

## **A Study of Students' Choice of Higher Education in Achieving Their Career Aspirations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to examine the factors that influence SPM leavers [n=694] in their choices of university courses. Socio-economic and personality factors such as interest in work-related experience and ambivalence have been frequently cited as the main factors affecting students' career aspirations. Noting that the cost of tuition fees correlate strongly with the affordability of the course chosen, and taking into consideration the fact that the cost of enrolling in a public university is lower than in a private university, this study found no evidence to suggest any significant difference between the career aspirations of students studying in public and private universities. This study, found choice of university is dependent on gender (Chi-square =7.131, p=0.008), that is more female students (67.6%) prefer to attend a public university in contrast with males (55.7%). The study also found that the most important criterion in the decision making is the availability of scholarships.

*Keywords:* career aspirations, career choice, gender difference, higher education, socio-economic status

### **INTRODUCTION**

Upon graduating from high school, aspiring higher-level education students typically do not know what their dream jobs are.

Students from lower-income families without financial resources, cannot study at a private university in view of the absence of education grants or loans. Those from higher-income families have the luxury of attending public or private universities. Based on data from Higher Education Research Institute (2010) cost and financial resources is a deciding factor in the selection of courses.

Regardless of the route (private or public university) a student selects according to Woodruff (2013), there is

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always the possibility a student's career aspiration being disfigured and distorted through the university's own filtering system especially in public universities. A student's career aspiration is almost certainly subjected to a degree of admission requirements.

The Malaysian government has provided loans for students studying at public and private universities.

For high-achieving students, the government of Malaysia has awarded loans and grants to allow them to pursue higher education not only in Malaysia, but also overseas. This said, regardless of whether the university is a private or a government-sponsored one, the main challenge for a university is always to produce high-quality graduates that go on to become dynamic professional individuals with high characters that will be absorbed in today's marketplace at costs generally achievable by the majority of the Malaysian population.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study on students' career choices is vast. Ahmed, Alam and Alam (1997) suggest personality factors such as interest and work-relevant experiences were frequently reported as important factors behind students' course selection. It has to be noted that besides internal factors such as the students' own interest contextual factors such as financial constraints and social support also act as barriers on course and career selection.

Ahmed et al. (1997) qualitatively examined the influences behind choice of university and career. The factors were categorized as follows: (1) factors affecting students' occupational choices, (2) factors that supported/restrained students from pursuing their choices, and (3) ways in which the students overcame the barriers keeping them from their course and career of choice. From a survey of 295 students from five universities in New Zealand, they found that students desiring to pursue a chartered accountancy (CA) program placed significantly greater importance on financial, job-related and perceived benefit-cost ratio factors when compared to those opting for other careers.

Studies done by Kasperzack, Ernst and Piquart (2014), Puffer (2014), and Oztemel (2014), found personality factors such as that of ambivalence to be significant in career selections.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) carried out a longitudinal empirical study and found that degree programs tended to pay-off better than diploma programs in terms of occupational earnings. The studies found that although education affected future earnings, there is no significant difference in net occupational earnings or status between students opting for public or private based universities. This paper aims to examine factors that affect choices of university courses among SPM leavers.

## METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the survey methodology.

### Target Population

This research targeted students that intend to further their education upon completion of their secondary school education. Since the students that will seek entry into university in 2015 would have sat for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) exams in 2014, the sample came from students who will be taking the SPM exams in that year. Additionally, some students who were already enrolled in colleges at the time this study was conducted were also sampled in order to determine the reason for course selection.

### Samples

The respondents came from students sitting for the 2014 SPM exams in the state of Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, and the state of Pahang. These three states were chosen due to their close proximity and their rapid economic growth. Students from both urban and rural schools were randomly sampled by using the random stratified sampling method. As can be seen in Table 1, a total of 694 SPM leavers were sampled.

### Procedure of Data Collection

Data for this research was obtained through open-faced interviews by well-trained lecturers from Universiti Teknologi MARA

(UiTM). This method was proven efficient to ensure that the respondents did not avoid answering questions, or, correspondingly, only respond to questionnaires with simple, cookie-cutter-like answers which failed to reflect their views truthfully.

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The demographic information of the respondents were analysed using descriptive analysis for the variables gender, state of school, current educational major, hometown, ethnic group, family income, level of parents' education, preferred place of study and preferred courses of study. Then the factors that affect choices of university among respondents were cross tabulated with the demographic information to obtain the percentage on the preference of university based on perceptions and views.

