

Factors Influencing VNU-IS Students' Choice of University

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Received 16 June 2015

Revised 29 September 2015; Accepted 20 December 2015

Abstract: The research aims to investigate factors having important impact on students' choice of university, particularly in the context of Vietnam National University, Hanoi – International School. It was based on the theoretical framework of factors affecting university choice suggested by Chapman (1981). The result from the analysis of variation (ANOVA) showed differences in how each factor is valued by students of various majors and with different fathers' educational background in selecting VNU-IS. The results from comparing mean and in-depth interview also showed that the VNU-IS unique factors such as educating in foreign languages or IS being owned by VNU, from students' perspectives, have the most significant impact on why they choose the school to enroll. These findings have been the solid foundation for some recommendations to enhance the rate and the quality of students enrolling in different majors in VNU-IS.

Keywords: Educational background, factors affecting choice of university, VNU-IS

1. Introduction

Choosing a suitable university to apply is an important decision of any students. It not only affects students' orientation of future career but also influences their motivation to study, commitment and interaction with the university. In fact, not being rational in choosing a university, students may have difficulties in maintaining learning motivation, achieving high academic results and getting a desirable job. Exploring factors which drives to students' choice of universities is, therefore, necessary to consult them for the more informed decision. As to educational institutions, understanding factors impacting students' choice of university is the basis for recruiting strategies and the implementation of training programs, which

decides the survival and development of each university in the competitive environment of higher education provision. This is also the situation that the International School, a member of Vietnam National University, Hanoi, has been currently coping with.

Aiming at exploring significant factors which affect students' choice of university, particularly the choice of VNU-IS based on students' various personal characteristics and socio-economic background, the study was underpinned by two research questions:

i. Is there any difference between students grouped by personal characteristics and socio-economic background in assessing the significance of factors which possibly affects students' choice of VNU-IS?

ii. Which factors were perceived to be significant by students in their choice of VNU-IS?

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The research procedure includes two phases: The first phase uses quantitative method with a questionnaire collecting data of students' demography and their judgment of the importance of given factors. The data was then analyzed, using statistical analyzing methods. In the second phase, in-depth interview with 10% of participants was conducted, which helps find reasonable explanation for the results of the first phase.

2. Literature review

Regarding factors that affect students' choice of universities, a number of research has been conducted based on economic, social and collective perspectives (Kitsawad, 2013; Kim & Gasman, 2011). In terms of economic perspective, some studies showed that when choosing to enroll in a university, students often consider each university as "a product" and compare benefits gained from them (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1985; Paulsen, 2001; DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). Meanwhile, studies based on social perspective focused on individuals' needs and interest which are influenced by personal and social characteristics (Kitsawad, 2013; Perna, 2006). These characteristics can be social economic background, parents' encouragement or previous academic results (Sewell & Shah, 1978). As to collective perspective, both social and economic aspects are considered, but the decision making procedure are divided and analyzed in different steps (Perna, 2006). Beside study models based on the three mentioned perspectives, more recent researches refined the models of university choice by focusing on target groups (Kim & Gasman, 2011), separate steps of decision process (Pitre, 2006); or in some other researches, more comprehensive model were used to explore the interrelationship between selected factors (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanithou, 2007).

Despite various perspectives of studies, there are common groups of factors which are often considered in most research: Personal characteristics, characteristics of the university, influence from other people and communicative effort from the university. These four groups are in agreement with the theoretical framework for impacting factors of students' choice of university proposed by Chapman (1981).

2.1. Personal characteristics

Results from previous studies revealed the role of personal characteristics such as personal interests, perception of ability or socio-economic background of the family in students' choice of university. In a recent research, Mehboob, Shah and Bhutto (2012) showed that interest and career objective is the most important factor which affects students' choice of university. Besides, perception of personal ability being suitable with chosen major and the school requirements are proved to be crucial in students' decision (Cabrera & Nasa, 2000). In fact, the assessment of personal interest and ability before choosing a university to enroll not only influences students' retention rate but also tends to make more capable students to choose more competitive and private universities with longer training period (Paulsen, 1990).

Furthermore, socio-economic background of the family, especially financial resource was proved to be an important factor in students' choice of university (Wargner&Fard, 2009; Perna, 2006; Lau, 2005). Interestingly, the role of scholarship or financial support from the school in students' decision was diverse. For example, while Reagle (1997) confirmed that financial support is crucial consideration when students apply a university, Galottiand Mark (1994) claimed that only more capable students care about this. Meanwhile, Avery and Hoxby (2004) concluded that students who have higher socio-economic background with strong financial resource and those whose parents had earned a bachelor degree do not put financial support from the university on top priority.

2.2. Characteristics of the university

Characteristics of the universities, together with students' personal and social background, was considered to be crucial to students' decision to apply. According to Kim and Gasman (2011), Pampaloni (2010) with the exception of the study of Hoyt and Brown (2003), the perceived reputation and prestige of a university has significant impact on students' decision to apply, interestingly; this impact can be indirectly brought to students by their peers (Smith & Matthews, 1990).

As to VNU-IS case, with various international joint training programs, the prestige of training partners is also worth studying as an important factor. In addition, the provision of high-qualified majors being suitable to students' needs and interests, tuition fee, enrolling requirements and graduating conditions were proved to greatly influenced students' choice of universities (Robert & Higgin, 1992; McDonough & