Chapter 8

Factors Influencing Postgraduate Students' University Choice in Nigeria.

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An understanding of postgraduate students' choice criteria for universities selection is essential for marketing higher education, securing the long-term success of the universities, as well as its marketing strategy. While previous studies have focused on developed countries and undergraduate students, this chapter explores factors influencing postgraduate students' decision making. The study recognises that the rapid expansion of the enrolment of undergraduates has also stimulated students' enthusiasm for postgraduate studies and importantly, postgraduate students have prior experience in a university service environment (compared to undergraduate students). The semi-structured interview was conducted with first-year postgraduate students at a private university in South-West, Nigeria. Some of the participants were new to the university while some did their undergraduate studies there. Findings from the study revealed four key factors which are the desire to study for a postgraduate degree, the facilities of the University, including its geographical location, the courses on offer and influence of other stakeholders like parents, siblings and friends. This influence of stakeholders aligns with the fundamental values in a collectivist culture like Nigeria. This study contributes to literature on higher education marketing, especially in Africa and for postgraduate students. The chapter presents an integral insight into marketing higher education in Nigeria and Africa, as this is an under-researched area.

Keywords: Student choice, higher education marketing, postgraduate, Nigeria, Africa, University, Location, Stakeholders

Introduction

An understanding of postgraduate students' choice criteria for universities selection is essential for marketing higher education, securing the long-term success of the universities, as well as its marketing strategy. A strategy that is focused on the needs of the students per se implies that the students are offered value. This can only be achieved when the universities have a clear understanding of the needs of the students they serve and respond to such needs. The choice-making process has been a subject of different consideration among scholars in different contexts. It has been considered very complex (Chapman, 1981; Moogan & Baron, 2003) as there are several factors to consider.

In recent times, the determination of the selection criteria for higher institutions by students, especially amongst universities, became noticeable as necessary research that will assist the universities in knowing how to position themselves. Previous studies on choice-making process among the students of universities focused on undergraduate students of private and public universities (Paik & Shim, 2013; Poo, et al., 2012; Maringe, 2006), as well as the selection criteria for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Nachatar Singh, et al., 2014) and branch campuses (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

Most of these studies were done in developed countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, America, and other developing countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, to mention a few. There is a gap in geographical location of the study of universities' selection criteria. There is also a level gap in the study of selection criteria among universities, as previous studies focused on undergraduate students in private and public universities. The selection criteria among postgraduate students have not received any significant attention.

Using an African setting, this study aims to determine the postgraduate students' choice criteria for selecting universities. As there is a lack of research which investigates the issue from a country perspective, Nigeria was selected as the context for this study. With a population of over 200 million, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with the median age of 17.9 years. The country the largest higher education market in sub-Saharan Africa and there is a growing demand for higher education (Olaleye et al., 2019).

Besides, focus on postgraduate marketing and decision making, provides an essential contribution towards marketing higher education. Firstly, the rapid expansion of the enrolment of undergraduates has also stimulated students' enthusiasm for postgraduate (PG) studies (Liu & Morgan, 2015). Secondly, postgraduate students have prior experience in a university service environment (compared to undergraduate students). They have a different expectation and can be more demanding and selective in their choices (Arambewela & Hall, 2007). They are also expected to evaluate universities differently, resulting in the formation of different attitudes towards a university they may wish to attend. Thirdly, postgraduate students expect a wide variety of information which is both educational and professional, but also involves lifestyles, as they are already more experienced and familiar with educational choices and decisions (Galan et al., 2015). Lastly, as universities seek to become more research-intensive, expanding their postgraduate portfolios has become a critical strategic objective (Vasudeva & Mogaji, 2019). This sector is growing fast, and universities are conscious of the challenges they face in coping with this dynamic environment (Olaleye et al., 2019).

This chapter contributes to the literature on marketing of higher education, especially with regards to Africa and postgraduate students. It provides insights into the factors influencing the decision-making process of postgraduate students and provides a basis for developing further research initiatives. Managerially, the current study offers implications that highlight the need for university managers and administrators to be more strategic with the marketing communication, building relationship with stakeholders and enhancing students 'experience. A better understanding of student choice, especially at postgraduate level, can help to inform marketing practices and customise marketing strategies.

Following this introduction, section two of the paper considered the review of literature, section three reflected on the research question, section four captured the methodology used to carry out the study, section five revealed the results, section six presented the discussion of the findings of the study, while section seven captured the conclusion arising from the findings revealed by the study.

Literature Review

Higher Education in Nigeria

The National Policy on Education in Nigeria (NERDC, 2013) defines higher education as post-secondary education comprising universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, including such institutions as may be allied to them. In Nigeria, higher education is involved in the traditional functions of teaching, research and community service to develop human resources and disseminate necessary knowledge needed in industry and other sectors. Although tertiary education is offered by majorly the colleges of education, polytechnics and universities in Nigeria. Many students graduating from secondary schools prefer to seek admission into universities rather than in the colleges of education or polytechnics (Akinwumi and Oladosu, 2015; Stephen, 2015), evidenced by the large proportion of students that apply to study in universities every academic year (Aluede and Idogho, 2012).

The roots of higher education in Nigeria dated to the colonial period when Nigerian leaders demanded a university as a means to their emancipation. The agitation of Nigerians for a more comprehensive higher education provision led to the constitution of the Asquith and Elliot Commission on Higher Education. Their reports in 1943 favoured the establishment of universities in Nigeria. Consequently, in 1948, the University College Ibadan was founded as an affiliate of the University of London. University College continued as the only university institution in Nigeria until 1960 (Jubril, 2003).

Even though Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, it opened its first university years before that. At first, there was Yaba College, which opened its doors to students in 1932. It was the oldest tertiary institution in the country. In 1948, it moved to Ibadan, where it became University College of Ibadan and later the University of Ibadan. In April 1959, the Nigerian government commissioned an inquiry (Ashby Commission) to advise it on the higher education needs of the new nation. On the strength of the recommendations, six-generation universities were established. These were University of Nigeria, Nsukka was founded in 1960, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (formerly, the University of Ife) was established in 1961. Ahmadu Bello University Zaria and University of Lagos were both established in 1962, while the

University College transformed into a substantive university also in 1962 and University of Benin in 1970.

