

Students Perceptions on University Selection, Decision Making Process: A Case Study in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract: Through the growing number of students, universities are moving like a private company in the market. They are always trying to increase their students, namely customers to survive in this competitive field. The purpose of the study was to clarify the predictors of the students' choices for the university in Kurdistan region of Iraq. To do this, 400 students selected from the American University of Sulaimani (AUIS), Human Development University, and Cihan University which are the main private institutions of Sulaimani City. The results show that scientific activities and campus facilities have affected the reputation of the university, and consequently reputation influenced students to advice that university to others. When it is thought that advice play an important role in the university selection, these results are very important for the practitioners in order to increase their market share in the region.

Keywords: University Selection, Structural Equation Modelling, University Reputation, University Campus, Education Quality

1. Introduction

The changing environment and economic situations have brought universities especially private institutions to move as a company, which tries to maximize their portion in the market. On the other hand, there are a vast number of students who are travelling overseas countries to have a good quality of education (Poturak, 2014). Whilst the number of the private university students is increasing, the universities are trying to enhance their market share by attracting prospective students to campus. There are some universities in Kurdistan Region including public and private universities such as: Salahadin University, Sulaimani University, Sulaimani polytechnic university, Koya university, Charmu University, Raparin university, Cihan university Erbil and Cihan university Sulaimani, Ishik university Erbil and Sulaimani, Komar university, American university of Iraq \ Sulaimani and American university of Iraq \ Dhok, Human Development university, International university of Erbil, Bayan university, and Qalam university. Public universities exist since sixties of last century. However, private universities exist since 2002. In Kurdistan Region undergraduate degree courses are called Bachelor degrees or first degrees, which normally take 3 to 4 years of full-time study except medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and architecture, which take longer.

Entering into public universities depends on the mark that the students will achieve after national exam at the school, but this system has been changed from last year in which the students must take direct exam with an interview in some of the departments in the universities such as: accounting & finance; marketing & international relation; media; and administration department in Sulaimani Polytechnic University. Whereas, the system in private universities is that the students should fill the special form, which they will take from the university, and then the filled form will be short listed by the university and it will be sent to the ministry of higher education for acceptance.

There are many studies on university selection in various countries. Selecting university can be the most significant decision-making processes for the students' applicants (Kotler 1975; Chapman 1981). Students' choice of university might affect by marketing efforts of the university (Chapman, 1981). Chapman identified those factors as, personal characteristics and institutional drivers (Chapman, 1981; Henriques, Matos, Jerónimo, Mosquera, Silva, & Bacalhau; 2017). According to that information current research is investigating the motivator factors that affect the students' university preferences. And undertake a comprehensive literature review about the customer decision-making predictors. Finally, the data was evaluated by SPSS and AMOS in order to test the hypothetical relationships of the model, which illustrated in methodology section.

2. Literature Review

University selection is one of the significant decision-making processes for under graduate students, which can be viewed as a complex process to pursue (Kotler, 1975; Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Duan, 1997). Then, college selection depends on the students' effort and capability of search and process data in a meaningful way (Kotler, 1975). Students' selection might be influenced by the university's marketing efforts (Chapman, 1981).

Ancheh, Krishnan and Nurtjahja (2007) identified 26 variables that have influence on the students' preferences. These variables can be organized in to 6 groups, namely 1) financial attractiveness, (2) program and course suitability and availability, (3) ease and flexibility of enrolment procedure, (4) future ease of employment after graduating, (5) attractiveness of institutions, and (6) quality reputation.

Lin in 1997 conducted a questionnaire to investigate the reason behind selection of the university, in Netherlands and he discovered that the most significant reasons were the quality of education offered, career opportunities, universities' reputation, curriculum emphasis, academic standard, and faculty qualifications. Similarly, some other factors listed by Hooly and Lynch (1981) to affect the students' selection of university can be listed as: course suitability, university location, academic reputation, distance from home, type of university (modern/ old), family opinion, job prospects, quality of teaching, campus atmosphere. Hence, Turner and Soutar (2002) revealed that course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects, and teaching quality are preferred to be most important determinants of university selection.

