



FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

As a result of new government initiatives, private universities are sprouting in Nigeria. These institutions, which supplement higher education, are now faced with the problem of attracting enough students. The study looked at the factors that influence students' decision to enrol in a private institution in Nigeria and the amount to which these factors influence their decision. The study also looks into whether there are any major differences in the elements students consider while choosing a university based on their demographic traits. For this study, the primary research approach was descriptive survey research. With a total student enrolment of 5,590, Al-Hikmah University was chosen as the case study for private universities in Nigeria, and the first-year students with an enrollment of 1450 were used as the research population. A total of 300 students were used in the study. A structured questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.95 was utilized as the tool. The data were examined using descriptive statistics, and the hypotheses were tested using T-value statistics at the 0.05 level of significance. Affordability offers of the desired program, reputation/academic quality, the flexibility of schedule, hands-on learning/real-world experience in curriculum, location/security, and availability of facilities are the seven (7) major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria, according to the findings of this research study. The study also demonstrates that male and female students have very different perspectives on the primary elements that impact students' decisions to attend private institutions in Nigeria. The findings of this study will help private institutions have a better knowledge of what students value when deciding which private university to attend, and then make any necessary changes and adjustments, as well as improve academic quality, to increase student enrollment.

Keywords: Students' Choice; Private Universities; Impact

1. Introduction

Public higher education has played a dominant role in meeting educational needs in Nigeria because it was the only option available in those days. As a result, most students pursuing a university education in those years had little choice but to attend public universities. With time, government universities have become insufficient; even those available are underfunded and ill-equipped to satisfy the growing demands of more candidates. In most cases, Nigerian public universities receive more student applications than they can accept in any academic year. As a result, most public colleges only engage in marketing to recruit students, as it is nearly natural for students to apply (Otoja & Obodumu, 2017). The Federal Government of Nigeria has said that non-profit organizations, people, and groups can create universities as long as they adhere to the Federal Government's basic standards (FGN, 2014). Because of the deregulation of the education sector, the issues facing public higher education in Nigeria led to the emergence of private higher education under President Olusegun Obasanjo (NUC, 2019). Starting with three private universities in 1999, the number of private universities in Nigeria has steadily increased in recent years.

Private universities have aided the Nigerian educational landscape in terms of human resource development, academic job creation, the development of healthy academic and industry-based international relationships, and the reduction of strain on public institutions (Iruonagbe et al., 2015). As a result, the private sector has become an active and vital part of Nigerian education in recent years. The ever-increasing demand for educational possibilities that public universities are unable to provide, as well as the occurrence of public university employee strikes, created a void that these private universities might fill. As a result, many students have turned to private universities as an option if they are denied entry to public higher education institutions or want to avoid learning delays caused by public university strikes. The elements influencing a student's decision to pursue higher education are critical to any university's admission policies and marketing initiatives. As a result, university administrators must be aware of the factors that impact students' decisions to continue post-secondary education at a particular institution. The process of picking a higher education institution to attend is quite difficult (Moogan & Baron, 2003), as there are numerous elements to consider.

Attempts have been made to identify the decision-making profiles of students who choose a higher education institution for their studies. Rika et al. (2016) found that cultural, social, psychological, and organizational aspects are essential and relevant for student choice in Latvian secondary schools. Attachment to the University, school location benefits, and cost of

the program, failure to gain alternative admissions, schools' student support, lecturers and staff recommendations, and personal intention to pursue the program are seven factors that have been identified as important during students' selection (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). Henriques et al. (2018), based on Chapman's longitudinal model of students' decision-making, divide these elements influencing student choices into institutional and personal categories. The institutional elements highlight the University's characteristics, which influence students' decisions. According to the report, tuition fees were regarded as an important consideration (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). Because prospective students are aware of the expense of higher education and, in many cases, evaluate these financial elements during their HEI selection process, the price or affordability of the school is a crucial point of appeal for some institutions. Furthermore, financial aid in the form of scholarships was discovered to significantly impact students' decisions (Drewes & Michael, 2006).

The University's size and location influenced students' selections, as they may have to leave home and live on or near the University's campus (Drewes & Michael, 2006). Students noted how the attractive campus environment influenced their decisions, according to research, implying that the University exuded a warm, friendly, and laid-back vibe. Many participants expressed their appreciation for the campus's warm and friendly nature and the overall communal spirit they noticed and later experienced (Stephenson et al., 2016). This is consistent with previous results that campus visits significantly impact university enrollment (Anctil, 2008). Open Days, which allow students to tour the University before enrolling, have a lot of advantages for potential students and can have a big impact on their decision (Maniu & Maniu, 2014).