Consequently, the six universities established during this period 1960-1970 became known as first-generation federal universities. Between 1975 and 1977, seven new universities were established which was to reflect the then 19 state structure. These second-generation universities as they were referred to include the University of Calabar (1975), the University of Ilorin (1976), the University of Jos (1975), the University of Sokoto (1977), the University of Port Harcourt (1977), and Bayero University, Kano (1977).

With the growing population, there is also the growing demands for higher education, especially at the undergraduate level. Admission into universities in Nigeria is critical as there is an ever-increasing demand for university space (Adeyemi, 2001). Over 2 million prospective students registered for UTME in an academic year; all are competing for 750,000 places, potentially leaving over a million qualified college-age Nigerians without a post-secondary place (Parr, 2018).

Despite its vast population, Nigeria is making effort to improve its educational system, albeit a challenge (Olaleye et al., 2019). There is an unprecedented increase in number, as new universities are established by the federal government across geo-political zones, while private license was issued to private operators by the government. Nigeria's University education system includes both public and private universities. Both Federal and State Governments run public universities. There are currently 170 approved universities in Nigeria comprising 43 federal universities, 48 state universities, and 79 private universities (NUC, 2019). Up until 1999, the establishment, ownership, management and funding of universities and all tertiary educational institutions remained the exclusive reserve of federal, regional and state Governments (Akpotu & Akpochafo, 2009).

The demand for higher education is very high, yet the supply is little. The public universities are not meeting these demands, and this has led to high numbers of private universities aspiring to meet this market demands. The policy of privatisation in Nigeria has allowed the private initiative to participate in the provision and management of education. This supply of universities and demand for higher education presents a market dynamic in the higher education system of Nigeria. It is not surprising to see some parents prefer to send their children to universities in neighbouring African countries, or even to Europe and America. There has been report of Nigerian students going to Ghana to study, and Nigeria loses revenue annually because of the choice of Nigerian students to gain an education in other countries (Hope, 2018).

The Nigerian university system offers more than 144 courses across different universities. The courses range from Law, Medicine, Medical Sciences, Engineering& Technology, English & literary studies, Political Sciences, Theatre & Media Arts, Mass Communication, Business & Management based courses (Business Administration, Marketing, Accounting, Finance and Insurance etc.) It is noteworthy that available statistics show that the approved capacity for the NUC for each of the federal universities is between 7000 and 15000 as of May 3rd, 2018.

Challenges in higher education in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. There is the marketing dynamics of supply of university place by the universities and the demand for those spaces from prospective students (Olaleye et al., 2019). There are the underfunded public universities which have a heritage and quite affordable. Likewise, private universities are meeting the needs

of prospective students seeking higher education. Besides, there are opportunities to travel outside the country to study. Prospective students are faced with options, and they must decide; therefore this study aims to explore this decision-making process of these students, especially for their postgraduate studies, and to understand different factors that influence their choice.

Student Choice

Understanding student choice making has received much academic attention in recent time. It is becoming essential for university managers to understand how prospective students decide on which university to study and where they get their information, as this can influence universities' marketing strategies (Simões & Soares, 2010). Taking into consideration the marketisation and globalisation of higher education, which allows universities to attract more home and prospective international students, strategic marketing is becoming more important for universities to survive in the competitive higher education market. These market dynamics have necessitated the need to understand prospective students as customers whose choice behaviour, factors influencing the choices, and source of information, are changing (Le et al., 2019)

Higher education choice is a high-risk decision (Le et al., 2019), and the decision of which university to study can have further long-term effects on the student's career (Walsh et al., 2015). This decision, however, can be influenced by many factors which include external influences in combination with the characteristics of students (Chapman, 1981). In developing a contemporary higher education student-choice model for developed countries, Vrontis et al., (2007) recognised that students' characteristics, influencers, high school and college characteristics, environments and college actions, influences student choice of university.

This suggests that a wide range of factors influence the decision of which university to apply. Though generally classified into two form - characteristics (and related factors) of universities and the information sources from which they seek advice and information (Le et al., 2019), many studies have made an effort to identify decision-making profiles of students who choose a Higher Education Institution (HEI) (Adeyanju, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the lists of choice factors are diversified across studies.

In understanding students' preferences for selecting universities in Western Australia, Soutar & Turner (2002) identified 'course suitability', 'academic reputation', 'job prospects', and 'teaching quality' as the top four determinants. Le et al. (2019) reported that 'future job prospects', 'teaching quality', 'staff expertise', and 'course content' were important choice factors for Vietnamese students. In Scotland, undergraduate students across the six universities indicated that 'academic reputation', 'distance from home' and 'location' were the top three factors that influenced their choice of which university to study (Briggs, 2006). When Dao & Thorpe (2015) asked for factors influencing Vietnamese students' choice of university, they found that 'facilities and service', 'programme', and 'price' were most important, while Veloutsou et al., (2004) also found that 'content of specific courses', 'university's reputation' and department's reputation were essential factors influencing choices.

The variation in factors that affects student choices is dependent on the research context (Le et al., 2019) which includes the destination of the prospective students (home or international), the country of study and also the level of education (undergraduate or postgraduate). This

further highlights a gap in understanding from two contexts - firstly, considering the dynamics and challenges of higher education in Africa, how prospective students are making their choices; and secondly, how are postgraduate students deciding.

Research Question

Recognising the value in understanding factors influencing student choices, its implication on higher education marketing strategies and the dearth of empirical understanding within an African context, this study is developed to specify a research question which is:

What are the factors influencing postgraduate students' university choice in Nigeria?