Table 1  
*Distributions of Respondents*

States	Number of Respondents
1. Selangor	231
2. Pahang	207
3. Kuala Lumpur	256
Total	694

### Research Tools

A two-part questionnaire was developed to determine the students' choice of higher education. The first part of the questionnaire involved personal questions such as:

a) personal biography, b) preferred place of study, c) courses by which the student intended to study, and d) preferred fees. In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were expected to answer questions in order to determine their views and thought-process prior to deciding and pursuing their preferred institute of higher education using a 5-point Likert scale, given that 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. The factors on perceptions and views were grouped into 7 categories of affected factors, such as; relaxed campus environment, modern building, many exciting activities, low tuition fees, provide scholarship, reputable academic program, prestigious university.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at the data quantitatively, there were 344 male students and 350 female students surveyed. From the survey, both the male and female students reported to

have chosen public universities over private ones. Interestingly, the data tabulated for private universities came out exactly the same as that of studying in universities overseas [see Figure 1].

The mean for each variable involved in the study is shown in Table 2. All variables have a mean score of above 2.00. The result shows that majority of the respondents agree with the statement of items for each variable. All variable listed seem to be important in influencing the choice of university among SPM leavers. Generally, in comparison of means of variables, "Provide scholarship" has the highest mean score (3.30), followed by "relaxed environment" and "Reputable academic program". "Prestigious university" has the lowest mean score among these variables. When the data was analysed further using crosstabs, it was found that more female students choice is public (49%) university as shown in Figure 1.

Table 2  
*Means of Items According to Variable*

Variable	Importance	
	Mean	S.D
Provide scholarship	3.30	1.102
Relaxed Environment	3.27	1.178
Reputable academic program	3.24	1.193
Many exciting activities	2.76	1.229
Low tuition fees	2.67	1.358
Modern building	2.75	1.321
Prestigious university	2.35	1.948

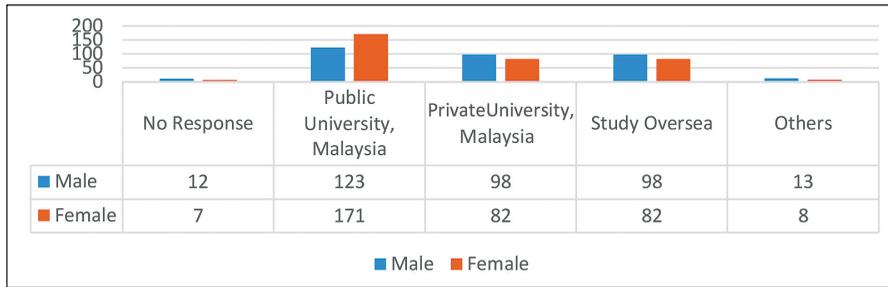


Figure 1. Students Choices of Higher Education

As in the case between genders, there were 3.5% male and 2% female students who were indecisive (no response) about their choice of university for higher education. In terms of course-selection among male and female students surveyed, male students were reported to have chosen engineering (34.9%) more than any other field of study while female students reported choosing medicine (31.4%) as their preferred course. We then analyzed the choice of programs among different

ethnicity. Results in Figure 2 shows that a Malay students choice is Engineering, Chinese students prefer Business while Indians prefer Medical programmes. It is noted, however, that there were 157 students (22.6%) who showed no response (i.e. who were still indecisive) about their choice of field of study. This ambivalence that was highlighted in studies conducted by Kasperzack et al. (2014), Puffer (2014), and Oztemel (2014), earlier is greatly seen among Malaysian students.