Furthermore, one of the most important choice considerations for students is an institution's reputation, which contributes to its league table ranking (Angulo-Ruiz, et al., 2016). Similarly, the courses offered by universities significantly impact students' decision-making (Sojkin et al., 2011). Students' mindset is shaped by HEI's marketing efforts to reach out to prospective students (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2016). Positive word-of-mouth and marketing initiatives that prospective students are exposed to; for example, influence their choice of HEI (Demetriou, et al., 2018). Similarly, the University's branding and positioning are important elements in a student's choosing. According to Bastedo et al. (2014), there is a clear correlation between the HEI's brand image and charismatic leadership, which influences enrolment applications and financial donations.

Statement of the Problem

Private universities in Nigeria are grappling with how to deal with issues and competition regarding student enrollment. The current level of student competition is unprecedented in its intensity. Many private institutions put forth their best effort in the form of advertising to achieve a high enrolment rate. However, the factors prospective students evaluate before deciding on a university need more attention. Private universities must understand why students select one university over another, as well as what is essential to them and their parents to survive. Also, they view the institution as compared to its competitors on several grounds. It's vital to remember that universities exist to serve students, so getting a better sense of what they want and need is the best way to improve school quality and assist changes the school's mission. There is currently little research in Nigeria on the factors influencing students' decision to attend private universities. The development of such services necessitates further research into student preferences, expectations, and parental decisions.

Purpose of the Study

This study assesses the elements that influence undergraduate students' decisions on which private universities to attend in Nigeria. The main objectives are as follows:

- i. ascertain the key factors that influence students' decision to attend private Universities in Nigeria undergraduate students' and
- ii. investigate whether there are significant differences in the factors students use in making their university choice based on students' demographic characteristics.

Research Questions

The following questions guide the research for this study:

- i. What major factors influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria?
- ii. Are there any demographic differences regarding each of the following categories of University-choice factors?

Significance and Scope of the Study

The research will reveal the primary factors that influence students' decisions to enrol in private universities in Nigeria, as well as the extent to which these factors influence their enrollment decisions. Furthermore, the research will determine whether substantial disparities exist in the elements students consider when choosing a university based on their demographic features. The research looks at students in private universities, using Al-Hikmah University in Ilorin as a case study, to see what factors impact their decision to attend one over the other.

2. Review of Related Empirical Studies

General empirical studies have reported factors that influence students' choice of Tertiary Education Institutions in many countries. Sidn et al. (2003) reported that a student's selection of university depends on general criteria, including academic quality, facilities, campus surroundings, and personal characteristics. The study further validates the contention that income affects the choice of students along with public education. Wagber and Fard (2009) utilized emerging categories of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) choice conceptual model of economic, sociological and combined to carry out a study on factors influencing student's intention to study at Higher Education Institutions. The findings of this study indicated that physical aspects, facilities of HEI together with the information received by students are also significant factors.

Pampaloni (2010) conducted a survey of high school students at college operations to determine which elements influenced their university application decision-making process the most. The findings demonstrated that students' perceptions of a school's atmosphere were influenced by its size, housing, and whether or not they knew someone who went there. Kusumawati (2010) conducted a study on factors that may influence student choice of an Indonesian public university using semi-structured and focused group talks. The findings revealed that total costs (cost reputation, location, career prospects, parents' academic quality, friends, and psychological pre-selected motive), facilities, and campus environment have an impact on students' institution choice.

Mudholkar (2012) conducted research on the factors that influence students' decision to attend business school, with a focus on numbers. He analyzed data acquired from students via surveys and interviews using percentile and ranking algorithms. Male students place a high value on aspects such as positioning, image/reputation, infrastructure, speciality, and facility teaching, according to the study's findings. Female students place a high value on image/relationship, faculty/teaching, fees, structure, location, and placements, according to the report. Chia (2011) performed research on the factors that influence students' choice of private education institutions in Singapore. A total of 245 students were surveyed using a self-administrative questionnaire. Academic repute and recognition, campus enrolment, reference group, influence programmed, relevancy, promotional information, financial cost, accessibility, and location were revealed using factor analysis.

Wiese (2008) also conducted a study on the higher education marketing perspective on decision variables considered by South African first-year university students, using a sample

of 1241 students from six higher education institutions. Quality of teachers, employment prospects, possible job opportunities, campus safety and security, academic facilities (libraries, laboratories, workshops), international links (study and job opportunities), language policy, the image of higher education institutions, flexible study mode (evening classes and use of computers), academic reputation (prestige), and a wi-fi network are the top ten factors respondents regarded as important in the selection of a higher education institution.

