

**A MODEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS CHOICE IN MALAYSIA –
A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

With the liberalization of Malaysia government policy in higher education services in the 1990s, student enrollment has increased substantially. This is evidenced by the number of private higher education institutions being set up in Malaysia. However, the higher education institutions (HEIs) are faced with a difficult situation of trying to understand how students select HEIs of their choice. This conceptual paper seeks to explore the criteria with which students select their HEIs and build a conceptual model to suit to the local higher education services industry. Factors influence student's choice of HEIs are student characteristics, external influences, college attributes. Also, in the model, information satisfaction as a mediating variable is discussed. Areas for future research are highlighted.

Keywords: influence, student's choice of higher education institution, higher education institution, student characteristics, external influences, college attributes.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian higher education sector has undergone substantial growth as a result of efforts taken by the Ministry of Education to expand the education industry. It is the government's long-term goal to make Malaysia a regional center of excellence in education. The growth of higher education in Malaysia can be seen in several areas: increase in students' enrolment, increase in number of higher education institution (HEIs), increase in government spending, additional government policies in promoting education and the country's continuous need for human resources (Ariffin et al, 2008, 2).

The increase of students' enrolment and number of HEIs can be seen as table 1.1 and table 1.2 respectively below.

Table 1.1 Enrollments in Tertiary Education Institutions in Malaysia by Level of Study, 2000-2010

Level of Study	Number of Students								
	2000			2005			2010		
	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total
Certificate	23,816	81,754	105,570	37,931	94,949	132,880	141,290	143,480	284,770
Diploma	91,398	117,056	208,454	98,953	131,428	230,381	285,690	188,680	474,3470
First Degree	170,794	59,932	230,726	212,326	110,591	322,917	293,650	134,550	428,200
Masters	24,007	2,174	26,181	34,436	4,202	38,638	111,550	5,770	117,320
PhD	3,359	131	3,490	6,742	140	6,882	21,410	270	21,680
Total	313,374	261,047	574,421	390,388	341,310	731,698	853,590	472,750	1,326,340
Source: 9 th Malaysia Plan (http://www.epu.jpm.my/rm9/bahasa/Bab11.pdf)									

Table 1.2 List of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia

PHEIs as at October 2009	
Categories of PHEIs	Number
University Status	
Private University	21
Private University College	22
Foreign University branch campus in Malaysia	5
Non-university Status	405
Total	453
Source: Ministry of Higher Education (http://jpt.mohe.gov.my/menudirektori.php)	

Nevertheless, the increased public demand for tertiary education has led to higher education market becoming monopolistically competitive. Both, public higher education institutions (PUHEs) and PHEIs are competing for student enrollment. PHEIs mainly enroll student who have failed in admission in admission into public universities and there is a fierce competition among most of these institutions in winning students enrollment. This highly competitive environment has resulted in an estimated decline in student enrollment by approximately 20 percent across the board, especially among the smaller private colleges with student enrolment ranging between 400-500 students (Zalina, 2003).

Over the years, models of college choice have assisted college administrators in identifying the pressures and influences that guide institutional recruiting policies. Without models, “colleges may overlook ways to increase the effectiveness of their recruiting or, conversely, overestimate the influence of recruiting in which they do engage” (Chapman, 1981).

In Malaysia higher education environment, Baharun (2002) found that students’ selection of a university was mainly determined by types of academic programmes available, quality of education, administration standards, faculty qualification, and convenient and accessible location. Based on the preliminary study of final year management students, he argued that

these selection factors should guide university administrators in developing the preferred image of their universities.

Another study conducted by Keling (2006) concluded that there were six (6) main institutional factors that attract students to study in Malaysian private universities. The factors are namely reputation of the institution, future graduates' job prospects, nature of the institutions, lower costs, affiliation of the institutions, entry flexibility and institutions' campus environment. He argued that it was essential for institutions to have the capabilities and offerings of the said factors to be attractive to the prospective students.

Two years later, Yusof, Ahmad, Tahudin & Ravindran (2008) conducted a similar study as per Baharun and Keling. However, their purpose of the research was to examine the expectations of higher education institutions among *prospective students*. Prospective students are those who are about to complete secondary school education and who were at the crossroads in choosing the place to further their studies (Yusof, Ahmad, Tajudin & Ravindran, 2008). It was concluded that availability of required programme at the university/college, academic reputation of the university/college, quality of the faculty/lecturers and financial assistance offered by the university/college were the four most important factors that prospective students expect before they enroll in university/college.

