'Information Gathering' stage (College Search Phase of present study model) and the 'College Characteristics' at the 'Application' stage (College Application Phase of present study model). However, the impact of such institutional and individual characteristics should not just be confined to these two stages explicitly but throughout the entire process of College Search, College Application and College Selection as shown in the model of this study. Also, comparing the variables, under 'College Characteristics' in the Hanson and Litten's (1982) Model, 'Price', 'Size', 'Programme' and 'Ambience' are regarded as important factors in the college choice process, which is consistent with the present findings. In terms of 'Influence/Media Used' in the Hanson and Litten's Model (1982), present findings on the influence of 'Parents' and 'Peers' also indicate that these two individual factors are significant criteria in the college choice process. In addition to the consistency of choice

relation to the chosen college experienced by existing students, is reflected between the “College Attendance” and “Graduation” stages of the model in this study.

6.2 General Implications

As college choice is a byproduct of many dimensions, in the process of the development of marketing strategies, institutions of higher learning must regard students or parents as individuals and not assume that they have the same expectations in mind when enrolling at a college. Otherwise, institutions of higher learning may inadvertently be neglecting some prospective students. The probable dual roles played by parents as the key financiers and advisers to students reflect the significance of parental involvement in the college choice process. Hence, institutions of higher learning and the statutory bodies should focus not just on students but also parents, in addition to other significant person influence to enhance students' college aspiration and attendance.

Also, the large areas of congruence in choice factors regarded by students and parents provide good directions to institutions of higher learning in their formulation of recruitment strategies as well as to the local Statutory Bodies in the development of guidelines for a preferred institution and guidelines for student retention to enhance graduation rates.

6.2.1 Implications of Finding

A glance at the importance ratings on the two career aspiration factors (recorded in this study for academic interest) reveals that both students and parents have placed the highest emphasis on the “Career Prospect” among the 31 factors surveyed (29 choice factors and two career aspiration factors). This suggests that the Government can highlight the career prospects of certain fields of study where they foresee a shortage of skilled or trained professionals. This strategy is anticipated to encourage and propel

factors between the present model and the Hanson and Litten's (1982) Model, significant institutional and individual choice factors identified in this study could be added on to the lists of 'Influence /Media Used' and 'College Characteristics' in the Hanson and Litten's (1982) Model to enhance the accuracy and application of such influential factors of the college choice process. These institutional factors are : (1) Availability of Field of Study, (2) Availability of 3+0 Option, (3) Timing of Programme Commencement, (4) Programme Recognition, (5) Reputation of Programme, (6) Reputation of Twinning University, (7) Reputation of College, (8) Country of Twinning University, (9) Location of College, (10) Scholarship/Financial Aid Availability, (11) Dormitory Availability, (12) College Facilities, (13) Extra-curricular Activities, (14) Quality of Lecturers, (15) Friendliness Enrolment Counsellors, and (16) Quality of Administrative Staff. Other Individual Factors which are found to be significant in the college choice process and which can be incorporated into the Hanson and Litten's (1982) Model under the 'Influence/Media Used' are : (a) Student's Decision, (b) Family Members' Influence, (c) Alumni Influence, (d) High School Counsellor Influence, (e) Education Counsellor, Influence, and (f) Meeting minimum entrance requirements. Hanson and Litten (1982) had placed the impact of 'Aid' (granted, amount, package) at the point between 'Application' and 'Enrolment' stages in their model, however, the present findings show that the effect of scholarships/financial aid is significant throughout the different phases of College Search, College Application and College Selection. As "Age Group" and "Year-of-Study" of students in this study have shown to affect perceptions towards certain choice factors, these two aspects of demographic background could be added onto Hanson and Litten's (1982) Model to make the impact of 'Background' more complete. As described in the preceding chapters and depicted in the current model of study, this research has extended its investigation beyond the "College Selection" to "College Attendance" and "Graduation" stages. The significance of satisfaction with various choice factors in

students into such fields of study to achieve the desired manpower development distribution, which ultimately supports progress towards achieving the national vision of becoming a developed nation by 2020.

To realise the potential of students, academic quality in terms of curriculum and lecturers needs to be maintained. The Ministry of Education should continue to monitor the course curriculum of twinning programmes in addition to channelling its resources for the training and development of academics. Also, the Ministry of Education should encourage and reinforce all institutions of higher learning to be selective in their lecturer recruitment exercise. Qualified lecturers with positive attitudes are essential for imparting relevant knowledge to students. To the private colleges, to possess a good teaching faculty is the most important selling point to attract enrolment as "Quality of Lecturers" has been regarded as most important by not just students of different abilities but by parents as well.