A survey study conducted by Yusuf *et al.* (2008) on factors influencing higher education institution selection is particularly relevant to this topic. They asked 402 people to fill out a questionnaire with a five per cent scale response. The survey found four key characteristics that students expect from their preferred higher education institution. These characteristics included the availability of the desired curriculum, the university's academic reputation, the quality of staff or lecturers, and the university's financial support. The study used a conceptual model based on financial, location, physical infrastructure, industry expectations, and provisions to influence students' choice decision-making process. Mana and Claudia (2012) used a questionnaire to collect data on 1641 students' impressions of decision criteria. Geographic proximity is the most important determining factor for higher education institutions, according to the data. Additional important indicators included academic standing, career counsellor advice, professor advice, impact from current students, and family support. In Kumasi Polytechnic, Ghana, Alfred (2012) did a study on the factors that influence students' decision to attend tertiary education institutions. According to the study's findings, applicants chose Kumasi Polytechnic because of its good reputation and availability of qualified instructors and facilities.

To maintain the polytechnic's high image, the study advised that the polytechnic's management focus on expanding current lecture halls and laboratories and retaining competent staff. Muaura and Fatoki (2007) delivered 200 questionnaires to respondents who were conveniently chosen to explore the factors influencing foreign business students' university choices in South Africa. A Likert answer scale of "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly Agree" was used to create 24 items. According to the study's findings, financial aspects, with a mean score of 4.39 on a five-point scale, indicate no significant difference in mean scores on financial information, quality, attractiveness, diversity, facilities, opportunities, and social elements. Al-faltal (2010) conducted a study on student choice of university and marketing tactics at three universities in Syrian Private Higher Education using three phases of research designs: exploratory, survey, and multi-case studies. The questionnaire, which ranged from unhappy to satisfy on a seven-point scale, was distributed to each of the three universities in batches of

110. Career and security were shown to be important considerations in students' decisions to attend private universities in Syria. The World Bank (1994) emphasizes the importance of this trend by pointing out that private institutions are critical components of some of the world's most powerful higher education systems. They can respond quickly and effectively to shifting demand, as well as expand educational offerings at a low cost.

Higher education is now seen as a "private good" rather than a "public good," with few immediate and favourable externalities to justify public funding. One immediate rationale for privatizing public tertiary institutions has been this. The fundamental reason for the new worldwide interest in promoting demand for private universities is worth noting. The migration to free-market ideology appears to be the main explanation. According to Quddus and Rashid (2000), new universities have formed in the private sector in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia, Cyprus, and Bolivia since 1990. Nigeria and other developing African countries are experiencing a similar trend. In Nigeria, Adefulu *et al.* (2020) investigated the factors that influence postgraduate students' university choices. The study's findings highlighted four main factors: the desire to pursue a postgraduate degree, the University's facilities, including its geographical location, the courses offered, and the impact of other stakeholders such as parents, siblings, and friends. This stakeholder impact is consistent with the underlying beliefs of a collectivist culture such as Nigeria. Adeyanju, *et al.* (2020) used a Nigerian federal institution to investigate the factors that influence students' choice of a federal university. Personal interest influenced students' decisions the most, followed by parental influence, university reputation, university ranking, and fees, according to the survey. The emergence of such providers necessitates research on student preferences, expectations, and parent decisions when it comes to university selection in Nigeria.

3. Methodology

For this study, descriptive survey research was used. The design was chosen based on Kerlinger's (2005) suggestion, who stated that this form is employed when a research project incorporates the use of a questionnaire to solicit responses. The purpose of using this design was to allow the researcher to get student feedback on their preferred private universities in Nigeria. The design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to see the phenomenon through the eyes of the participants. Al-Hikmah University was chosen as a case study for private universities in Nigeria for this study's population sample. The overall number of students enrolled at Al-Hikmah University Ilorin is 5,590, with 1450 students enrolled in the first year of the 2021/2022 session (Registrar, 2022). A total of 300 individuals were selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) method from Al-Hikmah University's first-year university

students, accounting for 20.89 per cent of the total. Factors Influencing Choice of Private University by Nigerian Undergraduate Students (FICPUSQ), a 14-item structured questionnaire devised by the researcher and approved by three educational management professionals, was used to collect data for this study. Cronbach Alpha statistics indicated that the instrument's reliability coefficient was 0.95. The items in the questionnaire were rated on a four-point scale: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

The questionnaire was delivered to 300 students via Google Forms and hard copy. The respondents completed 285 questionnaires, reflecting a 95 per cent response rate. Mean, and standard deviation was utilized to evaluate the data for addressing research questions, while T-value statistics were employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Acceptance or rejection of items was based on a mean score of 2.50. As a result, items with a mean score of 2.50 or higher were deemed to agree, while those with a mean score of 2.49 or lower were deemed to disagree. Furthermore, the hypothesis was accepted if the C-value was greater than the Alpha value at a 0.05 threshold of significance and was rejected otherwise.