A research carried out by Ford et al (1999) revealed that the factors that students from New Zealand and USA considered in choosing higher learning institution do not correspond. To this end, the rank importances of the factors for New Zealand students were academic reputation, career opportunities, and program issues. However, the order of importance for the USA students was academic reputation, cost/time issues and program issues. Indeed, Ford

et al (1999) commented that "...trying to develop a single model of important facts to apply cross-culturally might be a mistake."

Four years later, a research carried out by Garma & Yoon (2003) also revealed that the differences exist between Australian and Malaysian of students in the factors they consider in selecting a university. Malaysian students rated quality of teaching, research produced by academics and academic qualification higher than Australian students. This concurs with the studied done by Ford et al (1999) that students from difference culture background have different factors to be considered when choosing a higher education to study.

Based on the above statements made by Ford et al (1999) and Garma & Yoon (2003), it can be concluded that student college choice model vary from one country to another country. Thus, this paper attempts to develop a conceptual model on student's choice of HEIs in Malaysia. However, for the purpose of this study, the conceptual model to be developed will adapt and modify the models developed by Chapman (1981) and Ismail (2009).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1981, D. Chapman introduced one of the first models of student college choice. Chapman (1981) described it as a "general conceptual model of student college choice that specifies the important variable sets and their interrelationships." Chapman's general conceptual model of student college choice is based on the interaction between the students' characteristics of socioeconomic status, aptitude, educational aspiration and achievement and a series of external influences (see figure 1, Appendix A).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The external influences fall into three categories: 1) significant other – friends, parents, high school teachers and counselors; 2) fixed characteristics of the institution – cost (financial aid), location, program availability; and 3) communication efforts of the college – campus visits, written information, admissions and recruiting activities.

The interactive effects of the factors in this model appear to directly influence the student's college choice decisions. Chapman model's acknowledges the longitudinal nature of the college choice process. Specifically, the model looks at the impact of student characteristics and external influences on the general expectation of college life. According to Chapman (1981: 499), many high seniors "share a highly stereotyped, idealized image of college life, an image not representative of any actual institution."

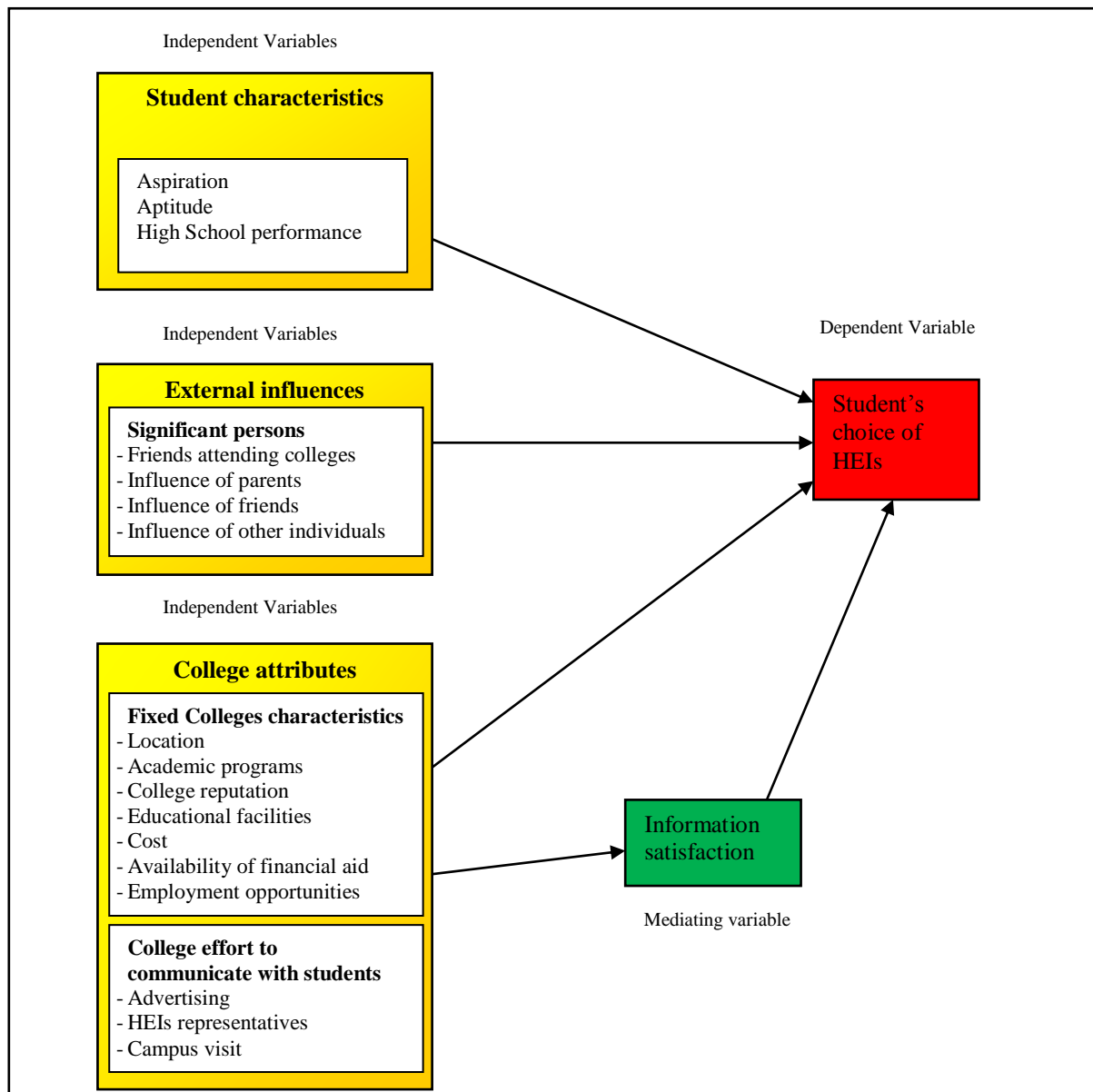
Chapman (1981: 499) was careful to note that his model "does not exhaust the possibilities of influence." As such, the model highlights the major factors that influence the college choice process but does not contain the full range of possibilities. This model could best be characterized as a conceptual model which describes the interactions and influences on the college selection process; the model does not have defined phases or stages. This model has served as a catalyst for later models of student college choice.