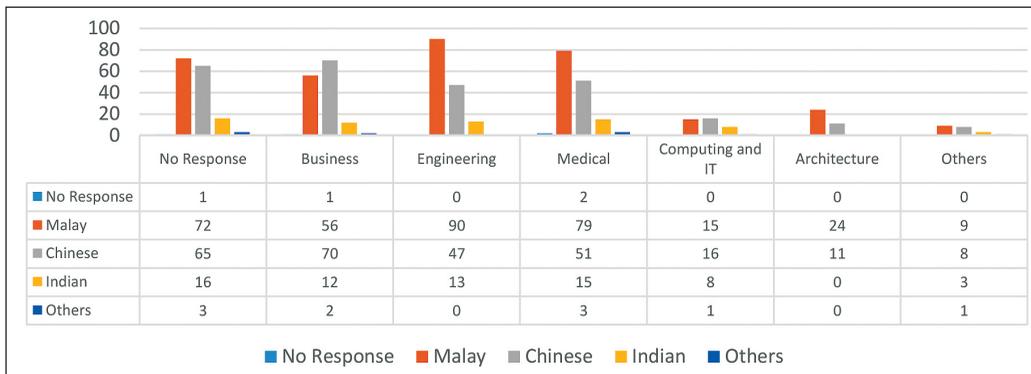


Figure 2. Choices of Higher Education Between Ethnicity

The Chi-Square test results in Table 3 shows a significant association (Chi-Square=7.131, p=0.008) between choice of university (public or private) and gender. A higher proportion of female students (67.6%) choice is public university compared to male (55.7%) students.

Table 3  
*Choices between Public versus Private University and Gender*

	Public	Private
Male	171 (55.7%)	98(44.3%)
Female	171(67.6%)	82(32.4%)

Note: Chi-square (1 df) =7.131, p=0.008

In Malaysia, low income family are families whose monthly income is less than

RM3000. The middle income family are those in RM3001 to RM10000 range and those with incomes exceeding RM10000 considered high-income. This study concurred with many studies on socio-economic status (Jackson, 1982; Ekstrom, 1985; Flint, 1992), where it was found that there were significant association (Chi-Square (6df)=68.867, p=<0.01) between the different socio-economic status and students' choice of higher education. Results Table 4 show evidence that majority of student in low income (65.2%) and middle income (46.2%) family prefer public university. Meanwhile, students from high income families prefer Private (39%) or study oversea (37.1%).

Table 4  
*Choice of Higher Education Between Family Income*

Family Income	University Choice			
	Public University, Malaysia	Private University, Malaysia	Study Oversea	Others
Low Income	122	26	34	5
	65.2%	13.9%	18.2%	2.7%
Middle Income	127	71	68	9
	46.2%	25.8%	24.7%	3.3%
High Income	36	62	59	2
	22.6%	39.0%	37.1%	1.3%

Note: Chi-square (6 df) =68.867, p<0.01

Among the factors affecting university selection are: low tuition fees, reputable programs and universities, and whether the university will provide loans, grants or scholarships. As can be seen from

Figure 3, this study found that the most important factor (32%) is the availability of scholarships to aspiring students, followed by the environment and the university's overall reputation.

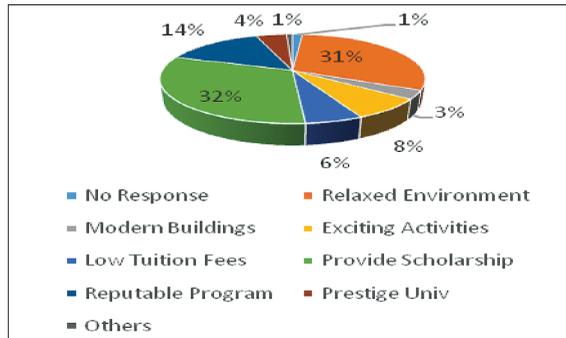


Figure 3. Factors in deciding university selections

## CONCLUSION

The three major differences between public university and private colleges are: 1) tuition fees, 2) the size and degree offerings, 3) class size and demography (Peterson, 2014). In this study, it was found that there are significant difference in the students' choices between public and private universities. This study also found significant difference in gender as well as socio-economic status on students' in the choice of career and hence on which courses to attend. The result of this study is in direct contrast to that of Ahmed et al. (1997).

In a survey by Higher Education Research Institute in the United States it was found that the most important factor in choosing a university is not the ranking of the university (16.7%), but its academic reputation (67.7%). University financial assistance was ranked third (45.3%) in the students' list of priorities.

This contrasts with studies done in Pakistan [N=226] by Sabir, Ahmad, Ashraf and Ahmad (2013), where

higher education commission ranking, institutional reputation, employment, and career prospects are deemed more important.

Our study concurs with that done by Kitsawat (2013) in Thailand [N=1012] where it was found that three most important factors in influencing selection criteria are university environment and study atmosphere, university reputation and the availability of financial assistance. In 2009, Wagner and Fard (2009) identified the significant factor behind Malaysian students' choice of higher education is the cost of education. This finding is reflected likewise in the findings of this study where financial aid is deemed incredibly significant in students' list of priorities when selecting both the area of study and the institute of higher education.

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