According to Proboyo and Soedarsono (2015), Burns (2006), and Chapman (1981) three factors can affect students' university selection. The first one is characteristics of students that involve students' interest, ability and capability (Manski & Wise, 1983; Mahani & Molki, 2011). The second factor is external influences, which include: parents, friends, and other individuals (Sia, 2010; Misran et al.,

2012). In addition, teachers, guidance counsellors, attending friends in to the college, and admission counsellors can be the most significant factors that affect students' university selection (Proboyo & Soedarsono, 2015).

The last factor is characteristics of universities, which can have influence on the students' university selection. These characteristics involve two aspects. The first one is university characteristics, which include: location, offered program, university's reputation, study fees, job opportunities, and facilities provided by university. The second aspect is the marketing effort prepared by the university that involves advertising arranged by university and visit campus (Proboyo & Soedarsono, 2015).

2.1 Quality Factors and Hypothesis Development

According to scholars the motivator that affect the students' preferences are the quality factors. Those predictors have been adapted from a comprehensive literature review to the present study, which was mentioned before. But we couldn't find enough study in the literature that combines the relationship between international staff and scientific activities; and scientific activities and the reputation and the atmosphere of the university. On the other hand, there isn't any research that implies those predictors effect on the private university students in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Because of that, this study will have an explanatory survey about the Kurdistan and as well the American university students' preferences.

The first factor, affecting the campus activities and in turn the university quality is the IT services. IT services comprise; internet resources, e-services, on-line classes, and on-line student services etc. Gatfield et al. (1990) found that computer services are important for the quality of the university. Similarly, in Eliot and Healey's study concluded that its services have the fourth level of importance and the third level by the satisfactory factor for the students.

H1: IT services have a significant effect on the Campus activities of the university.

According to Eliot and Healey's study campus climate/atmosphere is one of the important and satisfactory factors for the students. And Montilla (2004) asserted that a good atmosphere in the campus attracts and increase the prospective students in number. Additionally, James, Baldwin, and McInnis (1999) found that atmosphere of the campus is the second most influential predictor after campus surroundings on the students' decisions about the university.

H2: Atmosphere has a significant effect on campus activities.

Next predictor for the influential on the student choices is social activities, which are fun, enjoyment, and entertainment services. Moogan and Baron (2014) found that social activities are an important and high-level predictor for the decision-making of the prospective students. Mantilla (2004) asserted, majority of the students choose university because of social life activities that provide them possibilities to be a good citizen and to improve their personalities.

H3: Social activities have a significant effect on campus activities.

Dao and Thorpe (2014) found that campus facilities comprise; library, computer labs, entertainment facilities, health service, online access to lectures, on-campus accommodation and career guidance, are the most important factor, which affect the students' choices for the higher education. So, we hypothesized that, campus facilities are an important factor for the students' decisions.

H4: Campus facilities have a significant effect on reputation.

The next predictor of the student choices is the academic staff. Gatfield, Barker and Graham (1999) found that quality of teaching styles and teaching facilities are necessary within the campus. Elliot and Healey (2001) empirically proved that the instructional effectiveness is very important for the satisfaction of the students with the university. Similarly, Montilla (2004) asserted professors' effectiveness ensures the atmosphere and this causes an attraction for the new students.

H5: Academic staff has a significant effect on scientific activities.

Under the term internationality, it is proposed here, the international staff and international students of the university. Internationality of the university flourish the students capability and ability as knowing new cultures, new styles of thinking, decision making and saving different types of experiences (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Similarly, various originality of academic staff provides students variety of experiences. So that our hypothesis shaped as,

H6: Internationality of the university has a significant effect on the scientific activities.

Scientific activities are conferences, seminars and project-based learning activities, which are held within the university. Those activities are improving the academic success of the university (Montilla, 2004). According to Kotler and Fox (1995) academic programs increase the satisfaction of the students. Then our next hypothesis was proposed as;

H7: Scientific activities have a significant effect on the reputation of the university.

According to Sidin, Hussin, and Soon (2003) students are selecting universities when the institutions match their preferences as academically, financially, and socially. For Dao and Forte (2014) financial aid and scholarship are opportunities that decrease the cost of education. Additionally, Elliot and Healey (2008) found that, financial aid was defined as an important and satisfactory factor by the students.

H8: Financial aid/scholarship has a significant effect on the reputation of the university.