On the other hand, the model developed by Ismail (2009) explains the mediating variable that is "information satisfaction" that mediated external influences and student's choice of HEIs.

The finding concluded that information satisfaction plays a significant role in mediating the relationship between external influences and student's choice of HEIs.

2.1 Conceptual Model

Figure 2: Proposed conceptual model of student's choice of HEIs showing the relationship between student characteristics, external influences, College attribute, information satisfaction and student's choice of HEIs.



Sources:

Adapted and modified from:

1. Chapman, D. 1981. A model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 52(5), 490-505.
2. Ismail, N. 2009. *Mediating effect of information satisfaction on college choice*. Paper presented in Oxford Business & Economics Conference Program. UK.

Student characteristics

a) Aspiration

Carpenter and Fleishman (1987), Gilmour, et al (1981) and Jackson (1978) found that student educational aspirations are positively associated with post-secondary participation. In short, the prospective student's personal aspirations have an important impact on the decision to attend college. Aspirations and career plans of potential students are key indicators of college attendance.

b) Aptitude

According to Hossler (1984), students who are aware of their ability to achieve academic success in college tend to attempt post secondary education. Manski & Wise (1983) stated that individual self-selection plays a critical role in the predisposition to attend college.

c) High school performance

Borus (1993) found in a study of prospective college students that high school activities were a positive predictor of a student's predisposition to attend college. Successful participation in high school activities are related to the predisposition and achievement in college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Manski & Wise, 1993).

External Influences

a) Friends attending colleges

Kohn, Manski & Mundel (1976) and Manski & Wise (1983) stated that there is a peer effect that effects a student's predisposition to attend a post-secondary institution. They state that the larger the proportion of a student's classmates plan to enroll in college, the more likely that he or she will also make this choice.

b) Influence of parents

A study conducted by Baharun (2006) stated that advice and recommendation from family was the most important factor, with advice from peers ranking second that impact on student's choice of tertiary education.

c) Influence of friends

Hossler (1984) reports that friends can be almost as important as parents in the decision to attend college. Weiler (1994) is blunt in his research study by stating peer pressure is a variable or factor that influences a student's predisposition to attend college.

d) Influence of other individuals

Family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and admissions counselors can influence the students to attending college. Ceja (2006) studied the role of older siblings and concluded that although the parents tended to pay for the applications fees and handled the other economic concerns, the older brothers and sisters provided advice that was sought after and often heeded by the younger students. Ceja said that this was more common in families where the older siblings were first generation college attendees. Also, according to the study by Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999), ninth-grade students with siblings who had attended or who were currently attending college, were more likely to have college aspirations than those without siblings.

College Attributes

a) Location

Servier (1996) stated that research has consistently shown that college or university location can be a major factor for potential student's decision to apply and enroll. Some students may

be looking for a school close to their hometown or place of work for convenience and accessibility (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Sevier, 1994).