Methodology

Semi-Structured Interview

To address the research objective, qualitative research was conducted. While the topic of student choice and decision making has received increased attention of late, mainly due to the marketisation of higher education, the choice-making process and influence on postgraduate decision remain unclear. It was, therefore, deemed appropriate to employ qualitative research using semi-structured interview to understand better and explain the decision-making process of postgraduate students (Sklyar et al., 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Interpretivist, qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015) with first-year postgraduate students at a private university in South-West Nigeria was undertaken to develop an understanding of how and to what extent different factors influence their decision to study at the university for their postgraduate studies. The qualitative methodology can independently provide more in-depth insight into the research, thereby encouraging participants to reveal the causalities behind their decision (Farinloye et al., 2019). It is ideally suited to exploratory research (Clifton & Handy, 2001) that identifies the extent, empirical details, and the narrative of the subject matter (Cass & Faulconbridge, 2016). Qualitative research draws out explanations in context by probing participants about their decision-making processes and factors that influenced their choices. It enables the researcher to have a conversation with the participants and gain a better understanding of their experiences regarding the subject matter (Willig, 2008).

Though constrained by time, finance, and personnel, this methodology can enhance the trustworthiness of the research by guiding the participants (Farinloye et al., 2019; Rau & Manton, 2016) and improve the response rate to enhance control over the sample (Axhausen, 2008).

Sample Recruitment and Representativeness

In this study, following the rationale outlined above regarding the qualitative methods, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with incoming first-year postgraduate students at a private university in South-West, Nigeria. Some of the participants were new to the university while some did their undergraduate studies there. Criterion sampling was used in this study. Criterion sampling is a type of purposive sampling that involves the selection of cases that meet a predefined criterion of importance (Stephenson et al., 2016; Patton, 2002). In

the case of this study, we focused on the critical period where students have just entered the University for their postgraduate studies. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 35, Female (56.5%, n = 13) and male (43.6%, n = 10). A profile of the 23 participants who participated in the investigation is presented in Table 1. Participants were assured of their anonymity and that no personal details would be shared.

S/N	Gender	Age	First Degree
P1	Female	22	First degree (BSc) from the same University
P2	Female	23	First degree (BSc) from the same University
P3	Female	23	First degree (BSc) from the same University
P4	Female	23	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P5	Female	23	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P6	Female	23	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P7	Female	23	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P8	Female	24	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P9	Female	26	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P10	Female	28	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P11	Female	28	First degree (HND) from Polytechnic
P12	Female	30	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P13	Female	35	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P14	Male	22	First degree (BSc) from the same University
P15	Male	23	First degree (BSc) from the same University
P16	Male	23	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P17	Male	23	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P18	Male	24	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P19	Male	25	First degree (BSc) from another Private University
P20	Male	25	First degree (HND) from Polytechnic
P21	Male	27	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P22	Male	29	First degree (BSc) from Public University
P23	Male	32	First degree (HND) from Polytechnic

Data Collection

Data for the investigation were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We conducted interviews, which permit in-depth inquiry into the experiences of participants (Patton 2002), to elicit an understanding of the various considerations that might have impacted on the choice of a university at the postgraduate level. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by an experienced research assistant from Nigeria, who also played a significant role in the interview process to answer the research questions and to achieve the research objectives. In total, twenty-three (23) interviews were conducted during the first four weeks of the first semester in 2018, by which time it became apparent that no new information of relevance was being collected. The semi-structured interview guide acted as a reference point and provided an outline to encourage the participants to answer the same open-ended questions (Stephenson et al., 2016). Also, the interview guide was paramount in managing the limited time that was available for the interviews (Patton 2002). The interviews lasted on average

between 30 and 52 min depending on the level of interaction from the participants, location, and time constraints.

Data Analysis

Once saturation was achieved, transcripts were translated and exported into NVivo software for analysis and coding of the data. Subsequent analysis was informed by analytical procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive thematic analysis was carried out using the six phases of analysis established by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, by reading the transcripts over and over again, the researchers became familiar with and immersed in the data to better understand the residents' travel behaviour. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) noted that 'immersion usually involves repeated reading of the data and actively reading the data; searching for meanings, patterns, and so on'. Secondly, the transcripts were imported into NVIVO, a qualitative analysis software tool (Farinloye et al., 2019), and initial codes were generated. The themes are data-driven, and they are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 2002). The coding of the data was carried out without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thirdly, there was a search for reoccurring themes around the factors that influenced the student' choices. These were considered child nodes. Fourthly, the themes (child nodes) were reviewed and refined as it became more evident that some of these themes were closely related and some were dormant. Dormant themes were subsequently removed. For example, uninterrupted calendar was merged with the reputation. Likewise, accommodation was grouped with facilities. Fifthly, the refined child nodes were considered satisfactory and grouped under the parent nodes. After the detailed analysis, four parent nodes emerged that illustrate factors that influence postgraduate students' choice of university. Lastly, the themes are presented in the following sections with a descriptive summary for each category (Saunders et al., 2012)

Credibility and Authenticity

To assure trustworthiness, several procedures recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were implemented. There was a 'member check' to ensure the credibility and authenticity of this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe the member check as a respondent validation where the transcribed interviews are sent back to the participants for verification. It is considered the most critical provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were allowed to check the interview transcripts, to comment on themes emerging from the interview data, and to discuss with the researcher the main conclusions emerging from the investigation (Iacopini & Hayden, 2017). As suggested by Shenton (2004), the emphasis is on whether the participants consider that their words match what they intended to state. A detailed description of quotes from the interviews was used to bolster each point. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 125), a 'thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and the study.' Another was peer debriefing, which occurred routinely during the investigation (Iacopini & Hayden, 2017) because the research was carried out across two different countries. There were regular meetings on Skype and WhatsApp to hear reports of the findings. Besides, a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out this study was documented in the form of an 'audit trail', as advised by Shenton (2004). The assurance of analytic rigour is to ensure that data was not selectively used and that the researcher's position did not overpower the participants' voices, which can be evidenced from the audit trails.