4. Data Analysis

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	163	57.2%
Female	122	42.8%
Total	285	100
Faculty		
Education	143	50.2%
Humanities	57	20.0%
Science	85	29.8%
Total	285	100

Table 1 above shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Of the 285 questionnaires returned, 163 representing 57.2% are male, while 122 with 42.8% are female. Similarly, 143 respondents representing 50.2% are from the Faculty of Education; fifty-seven respondents representing 20% are from the Faculty of Humanities, while 29.8% amounting to 85 respondents are from the Faculty of Natural and Applied Science.

4.1 Research Question One: What are the major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria?

Table 2: mean responses of students on the major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria

S/N	ITEMS	X ₁	SD	DECISION
1	Affordability	3.12	0.91	Agreed
2	It offers my desired program	3.04	0.94	Agreed
3	Reputation/academic quality	3.38	0.84	Agreed
4	Flexibility of schedule	2.66	1.07	Agreed
5	Hands-on learning/real-world experience in curriculum	3.41	0.84	Agreed
6	Location/security	3.38	0.84	Agreed
7	Availability of facilities	2.70	1.06	Agreed
	Grand	3.10	0.93	

Table 2 shows the mean responses of the respondents on 7 items posed to determine the major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria, with a grand mean of 3.10 and standard deviation of 0.93, which implies that the respondents jointly agreed with all the items.

4.2 Research Questions Two: Are there any demographic differences regarding each of the following categories of University-choice factors?

Table 3: mean responses of the respondents on the major factors that influence students' (male and female) choice of private universities in Nigeria

S/N	Statement	X ₁	SD	DECISION
1	Campus Safety and security	2.94	0.97	Agreed
2	Siblings attending the institution	3.37	0.85	Agreed
3	Academic facilities	3.21	0.89	Agreed
4	The attractiveness of the campus	3.05	0.93	Agreed
5	International links/employment prospects	2.53	1.13	Agreed
6	Social life on campus	3.10	0.92	Agreed
7	The reputation of an Institution	3.54	0.81	Agreed
	Grand	3.10	0.93	

Table 3 shows the mean responses of the respondents on 7 items posed to determine the major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria, with a grand mean of 3.10 and standard deviation of 0.93, which implies that the respondents jointly agreed with all the items.

4.3 Test of Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the ratings of factors influencing the choice of private universities in Nigeria by the respondents

Table 4: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of the Factors influencing students' choice of private universities in Nigeria

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F-Ratio
Between Factors	362.4	6	62.32	
Within Factors	10436.3	2340	1.214	26.22 (p<.05)
Total	10798.7	2346		

Table 4 above indicated that F-ratio obtained 26.22, DF = 6/2340, P < 0.05, was greater than the table value of 2.09. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the opinions of male and female students on factors influencing the choice of private universities in Nigeria

Table 5: Chi-square statistical analysis of the respondents' opinions on the major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria based on gender

Source	N	DF	X	S.D	C-Val	T-Val	Decision
Male	163	1	3.48	0.96	218.71	3.841	Rejected
Female	122		3.36	0.93			

From Table 5 above, the T-value (218.71) is less than the C-value (3.841) at a 0.05 level of significance; thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference in the opinions of male and female students on the major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Affordability offers of the desired program, reputation/academic quality, schedule flexibility, hands-on learning/real-world experience in curriculum, location/security, and availability of facilities are the seven (7) major factors that influence students' choice of private universities in Nigeria, according to the findings of this study. The study also demonstrates that there is a substantial difference in male and female students' perceptions of the primary elements that influence students' choice of private colleges in Nigeria, but no significant difference in demographic factors [male vs. female] choice of university.

Recommendations

The findings of this study are being recommended to private university administrators so that they can better understand what matters to students when choosing a private university to attend and then make any necessary changes and adjustments, as well as improve academic quality, to increase student enrollment.

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