A study by Kohn, Manski & Mundel (1976) discusses that an important factor in student predisposition to attend college is the close proximity of a higher education institution to home. It was found that a low-cost, nearby college was an important stimulator of a student's decision to further his or her education. Hossler & Gallagher (1987) also concluded that the proximity to a college campus does affect college attendance rates. Students who live close to a campus are more likely to attend college though they may not attend the campus located near home.

b) Academic programs

A study conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia by Yusof, Ahmad, Tajudin & Ravindran (2008) also found that availability of the required programme as “the very importance attributes” for first year university students to choose a particular higher education institution.

Ford, Joseph & Joseph (1999) also found that program issues such as range of programs of study, flexibility of degree program, major change flexibility and range of degree options are the most important factors for students to choose higher education institutions.

Nurlida (2009) indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information satisfaction with respect to academic recognition (external influence).

c) College reputation

Institutional image and reputation has a tremendous effect on college choice. It is a powerful influence on potential student and college reputation is extremely persuasive in the college search and selection process. Students value the reputation of a college and it rates as an influential factor by students in the college choice process (Lay & Maguire, 1981; Murphy, 1981; Servier, 1986; Keling, 2006).

Keling, Krishnan & Nurtjahja (2007) stated that the most influential factor that students will evaluate in selecting their choice of institution was reputation of the institution. The study was conducted in Malaysia with an average mean score of 3.730.

d) Educational facilities

Absher & Crawford, 1996; Hassan, Azmi & Mohamad (2008) stated that educational facilities such as classrooms, laboratories and libraries are important in a student's selection of a college or university.

e) Cost

It was reviewed by Joseph & Joseph (2000) that cost-related issues seem to have more importance as years go by. For instance, Houston (1979) found they were at the bottom of the scale, while in Webb (1993) and Joseph et al. (1998) they are one of the most important elements. Jackson (1986) concluded that price is a negative influence on college choice while financial aid to reduce costs is a positive influence.

f) Availability of financial aid

A study conducted by Yusof et al. (2008) found that financial assistance offered by university as one of the four very important attributes expected from a particular higher education institution of choice. Thus, students who receive financial aid awards are more likely to enter college (Jackson, 1988; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983).

Nurlida (2009) studied on mediating effect of information on college choice indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information satisfaction with respect financial factors (external influences) which include financial aids and affordable fees.

g) Employment opportunities

Students are often attracted to post-secondary education because of the career opportunities it may provide (Sevier, 1998). Paulsen (1990) states that students often make college choices based on existing job opportunities for college graduates. Students are interested in outcomes. They are influenced by what graduates are doing, what graduate schools they attend and contributions that they are making to society (Sevier, 1997).

h) Advertising

College marketing through the media has grown tremendously in the last ten years. Television and radio advertising have been shown to be particularly effective in building institutional image and visibility, especially in specific geographical areas (Hossler, Bean & Associates, 1990).

i) HEIs representatives

Lay & Maguire (1981) found that visits to high schools by college admissions representatives were rated as an extremely effective influence for prospective students. College representatives were rated as a top influential factor in a study by Rowe (1980). These visits can be very conducive and beneficial for both the student and the admissions representative (Hossler, Bean & Associates, 1990).

j) Campus visit

The campus visit is often a college or university's best recruiting tools. It is a major factor in the decision-making process (Sevier, 1992). Hossler, Bean & Associates (1990) found that the campus visit was the most important factor influencing a student's enrollment decision.

Information Satisfaction

A study conducted by Nurlida (2009) revealed that information satisfaction plays a significant role in mediating the relationship between external influences and student's choice of HEIs. Nurlida (2009) mentioned that student's choice of HEIs among the students is due their satisfaction of the information they have acquired regarding the attributes of that particular colleges on which their evaluation was based upon. Thus, it can be implied that the further the information meets the prerequisite of the students' choice criteria (based on the college attributes as per figure 2 above), the more will the students have on their choice of HEIs.

3.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As this paper is conceptual in nature, future empirical research can be carried out to test the fitness of the conceptual model. It can be tested both in the PUHEs and PHEIs.

It is also important to recognize that other variables or constructs that may possibly have an impact on student's choice of HEIs. For instance, future research can explore student characteristics such as socioeconomic status whether it has an impact student's choice of HEIs.