Findings

The study qualitatively explores the factors influencing postgraduate students' decision-making process. Students are taking personal responsibility for making a choice and being influenced by what the university has to offer and the opinions of other stakeholders such as families and friends. As an inductive thematic analysis was carried out, the themes are data-driven, and they are strongly linked to the data. The coding of the data was carried out without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following section presents four key factors that influence the student's choice of university for postgraduate studies.

The Desire

Unfulfilled desire to study abroad

There is a desire to study further for a postgraduate degree. Students wish they can travel outside Nigeria to pursue a postgraduate degree (often Masters) because they believe it is more affordable. Masters is for one year, instead of 3 or 4 years for the undergraduate degree. Students have the opportunity of improving their career progression, and however, when this desire becomes unfulfilled either though visa denial, application denial or cost, they, therefore, consider options available in Nigeria.

> 'I had wanted to travel to the UK for my Master's, but my Visa was denied. It was a painful experience. I had raised my hope, and I just did not want to go back and sit at home or look for job, so I enrolled for a Master's degree here' P9   Female 26

> 'I had the desire to study in America for my Master's degree, but unfortunately, my parent's business went down, the money was not coming in, they could not afford my fees, so they compensated me by stating I should do my Master's in Nigeria. I had to look around, sending emails to the universities and checking their websites' P19 Male   25

Motivation to Study

This unfulfilled desire does not take away the motivation to study further. The desire to acquire more knowledge influences the students to seek out for universities in Nigeria that they like and meet their needs. While some graduates may decide to look for jobs after their undergraduate degree, some individuals make a conscious decision for further studies. Often this is because they have enjoyed their undergraduate studies. They believe age is still on their side and they have parental financial support.

> 'I did enjoy my undergraduate studies, I engaged well with my lecturers, and I thought it would be nice to do my Masters here'. P3   Female 23

> I am still young, and I am eager to learn. I had an excellent time at the university. I missed my lectures, and I had to come back. P15 Male   23

In addition, participants with the Higher National Diploma (from the Polytechnic) believes that their Diploma will not be considered at the same level as a bachelor's degree. Based on this, they are motivated to study for and acquire a postgraduate degree from a university as they want to make effort to improve their employability with an additional qualification.

> *HND is often looked down as inferior, but I had to motivate myself to go beyond the limits of my HND. My motivation became a factor that influenced me to study further.* P11 Female 28

> *Likewise, those with lower classification of their undergraduate degree are also motivated to explore postgraduate degree opportunities. They believe that having a postgraduate degree can complement their lower classified bachelor's degree.*

> *I had a 2:2, and I know that I may not get the job I need in the competitive labour market, so I had to take responsibility and enrol for a postgraduate degree. I must work harder this time.* P2 Female 23

The desire to be different

This further leads to the desire to be different and stand out among prospective job seekers. With most job seekers having a bachelor's degree, participants consider a Master's degree a required qualification to put themselves on a higher pedestal. Likewise, those with HND believes their postgraduate degree makes them different from others and can improve their chances of getting a job.

> *Everyone I know has 2:1 bachelor's degree, we all finished from private universities, and we will all be looking for job. After the National Service, I thought I had to improve myself and set myself apart. That desire influenced my decision to enrol for the Master's degree.* P17 Male 23

> *Those with BSc are not even getting the job, and you can imagine me with HND. I thought I could not continue to struggle without taking any action. I had to apply for a Master's degree as my experience became very relevant.* P20 Male 25

The University

Reputation

Having decided to study for a postgraduate degree, the search begins to determine which university to attend. The reputation of the university plays an essential role in making this decision. The idea of reputation is, however, relative, as some consider this based on their undergraduate university, based on word of mouth and the positive things people have said about the university, while others consider it based on the uninterrupted academic calendar. Prospective students want to attend a reputable university and their perception of reputation influences their decision. There was, however, little indication of interest in ranking or research output as a measure of reputation.

I did my bachelor's degree here, and it was a good experience. The lecturer, the facilities, and location are beautiful. I feel close here, and our reputation is growing. So pleased to be a part of it. P14Male 22

I was with a friend during NYSC who kept saying a lot about this University. I had my reservations about private universities, but this was a different case. On discussing with others, its seen as a reputable university. P18 Male 24

Coming from a public university where there is numerous ASUU strike, you give credit to private universities with uninterrupted academic calendar, and this makes them more reputable compared to others. You know your degree is four years and you will finish in four years. P8 Female 24

Location

The physical location of the University was also a considering factor as students make their choice. Students do not want to travel away from home, and likewise, they recognise their parent's fear of travelling away from home. This is more likely linked to the transportation and security challenges within the country. Participants reported that they compiled a list of universities in their region and from that list they decide. With the participants studying in a university in the South West of the country, they reported that the security and transport link had influenced their choice as they can travel back home at the weekend,and family members can come to visit as well.

The travel is very conducive, which makes me wants to continue my Master's here. The location is close to home, and I like it. P1 Female 22

My family lives around here, and the location of the university has influenced my choice. I want to stay where it is close to my family. P22 Male 29

I know there are other universities around here, but the access to transportation and the road made this unique. I can quickly go home and come back. P16 Male 23

Availability of course

The availability of a course of interest at the university is considered a factor that influences the student choice-making process. Some students changed university after their undergraduate degree because they were looking for a different course that was not offered in the university they previously attended. One of the students interested in Project Management at a postgraduate level considered a particular university because it was not offered in the university where she did her undergraduate studies. For those with HND willing to attend a university, they also had to check to see which university is offering their course of interest.

I wanted to do a different course form my first degree. I wanted to change my career, and I had to look for a university that offers Project Management and can accept my first degree as I consider that it is very important. P21 Male 27

> *Coming from a polyethnic with the different course structure, I had to make sure I choose a university that offers a course that interests me. P23   Male   32*

While some students changed their University after their undergraduate degree, some decided to continue in the university because their course of interest was available. They did their undergraduate there and felt obliged to continue here for their Master's because of their experience.