H9: Financial aid/scholarship has a significant effect on "I advise my University".

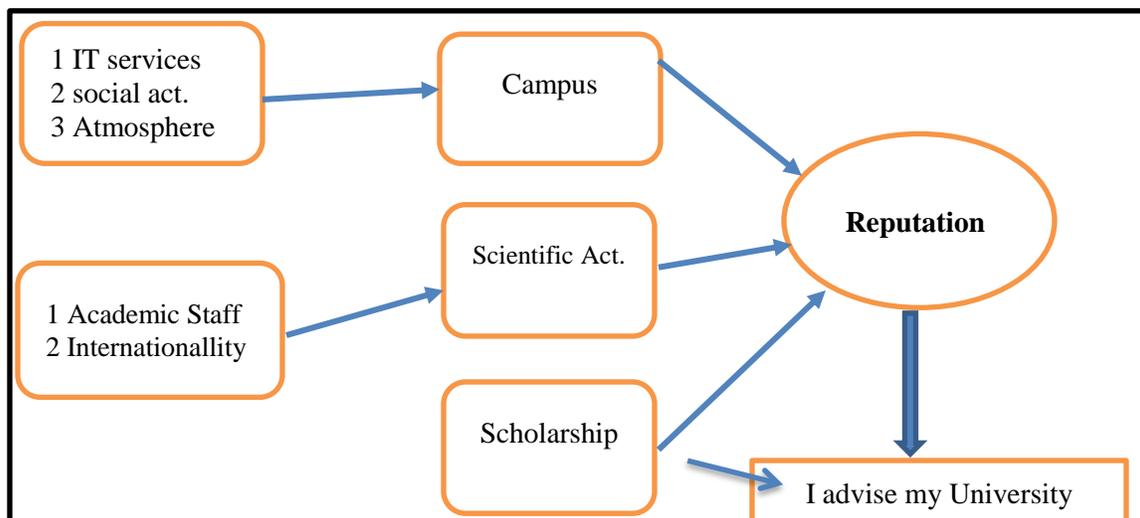
Abbott and Ali (2009) have investigated the impact of reputation on the student choices and found a significant relationship. In addition, Munisamy, Jaafar, and Nagaraj (2014) determined career prospects and reputation of the university as the most effective factors on the students' decision. Reputation is the fulfilment of the expectation over time and the assumptions of the society about the company. According to the scholars, reputation is more important than current quality of the university because reputation is directly influencing the prospective students' intention for the university (Munisamy et al., 2014; Gatfield et al., 2006; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Alves & Raposo, 2010). And we have asserted reputation impacts current students intention to advise their university to next prospective students as well.

H10: Reputation has a significant effect on “I advise my University”.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted in Sulaimani city. To do the analysis, 400 students have been surveyed and the results have been analyzed by employing structural equation modeling to understand the impact of each variable on the selection way. Further, ANOVA analysis have been proposed to understand the differences of those variables among universities. To do these, we have selected American University of Sulaimani (AUIS), Human Development University, and Cihan University which are the main private institutions of Sulaimani City. To start the project, we have constructed a survey questionnaire which includes questions that test campus facilities, quality of staff, internationality, scientific activities, social activities, IT services, reputation, and atmosphere. The aim was to understand the direct or indirect impact of these dimensions on “advising that university to their relatives and friends”.

Initially direct impact of those dimensions has been tested. It has been observed that none of these dimensions had direct impact on the “selecting that university as first choice” except atmosphere. Consequently, over correlation analysis, a model has been developed and it was seen that majority of the students select a university due to their relatives’ and friends’ advices. It shows that if a student, parents or acquaintances advise this university, the chance that students select this university would most probably increase. As a result of this, the model has changed its form and the dependent variable became “I advise this university to my relatives and friends”. When the “I advise this university to my relatives and friends” variable was investigated, reputation that has impact on the “I advise this university to my relatives and friends” variable emerged. Therefore, the model has been developed to understand the determinants of reputation which impact students and parents to advice that university to others. Therefore, figure below shows about the results of the model;



4. Validity and Reliability

Before the structural equation modeling was proposed, the validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire was first tested. The internal reliability was tested by Cronbach’s Alpha (Cronbach, 1951,

Demir & Aydinli, 2016). Each value of the dimensions was above 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978; Khine, 2013, Demir & Mukhlis, 2017).