Studies have successfully indentified various external influences such as parents, siblings, friends, school counselors that influence students in choosing higher learning institution. Nevertheless, "campus security" has yet to be explored by the researchers. Therefore, it would be more conclusive if future empirical studies be carried out to find out whether campus security is considered an important factor to be considered when choosing a higher learning institution.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

The fact that literature on student college choice model indicated that students from different countries choose different factors in selecting HEIs. The conceptual paper aims to develop a conceptual model on student's choice of HEIs in Malaysia. The model is developed based on research done by Chapman (1981) and Nurlida (2009). Students characteristics, external influences and college attributes are the factors the influence the student's choices of HEIs. A mediating variable has also been identified in the model and it is known as information satisfaction. Other variables which are not found in the Chapman model (1981) are also included in the model i.e. college reputation, educational facilities, employment opportunities, friends attending college and influence of other individuals. Using the factors mentioned above, HEIs could restrategise their marketing strategies on order to attract and retain students.

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APPENDIX A

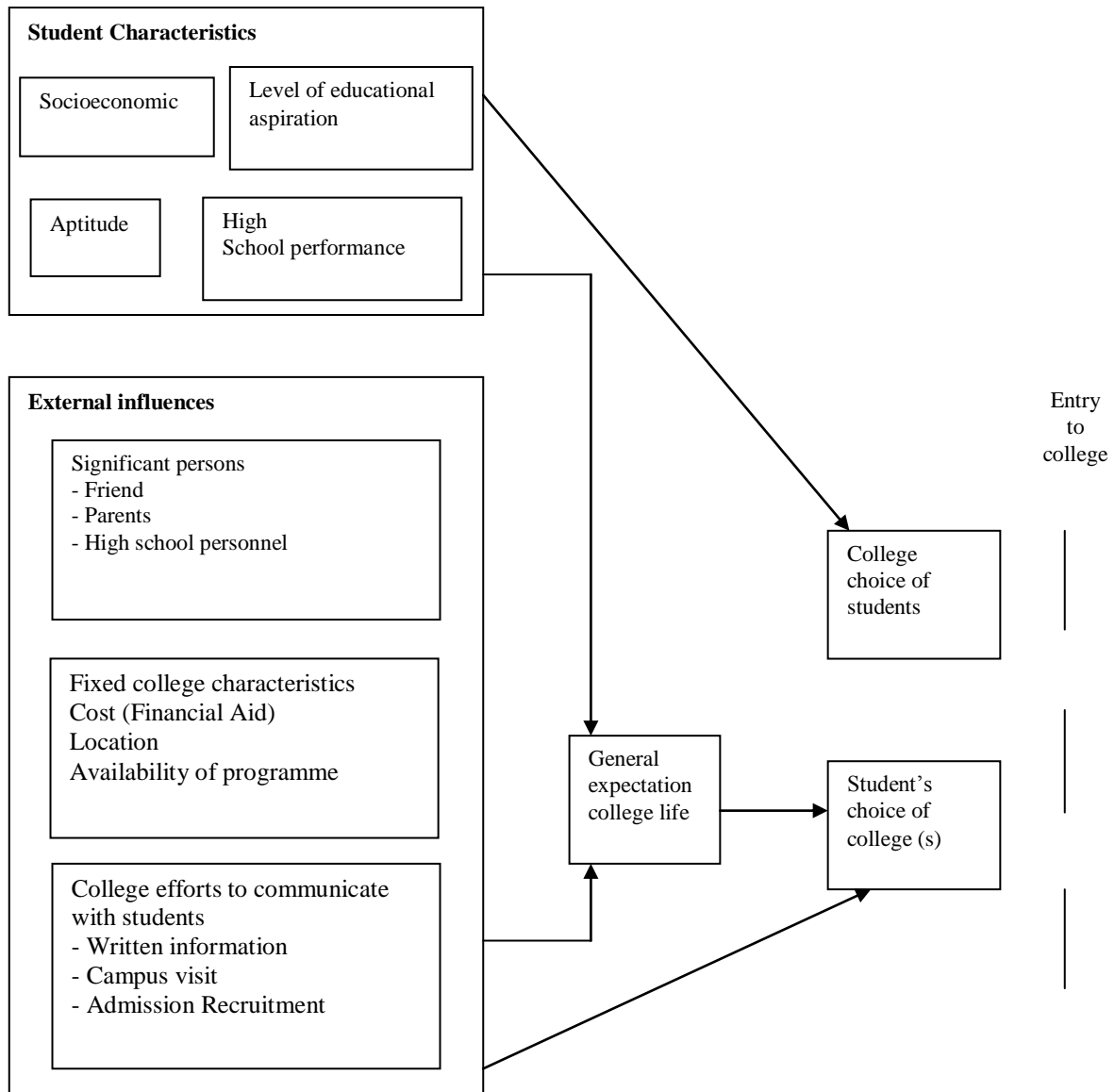


Figure 1. Chapman Model (adapted from Chapman D., 1981)