> *I decided to continue with my Master's here because I enjoyed my undergraduate studies. I enjoyed the courses, and I believe I can do much better at advance level. I know the lecturers. They are outstanding, and I look forward to enjoying the course'*
> *P1   Female 22.*

> *We all enjoy our time here. Two of my other friends are also doing their Master's here. We enjoyed our courses. We learnt a lot, and that has influenced our choice to come for Masters. P14   Male   22*

Besides, the students are also mindful of accreditation of the course. They are making sure that the courses are accredited and there is link with the industry as they believe this will enhance their job prospect.

> *I noticed that the university has the courses I wanted, and importantly, I knew it was accredited. That is information I consider when I was looking for a university. I do not want to do a course that will be deemed invalid by the professional body. P7 Female 23*

> *For private universities, accreditation is essential, and the fact that the course I have selected is accredited made me feel reassured. P6   Female 23*

Facilities

Students are mindful of the facilities that are available in the university. Even though not everyone goes to visit or tours the campus, they believe facilities to enhance their experiences are essential. Those who studied for their undergraduate degree at the university and decided to continue for their Master's already have a first-hand experience about the facilities. Nevertheless, some others rely on word of mouth and ask the universities about the facilities. Accommodation, lecture hall and the library are the essential facilities students were interested in. They want to make sure that inadequate facilities do not hinder their student experience. They believe they are more matured and can make an informed decision about where they want to study since they will be paying their fees.

As a former student here, I am aware of the existing facilities and the investment they are making in upgrading the facilities. I feel coming back will be much better as I can make use of these facilities to improve my learning. P3   Female 23

My Sister studies here and she was a testimony to their accommodation, and that was one of the reasons why I considered the school. P4   Female 23

I remembered asking one of the lecturers about the facilities at the university, and he told me about the books in the library, the reading spaces and the subscriptions to journals. I have not been disappointed since I came here. P5   Female 23

I do not want to be in another large classroom where I can't see what is on the board, and I was very mindful about the facilities in any university I wanted to study for my Master's. I knew I had to make an informed decision, so I made my enquires to be confident of what I was going to meet. P10   Female 28

Fees

Prospective students know the school fees of private universities are higher than the public university. They know the financial commitments they are getting into while considering to study for a postgraduate degree. However, this still influences their choices as they compare the fees among the various universities on their list. Those who studied at the university for their undergraduate degree acknowledge that the discount they received, as a kind gesture for continuing at the university, influenced their choice. Likewise, the availability of scholarship was another factor that influenced their choice. Students believe that such offers were enticing, and it made the decision making easier.

You know it is not cheap here. Every private university is expensive. It's more of the lesser of two and many evils, but you need to make a choice. I had to look around for the fees and decide. P17   Male   23

I remembered (another) university charging N600,000 for Master's, and I thought isn't that too cheap. But again, I looked at the reputation and the facilities that we have here. Though more expensive, I think I made the right choice. P12   Female 30

Being assured of a discount for continuing with my Master's here was a significant determining factor. I know it will save me some money and I will still enjoy my time here. It was an easy decision to make. If not for the discount, I might not have stayed back here. P2   Female 23

The Course

The Entry Requirement

Apart from the whole search about what the university has to offer, it is known that prospective students make a specific decision based on the courses they want. The entry requirement of

these is, however, a crucial factor in determining if they will apply. The fact that the university is right is not enough if the student does not have the requirement to study. This primarily affects those with the HND trying to get a university degree. Likewise, as the student is expected to pass a qualifying examination before admission and because the admission requirements into the undergraduate programmes also apply, prospective student needs to consider if they have those requirements and this inadvertently influences their decision.

My HND course is not offered at the university, and I wanted to select a course that I like, and that can accept my HND and experiences. I did not want to do [a] Postgraduate Diploma. P23   Male   32

I think the entry requirement for the course I wanted to do was a determining factor that influenced my choice. I came from a science background, but I wanted to do marketing since I have enjoyed it during my NYSC, and I had gained some experiences with digital marketing. I was very mindful of the university that will not reject me based on my prior qualification. P21   Male   27

Teaching methods

Teaching methods also influence the choice of the students, especially in terms of flexibility - if they have to come to the university every day, the lecturer teaching the course, the content and relevance of the course as well. Some prefer to do part-time, so they can have time for their family and other commitment, while some prefer to study during the weekend. But, the decision is based on what the university offers and how it suits the students. Students who previously did their undergraduate studies are aware of the teaching facilities, and that influenced their choices.

I have a busy schedule with my family, and I needed to know that the teaching method will fit my family. I was eager to know how often I need to be in class and all form[s] of assessment. P13   Female 35

Being familiar with the teaching method in the undergraduate degree made me assured that I can cope at this level, but I was still keen, and I discussed with my lecturers, and they told me it's a different teaching method. I was given the impression that I am responsible for my learning and I found that challenging. I liked it. P15 Male   23

Career Advancement

The assurance of getting a job after studying a course in a university which is considered reputable is an essential motivating factor influencing the students' choices. Participants believe that they are making an investment that can enhance their employability based on the content of the course, the employability strategies embedded in the course, the industry connection, opportunities to do internship, alumni connection and accreditation, and such

influenced student choices. Students believe that universities that offer these opportunities to enhance career advancement are favourably considered, as they believe there should be a reward for making the choice to study at the university.

> *Why come to a private university and pay this considerable amount without the assurance of a job? I had to see what they have in place to help my career, and that made me look around and asked questions. I had to know about their accreditation, exemptions from professional exams, connection with industry and opportunities to do internship. P18   Male   24*

> *This is an investment in my career. I have been held back with my BSc, and I wanted to improve. So, I looked for universities that have the content and connection to impact knowledge and propel my career. P13   Female35*

Other Stakeholders

Family

The influence of the family on student choice cannot be ignored even at postgraduate levels. Often those who rely on their parent for the school fees and maintenance, are inclined to follow the suggestion of their parents, even though the participants acknowledged that they have more control compared to when choosing for their undergraduate course. In addition, because the parents are the ones paying for the fees, the student often respects their choices.