To ensure the course curriculum meets the requirements set by the Ministry of Education, the Statutory Bodies should regulate the status of courses offered at all private colleges. This will not only maintain the quality of curriculum, but is envisaged to protect students' interests against enrolling into courses which are not approved by the National Accreditation Board and the Ministry of Education. The effect of programme recognition does not just lie in ensuring students learning from the content of a good curriculum, but also in improving students' career prospects as the Government Sector and the established multinational organisations recruit only graduates with recognised degrees. Private colleges would be wise to not ignore the significance of this selection criteria, as its importance has been particularly indicated by local students and parents. To the private colleges, courses which have received

approval by the local Statutory Bodies need to be publicised to instil students and parents with confidence, which in turn is envisaged to enhance enrolment.

To improve the accessibility to higher education locally and to reduce the nation's outflow of local currency, the offering of the 3+0 option should be encouraged by the Ministry of Education to the private institutions. To the private colleges, the offer of 3+0 Option will broaden their market segments, in addition to making available the gaining of foreign degrees to the lower income students who do not have the financial ability to achieve this otherwise.

To speed up achieving the national manpower development target, the waiting period between the completion of one course to the starting of another should not be too long. The Ministry of Education and private colleges may wish to shorten the duration between the completion of pre-university courses (example : STPM, 'A' Level, South Australia Matriculation, and others) and the commencement of undergraduate courses. This could be achieved by strategising the commencement period of undergraduate programmes not too long after the release of results of some major pre-university examinations. The importance of this aspect has been indicated as one of the college selection criteria by respondents in this study. To the parents, the return of educational investment is seen if a student graduates early and starts working. Private colleges with timely commencement period of courses are expected to do better in attracting enrolment.

With regards to the importance of the reputation and country of the twinning university, and the reputation of programme of study, private colleges which offer twinning programmes should seriously consider and select their potential partner universities. It is noted that most students and parents select the twinning university and programme

before they consider the college offering the programme. Two aspects of twinning university to be taken into account are the reputation of the partner university and the country of the partner university. The public seem to favour prestigious universities in addition to the countries where the currency exchange rates are lower and the distance is shorter from home.

As some of the Year 1 and youngest age group students may still be uncertain about their career goals and hence their fields of specialisation, they have indicated the "Availability of Field of Study" to be more important than have those of higher levels and older students. This shows the importance of the availability of fields of studies, as a student will not be able to choose a college if his or her desired specialisation is not offered at that college even though the student may be attracted to other choice attributes of the college. Hence, institutions of higher learning need to investigate the popularity of various fields of specialisation and to cater to this audience by offering the most popular fields of study or 'field varieties' to attract and secure enrolment. As Year 1 and youngest age groups students who have just entered the College should have a clear memory of the college selection experience, their responses should be specially noted.

As students seem to seek advice from not only parents but family members as well, the Ministry of Education and private colleges may like to provide information on career prospects, universities/colleges, and courses to these significant persons of prospective students. Targeting these sources of influence has been found to have impact on a student's college choice. As the study also shows that the final decision of a college is decided by the student, private colleges should pay equal, if not more attention to prospective students, compared to their parents and family members. This finding could be generalised to field choice where the Ministry of Education could educate parents or

family members of prospective students on career prospects for certain fields of study which the Government would like to encourage students to take. This is anticipated to yield better results than just focusing on students alone as they seem to rely on parents' and family members' advice in making their final decisions.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of the nature of college choice, educational research, both short term and longitudinal approaches should be conducted on larger scales continuously. As research in this arena is scarce in this country, both approaches of research should be encouraged to gain a more complete understanding of this question. While full-scale short-term surveys on different institutions will provide findings for comparisons to yield higher validity on the effect of various choice factors, large scale longitudinal approach is envisaged to illustrate the college choice behavioural change over time, that is, which variable is more important to which student and at which point in time.

As most Malaysians are still hesitant about participating in a survey and are reserved about providing accurate information, the Ministry of Education should educate the public on the importance of educational research and the benefits of the findings to its people. Also, the Ministry of Education should encourage institutions of higher learning, especially the private colleges to allow educational research to be conducted at their colleges. The importance of such findings to the Government policy makers and the benefits derived from such research to institutions should be highlighted to institutions of higher learning to seek their co-operation and support for educational surveys to be carried out at their institutions.

Parental influence cannot be denied in a student's college selection. As little has been researched in this area in the country, future research focusing on parents throughout the entire college choice process is recommended. This is anticipated to illuminate how parents develop their perception of various institutions and what appears to be significant to them at different points of the college selection process. As the findings in this study show that parents and students appear to be similar in their college preferences, it is possible to generalise from parents' findings and apply the same to the students in the country. Another potentially useful area for future research is the study of matched sets of students and parents. This is envisaged to provide a better comparison of differences or similarities between a pair of student and parent. With this approach, the effect of gender differences of male and female parents on their male and female children (students) in the college selection process could be better studied and understood.