Following the above, the exploratory factor analysis was proposed to reduce dimensions which may reflect the number of latent constructs. It was observed that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measured result was 0.897 which is well above 0.50 and Barlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p < 0.01$ (Field, 2000; Aydinli & Demir, 2015). This was then followed by another parameter of measurement which is the Eigen value of each factor. Here, it was observed that the Eigen value of each factor must be equal to or above one so that the concerning cluster of questions can be considered as a factor (Field, 2000; Demir, Demir, & Guven, 2017). According to the results noted in the current study, there were eight dimensions which explain 70 percent of the overall variance of the questionnaire. The remaining factor loads, Cronbach's Alpha values, and the dimension names of the questions are illustrated in Table 1 below;

Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

	Quality of Staff	IT Services	Reputation Campus Facilities	Atmosphere	Social Activities	Internationality	Scientific Activities	Cronbach's Alpha
Q1			.818					
Q2			.755					0.800
Q3			.765					
Q4	.695							
Q5	.784							
Q6	.817							0.858
Q7	.666							
Q8		.652						
Q9		.787						0.768
Q10		.755						
Q11					.479			
Q12					.818			0.719
Q13					.689			
Q14				.682				
Q15				.788				0.725

Q16										.487	
Q17										.550	
Q18										.820	0.733
Q19										.742	
Q20										.460	
Q21										.420	0.756
Q22										.520	
Q23										.591	
Q24										.748	0.749
Q25										.775	
Explained Variance	13.619	9.882	9.319	9.260	7.982	7.724	7.638	4.887	70.312		

The table above shows the results of exploratory factor analysis. It shows that Cronbach's Alpha values are above 0.70. These results show that each factor is reliable enough. Further, factor loadings and explained variance of each dimension also can be seen in Table 1.

Another validity analysis was confirmatory factor analysis. The results indicated that Chi-square/DF value is 3.866 which is sufficient where if it is below 5 (Demir, Eray, & Erguvan, 2015). Further, GFI, CFI, and TLI values are above 0.9 which shows sufficient level of acceptance. Finally, standardized factor loadings are between 0.550 and 0.846. It shows that the items under each dimension show sufficient value.

5. Structural Equations Modelling

It is known that the SEM tests direct and indirect effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables. In this study, a maximum likelihood model of the SEM is engaged. It allows for a widely inclusive mean which can be used to evaluate and modify the hypothesized model (Li et al., 2002). Moreover, the study employs structural equation modelling among eight variables by utilizing AMOS 23 software. The model fit indexes have the same threshold values as confirmatory factor analysis. It was seen that RMR value was 0.09, RMSEA 0.081, X²/DF 3.991, CFI 0.92, GFI 0.90, and IFI 0.92. According to these results model is fit enough to be accepted. For the next step, results of the hypothesis can be evaluated.

Table 2: Results of the Structural Equations Modeling

Hypothesis Results					
Dependent		Independent	Standardized Estimates	T Value	P Value
campus	<---	Social Activities	0.221	2.070	0.038
campus	<---	IT services	0.215	1.991	0.049
campus	<---	Atmosphere	0.239	2.624	0.009
Scientific Activities	<---	Staff	0.549	7.373	***
Scientific Activities	<---	Internationality	0.307	4.722	***
Reputation	<---	Scientific Activities	0.842	10.109	***
Reputation	<---	Campus	0.241	5.331	***
Reputation	<---	Scholarship	0.06	0.107	0.915
Advising University to Others	<---	Scholarship	0.323	3.917	***
Advising University to Others	<---	Reputation	0.360	4.768	***
Advising University to Others	<---	Selected that University on Advices	0.502	12.044	***

Results of hypothesis show that social activities impact campus facility perception positively (0.221). Moreover, this impact is significant at P value (0.038). It was observed as other determinants of campus facilities are IT services (0.215) and atmosphere of a university (0.239) which impact campus facilities perception significantly at P value (0.049 and 0.009) respectively. Another dimension, which impact the reputation of universities, is scientific activities variable. The hypothesis results show that staff quality and internationality impact scientific activities perceptions of the students positively. Furthermore, staff has impact as 0.549 and internationality as 0.307. Both impacts are significant as P value is less than 0.001.