> *My parent pays the piper, and they dictate the tune. They have a significant influence on which university I attend. I am still their child. I just gave them three options, we discussed them, and I decided to come here. P14 Male   22*

> *It was more of an automatic choice for me as I did my BSc here. My parents were happy with the university, so I just had to come back here after my NYSC for my Master's. P3   Female 23*

Matured students, however, do have a different experience. They recognised the influence of their partner and children with regards to their choice of university for a postgraduate degree. They believe they need to stay close to the house in order to get the support and have time for the children. Other universities elsewhere may offer a better course, but for the sake of the family, they reach a compromise to attend a different university.

> *I know the enormous financial commitment this is bringing on my family. I had to discuss it with my partner. We need to decide together. The one that will not cost us much money is still closer to home and offers the course I am interested in. My family had a significant influence. P12 Female 30*

In addition, siblings, especially older siblings, can also influence the choices as they can advise their younger siblings to choose their alma mater. This influence is often strong because of the word of mouth as shared by the siblings. They believe they have seen the university, they have experienced the facilities, and can testify to its reputation and can advise their siblings about their choice.

> *I went to a different university from my brother. He attended this university because they had the course he wanted there, and he has been disturbing me that I need to do my Master's here. He says a lot about the social life, the experience, and facilities. I must say he influenced me to be here. P7   Female 23*

> *Influencers are meant to be paid, but my sister did a free job here. She influenced me with her pictures, sweet words, and her satisfaction about the University. I think I made the right choice. P17   Male   23*

Family and friends (like aunties and uncles in the Nigerian context) whose children attended private school, can also influence the choice-making process. They share word of mouth about the university of their Children.

> *One of my big aunties has a son here doing BSc, and she regularly comes around our houses. And often in conversation, plans for Master's pops up and she will tell me to consider it. I trusted her and I did consider the university. P19   Male 25*

Likewise, peers and friends who have attended the university can encourage prospective students to consider their alma mater.

> *My secondary school friends attended this university. They always have beautiful pictures on their Instagram story and WhatsApp status. That always starts a conversation about their university and compared to mine. My friends experience here was an influence on my decision. P5   Female 23*

Religious Affiliation

This is often considered a subtle factor, but there are pieces of evidence that it influences the choice to attend a university. While recognising that high number of private universities in Nigeria are founded by churches, parents want their children to attend the university established by their church. They feel a sense of loyalty, and they are proud that their children are attending a university they have contributed to build. Prospective students acknowledge that there are always announcements about new programmes and discount for church members and this makes then wants to consider the university.

My parent feels they contributed to the church (to build the University), so therefore, I must attend. I feel their sentiments, and it is not bad, after all. P1   Female 22

There are often announcements and broadcast in WhatsApp group about a new program in the university. You keep getting these reminders and often nudged to consider the university. P10   Female 28

Societal Influence

The pressure from society to be different and be exceptional for a job is recognised as a factor influencing student choices. Prospective students believe that there is a norm within the society to do a Master's degree after the bachelor's degree because there is no job yet. To beat the competition, prospective job seekers need to have something different. There is a sense of peer pressure as students travel abroad for their Master's and those in Nigeria feel they also need to decide. Students, however, feel they have the ability to control this pressure and more so if there are no financial capabilities, they may not go further for the degree in a private university, but consider a public university which is cheaper.

'I think it's more of a societal pressure that you need to go do a Master's quickly to beat the competition in the job market, and that really influence you. But, I guess it also depends on your financial capabilities' P11 Female 28

'You see on job vacancies asking for a Master's degree and people are going abroad to study for masters. As I can't afford to go aboard now, I had to do my Master's in a good private university'P12   Female 30

Table 2 presents a summary of the key findings.

Main Theme	Sub Themes	Description
The Desire	Unfulfilled desire to study abroad	For participants who cannot go abroad for Master's; they had to consider options in Nigeria
	Motivation to Study	Motivated to study because of the excellent experience at undergraduate; to improve on lower grades or boost the HND
	The desire to be different	To be different and stands out in the competitive job market, you have to have what others do not have, and that includes a Master's degree.
The University	Reputation	Reputation is very relative to individuals. They consider a reputable university through word of mouth and experiences.
	Location	The physical location of the University in the country. Easy transportation access and security are essential.

	Availability of course	Students are motivated to attend a university that meets their specific needs with regards to the course they offer.
	Facilities	The physical structure on campuses such as accommodation, library (including internet access) and lecture Hills
	Fees	The lesser of two of many evils. Fees of private universities are expensive, but notwithstanding, students decide on overall experiences and not the cheapest.
The Course	The Entry Requirement	It is not just about the course of interest, but if students have the required entry qualifications.
	Teaching method	The teaching team, facilities and assessment methods, influence student choices, especially for matured students with commitments.
	Career Advancement	It is essential to attend a university that will propel one's career. Students consider a university with industry connection, successful alumni, and opportunities for internship.
Other Stakeholders	Family	He who pays the pipers dictates the tune. The parents provide the money, and they can influence the university, Siblings can do so as well. For matured students, their partner and children influence their decision.
	Religious Affiliation	With the University founded by a church, the religious affiliations play a role in influencing their choice, often as a sense of loyalty.
	Societal Influence	The pressure to be different and have something different is embedded in the society which influences the student's decision about a postgraduate degree. *If you cannot go abroad, do it in Nigeria. Just be different.*

Discussion

Each year, many young adults decide whether to pursue their Master's degree studies at a particular higher education (HE) institution (Sipilä et al., 2017). This study presents an exploratory analysis of the factors that influence the choice of university by postgraduate students. The study recognised vital characteristics (and related factors) of universities (Le et al., 2019) which affects student choice making. This includes the location of the university, the facilities available, and the course being offered. Students consider university that offers their course of interest guarantees professional and career progression, and learning delivered in a safe and conducive environment.