Future research is also recommended to investigate students' decision and other sources of influence, such as family members' influence, alumni's influence, high school counsellor's influence and peers' influence which appear to have different degrees of significance to students in their decision making process. The findings on the effect of various sources of influence will be more complete if future research were to include other sources which are not examined in this study, such as the impact of media, university published materials and others.

Future research is encouraged to examine the effect of choice factors as a function of socioeconomic status (SES) and parental educational levels. As shown by previous studies, among all demographic variables, SES and parental educational level have the greatest impact on a student and his or her parents' college selection. However, as SES and parental educational level are sensitive demographic issues in Malaysian society,

the Government should educate the public on the importance of such research and the benefits of these findings to the Government policy makers, institutions of higher learning and to its people. Students and parents should be encouraged to participate in such research by providing accurate information and responses.

Further study is also recommended to examine college preference as a function of students' age, year-of-study, academic ability, gender and personality types using personality inventories. Studies on these personal traits together with demographic factors such as SES and parental education hopefully will shed more light on individual differences which influence students' and parents' college selection.

Future research is also recommended to define each choice factor in more details to examine the exact element that is salient to students and parents in their decision making process. For instance, in this study, "College Environment" contains three elements : student composition, safety and cleanliness. To examine the importance of each of these elements, it is recommended that future studies will present each element separately or as a separate factor rather than to present a few components under one choice factor.

Will 'Field of Study' be the determinant for a student to choose a college rather than other choice factors which appear attractive to him? Or will he forego his preferred field of study for these other factors? To address this question, it is recommended that future studies investigate the impact of field of study on the college decision of a student.

Careers prospects, interest in the field of study and a student's calibre in the preferred field of study are areas recommended for future studies. Although these aspects are not determinants of a college choice, they are the deciding factors of the field of study. The

effect of these three field factors cannot be underestimated in the Educational Sector as this can provide a better understanding on how students and parents decide on a field choice. Such findings are important and useful to the Government policy makers, the Ministry of Education, and institutions of higher learning in manpower planning, in the development of courses in various specialisations and in encouraging or propelling students to take up specialisations where there is an inadequate supply of national manpower or where the institutions of higher learning would like to increase its enrolment.

How comfortable students and parents of students feel about their chosen college is an essential feedback to the respective institutions of higher learning, especially to the private colleges where competition is keen, and to the Ministry of Education for the following reasons : (1) as a positive reinforcement of those areas in which the institutions excel, (2) for awareness of potential problems and thus take pre-emptive steps, and (3) for improvement on weaker aspects. Institutions of higher learning should view this exercise positively and regard this as feedback rather than as criticism or exposure of their weaknesses. The Ministry of Education should view the collective feedback as guidelines for planning, the establishment of better quality institutions, the monitoring of institutional performance and for providing support to institutions which need further guidance and assistance.

Finally, a comparison between similar research on institutions of higher learning within and outside the country will provide a better understanding of the nature of college choice and its process.

In conclusion, as Malaysia progresses towards achieving Vision 2020, she needs better trained and skilled manpower with more advanced technology as primary sources of the national economic growth. Hence, to achieve this, the role of education, with an emphasis on science and technology to meet national aspirations, has been accentuated since the mid 1980's. Both public and private institutions have since played, and will continue to play an important role in the development of human resource. Thus, educational quality assurance in meeting the aspirations and needs of the nation, society and individuals is important. Confronted with a two and a half-fold increase in the number of private colleges since 1995 (Maklumat Pendidikan Swasta 1995-2001, Jabatan Pendidikan Swasta, 2002), private institutions of higher learning are faced with keen competition for its survival. To the private colleges which receive no government support in their funding, their vitality in continuing to serve the nation and the people depends on their student enrolment. Hence, an understanding of the student and parent college choice behaviour and process, is crucial to these private colleges in their recruitment activities, and in their management of enrolment.

With the identification of the college choice factors, a college can choose to implement the following : (1) recruit students with attributes consistent with the institution's characteristics, (2) adjust the institution's characteristics to be more consistent with those students possessing characteristics desired by the college, (3) adjust the institution's characteristics to be more consistent with students from larger market segments, (d) influence the enrolment behaviour of prospective students in the search and selection stages by emphasising choice factors considered important to students and parents, (e) provide a wider range of study options which are popular to create learning opportunities. It is envisaged that these adjustments will create a win-win situation for private colleges and students. A private college which is perceived to possess desirable institutional attributes and is more encompassing in its course provision is anticipated to

be more competitive in the market place. Similarly, it is anticipated that potential students' educational opportunities will be enhanced and their learning experience will be more satisfying with private colleges understanding and catering to the needs and preferences of students and thus, optimising students' graduation rates.