There are mainly two parameters which impact reputation. Those dimensions are scientific activities and campus facilities which means that the quality of the scientific activities and the campus facilities increase the reputation of the university. While both dimensions impact reputation significantly at P value is less than 0.001, it was observed that scientific activities have much more impact (0.842) than campus facilities (0.241).

Finally, it has been observed that reputation impacts students to advise that university to the acquaintances. Beside this, another parameter has been brought into the equation as “I have selected that university on the advices of my relatives”. This parameter evaluates whether the student have selected that university on an advice or him/herself. It was seen that if a student selected that university based on the advice of a relative, s/he advises that university for the further candidates. Moreover, this dimension has more impact (0.502) on advising that university than reputation does (0.360) both significant at P value less than 0.001.

6. Discussions

The study is very important in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which reveals the predictors of the students' university decision. Result of the study showed that the most important factor on students' choice is advice of parents, friends and relatives. Similarly, Foskett and Hesketh (1997) found the same results that students are significantly affected by their parents. In addition, Dao and Thorpe (2015) showed undergraduate students are affected more by their parents, however postgraduate students are influenced by teachers and friends.

Second most influential predictor on the students is scientific activities of the university. Those activities are important for the university in order to increase the reputation. Through well and high perceived reputation can the education institutions attract more students. These results are consistent with the literature (Kotler, 1976; Gatfield, Barker, & Graham, 1999; Elliott & Healy, 2001; Montilla, 2004).

The next important factor is the academic staff. The quality of the academic staff is directly and significantly affecting the scientific activities of the university. Similarly, Gatfield et al. (1999) found the same results that the quality of the academic staff is an important factor on the students.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to clarify the predictors of the students' choices for the university in Kurdistan region of Iraq. To do this, 400 students were selected from the American University of Sulaimani (AUIS), Human Development University, and Cihan University which are the main private institutions of Sulaimani City. To analyze the collected data, initially, exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis have been proposed. Secondly, structural equation modeling has been proposed to determine the impact of each independent variable on reputation and advising university to others.

It was seen for campus perceptions of the students that IT services, atmosphere, and social activities have been important dimensions with 0.221, 0.215, 0.239 impact respectively. Further, campus perception has affected reputation of that university at 0.842. Secondly, it was observed that quality of the academic staff and internationality of the academic staff influenced the quality of the scientific activities positively with the coefficients of 0.549 and 0.307 respectively. Consequently, it was seen that quality of the scientific activities impacted the reputation of the university significantly with the coefficient value of 0.241. Finally, the reputation of the university has impact on the advising of that university (significantly at 0.360) and if a student selected that university based on advices, s/he probably would advise that institution to others with the level of coefficient 0.502.

The main accepted hypothesis has been sequenced below on the table;

H1 IT services → Campus	Supported
H2 Atmosphere → Campus	Supported
H3 Social Activities → Campus	Supported
H4 Campus Facilities → Reputation	Supported
H5 Staff → Scientific Activities	Supported
H6 Internationality → Scientific Activities	Supported
H7 Scientific Activities → Reputation	Supported
H8 Scholarship → Reputation	Not Supported
H9 Scholarship → I advise my University	Supported
H10 Reputation → I advise my University	Supported
H11 Selected University on Advice → Advising University to others	Supported

8. Managerial Impacts

Results of the study emerged some important points: firstly, higher education institutions should increase their reputation through social and scientific activities in order to attract more students. Second, they should not only focus on the prospective students, in the same time they have to increase the prosperity and satisfaction level of their current students as well. On the other hand, according to our results, in order to reach a good and a well-known reputation, staff must be motivated to increase the scientific activities. These activities are: student projects, scientific researches, conferences, symposiums and publications etc. In addition, through social activities like: picnics, club activities and departmental social programs campus services and atmosphere could be positively empowered. Further, free Wi-Fi services within the campus, online lecture notes and extra materials for the students are the positive predictors of IT services for the prospective and current students' decisions and advice to their close environment. This study is limited with the Sulaymania, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It cannot be generalized to whole region. To do this, another case study should be proposed. Secondly, there has been one more private institution (Komar University) that couldn't have been included into this study due to some technical problems while collecting data.

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