This is in line with previous research that has identified the university's location as a relevant choice factor (Duarte et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2009). Our studies showed that in Nigeria, location is essential, both for economic and security reasons, especially when the inadequate transport facilities and security situation of the country is taken into consideration. There is a tendency for prospective students to stay close to home, mainly for economic reasons (Christie, 2007). Students want to study in a place they do not have to spend much time on the road, and their safety is guaranteed. The facilities are also considered necessary, both for students from public universities where facilities are not in good state and those who are from private universities that have experienced excellent facilities. This aligns with previous studies which noted that the physical environment of the service production constitutes an essential element in the decision-making process (María Cubillo et al., 2006).

In addition to the characteristics (and related factors) of universities, individuals characteristics of the student were also found to influence their choice of university. This includes their desire to actually study for a Master's degree, the unfulfilled desires to travel abroad, and because of that they consider the best available option in their home country, In addition, the experience of their undergraduate university also influenced their choices, Those who prefer their undergraduate university were more likely to continue in the same university for their Master's degree. These students feel they are more conversant with the lecturers, the location and the facilities, while those who were not very happy with their undergraduate university might want to consider another university. This was seen with those who left the public university to study for their Master's in a private university, even though it is more expensive.

The image of institutions and recognition of educational qualification are also essential factors in determining which to study, as seen with international students who travelled to the United Arab Emirates for tertiary education (Ahmad et al., 2016). The results also showed that while the reputation of the university is essential for students, ranking was not considered very important. Perhaps this is something unique to Africa where ranking is still an evolving measurement of reputation and the underrepresentation of postgraduate studies in the ranking tables (Ruth et al., 2019). This, however, contradicts prior research that emphasises ranking as a choice factor (e.g. Veloutsou, Lewis, and Paton 2004; Briggs and Wilson 2007). Students in Nigeria measured reputation through word of mouth, and family members and friend's perception about the university, which is perhaps a different approach to ranking in Africa (Kiraka, et al., 2019).

This study also recognised the influence of external stakeholders. These are parents, relatives, family friends and siblings. Parents, especially those who are making financial commitments and want their children to be better, have a significant influence on student choice. A participant noted that they rarely disregard the influence and opinion of their parent in the choice-making process. Nigeria, with a score of 30, is considered a collectivistic society (Hofstede, 2019) and as (Le, et al., 2019) found out in Vietnam that shared same values, parent(s) play(s) an essential role in the student choice making which proves that they are considered a valuable information source for Nigerians students when considering universities. This finding is consistent with reports from various sources concerning the role of parents in university choice. Iacopini & Hayden (2017) found that parents feel responsible for making sure their children are better qualified than them; more of making sure their future is guaranteed. Even though the parents cannot afford to send their kids to universities in Europe, they make effort to send their children

to one of the best private universities in the country. The influence of siblings, who through positive word of mouth, can convince their brothers and sisters.

The study found that WOM, which refers to the "informal communications between consumers concerning the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods, services and/or their sellers" (De Matos & Rossi, 2008, p. 578), is a valuable information source for prospective students considering Master's degree in Nigeria. They rely on words from parents and relatives who have a right attitude towards the university because they know the founder (church in this case), and siblings and friends who have attended or known someone who attended the university and shared their positive experience. This is consistent with the findings of a previous study conducted by (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) on the motivation factor of international students studying, where the comments and advice persuade the students of their friends and family members which suggest that WOM is a vital influence; not just in international study choice, but also still crucial for students making choices about studying in their home countries.

Characteristic of the university to be experienced during Open days and ordering prospectus are seldom explored. Participants noted that they explored information from the university's website, engaging with friends and family, and asking their lecturers. Some of the participants said they did not visit the campus, as they relied on word of mouth and social media posts, such as status update of friends and families, and the interest of their parent to attend that particular university.

While Le et al. (2019) noted that information on social media was only crucial for respondents who intend to study abroad, our findings present a different perspective. Though these students have an unfulfilled intention to travel abroad, they made effort to choose the best alternative by engaging with social media of peers to gain an insight into life in the university. They often do not engage with social media posts by the university, which hardly markets the university, but provides information for present students (Olaleye et al., 2019).

Even at the postgraduate level, career prospect is still an essential determining factor. Students are interested in a university that offers internship, and is accredited and respected by the industry, as well as an assurance of enhancing employability. As Bourke (2000) found that enhanced career prospects and higher status are factors for studying abroad, Nigerian students are still mindful about their career prospect even as they study at home. Some students cannot go abroad to study. Instead, they make the best use of what is available in their country. Ultimately, their career prospects are still significant in their choice.

The chapter makes both theoretical and managerial contribution. This study contributes to literature on higher education marketing, especially in Africa and for postgraduate students. The chapter presents an integral insight into marketing higher education in Nigeria and Africa, as this is an under-researched area. Specifically, in the Nigerian context, it highlights the influence of location of the university, especially with regards to the economic and security concerns. Likewise, the personal attachment and loyalty to the founder of the university are recognised. This is a factor that has not been explored in literature. Prospective students and their parent feel a sense of loyalty to attend the university that was established by their church. This aligns with the fundamental values in a collectivist culture like Nigeria, where loyalty is paramount - a long-term commitment to the group (Hofstede, 2019). This highlights implication in reaching out to prospective students who are non-religious, or of another religion

Importantly, and it confirms previous studies that recognise career prospect, fees, and courses on offers as essential factors (Dao & Thorpe, 2015; Mogaji & Yoon, 2019). The ranking was, however, less critical in Nigerian setting. Instead, positive WOM was considered a better measure of a university's reputation.

While previous studies are often focused on undergraduate students, this present study focused on postgraduate students and highlighted some key differences between the choice making. Postgraduate students often feel they can decide on their own, with fewer influences from their parent. They feel that they were spending four years doing a course they were not sure of, but at this stage of their career, they know what they want to do. Postgraduates were not consulting school counsellors before making a choice. They were not excited about attending Open days, as they place more emphasis on the course on offer and the facilities.

The findings provide insights for university managers in understanding the factors influencing postgraduate students' choice of university and highlight the unique information needs of the target segments of prospective students. The findings indicate the importance for HEI managers to consider criteria such as variety of courses, job opportunities, career progression, facilities and reputation of the university when making strategic decisions to enhance their institutions' profile. This study recognises the dynamics of higher education market in Africa (Olaleye et al., 2019, Ndofirepi & Mogaji, 2019), especially in Nigeria where the demand for university placement is higher than the supplier. It is not surprising to see that public universities that are oversubscribed are not often motivated to advertise because even if they choose not to market themselves, they will still have students. However, this is a different challenge for private universities who are aiming to attract prospective students who do not want to go to public universities, or those considering studying in Europe or other countries in Africa like Ghana and South Africa.

This finding is relevant to university marketers who may be investing in online platforms as an essential tool for relationship marketing. Universities need to recognise the different stakeholders they are engaging with on social media (Mogaji, 2019), and therefore provide relevant information to prospective students and retain the present students. While prospective students are not very likely to rely on social media as an information source during their decision-making process (Le et al., 2019), it can be used as a medium of building relationship and engage on a more personalised level. Using the findings of this study, practitioners can customise their marketing communications and provide suitable content across their communication channels to fit targeted segments, including the parents, siblings and the prospective student.

University managers should develop strategic marketing communications to influence the WOM from parents and siblings. They are stakeholders who pose a strong tie with prospective students and can influence them. Universities could provide emotionally appealing shareable contents on the university website and social media platform (Mogaji, 2016a; Sipilä et al., 2017). As Mogaji (2019) argued in the use of social media for strategic communications by universities, media used by stakeholders are different, and effort should be made towards personalising the content, as what appeals to the parent may not appeal to the siblings. In further attempt to engage these stakeholders to experience the university themselves, universities could reach out to them and invite them for events and occasions. Perhaps not just at graduation which is at the end of the whole study, but different events, maybe during festive period and

before graduation; whereby the parents and siblings can have a better insight and experience about the university.

Likewise, to further enhance the positive WOM, universities can tell stories and create a narrative around their alumni and current students -those who have passed through the university and have achieved something from their career and those presently going through. As prospective students are paying attention to graduate student job success (Henriques et al., 2018), these sharable contents can offer and inspiration to prospective students who are looking for a convincing reason to attend. These stories can be shared on social media, including LinkedIn, where parents might come across it.

Managers should also consider prospective students' characteristics when designing marketing strategies (Henriques et al., 2018). Siblings were found to influence student choices. Parents are also more likely to allow their children attend the same university, Family discount for siblings attending the university, as a form of financial aid, should be explored by the university. While the WOM shared among siblings are influencing, the financial aid will be of interest to the parents.

Unlike undergraduate decision-making process whereby the students rely on school counsellors to offer options and advice, the role falls on the lecturers. In this case, the lecturers were not actively influencing the choice, but the students found them inspirational and will want to continue under their tutelage. This highlights an implication for having highly motivated lecturers who will challenge and motivate the students, and these students are more likely to come back to the same university for their Master's. This is corroborated by Angulo-Ruiz et al. (2016) as they found that HEI staff are factors that profoundly affect the evaluation of a tertiary education provider selection. As suggested by Le, et al. (2019), information regarding scholarship opportunities should be clearly stated, and career prospects after graduation should be emphasised in promotional campaigns via university websites, to target the international student segment (Mogaji, 2016b).

Conclusion

This chapter sought out to identify the factors influencing students' choice of university for their postgraduate studies. This study is contextualised in Nigeria, the most populous black nation in the world and the biggest higher education market in sub-Sahara Africa (Olaleye et al. 2019). A sample of postgraduate students studying for their Master's degree in a private university was used to understand these factors influencing student choices. The study recognised that postgraduate students have a different expectation and they evaluate universities differently because they are more experienced and familiar with educational choices and decisions.

The factors influencing student choices at postgraduate level can be summarized into three areas. Firstly, the essential characteristics (and related factors) of universities (Le et al., 2019) which includes the location of the university, the facilities available and the course being offered. Students consider university that offers their course of interest guarantees professional and career progression and learning delivered in a safe and conducive environment. Secondly, the individual characteristics of students, which includes their desire to study for a Master's degree, the unfulfilled desires to travel abroad, and because of that, they consider the best

available option in their home country, In addition, the experience of their undergraduate university also influenced their choices; and thirdly, the role of other stakeholders like the parents, family friends and siblings. This chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of marketing higher education in Africa (Mogaji, Farinloye, & Aririguzoh, 2017; Ndofirepi, Farinloye, & Mogaji, 2019), and especially the choice factors of prospective students considering HEI. Understanding factors that influence choices allows managers to develop and implement a strategic marketing campaign in the competitive HEI market.

Although the study was carefully designed and conducted, the limitations of this study warrant attention and future research. Firstly, the postgraduate sampling is considered unique, but it is not representative of the whole of the prospective students applying to an HEI, and therefore results may not be widely generalizable. Secondly, the study only focused on postgraduate students in a private university. There are possibilities that the choice-making process of postgraduates in the public universities may be different, as these universities are well located across the country, often offer more courses and are cheaper. Future research could explore the choice-making process and factors that influence their choices. Thirdly, a qualitative methodology was adopted to have an understanding of the factors influencing the student choices, given this methodological approach, the investigation does not provide a basis for generalising to the population of prospective postgraduate students in Nigeria. The investigation does, however, provide opportunities for future research to understand how decisions are made in Nigeria about the selection of a university to attend, especially on a postgraduate level. Given the importance of the discoveries made in this study, it is relevant to develop these finding further by adopting a quantitative methodology. Explicitly asking students to rank the criteria used when choosing the HEI that they wish to attend. This inquiry would shed light on the relative importance of each criterion, and by doing so, would contribute to improving the rigour of the management of the HEI institutions by offering its managers success indicators.

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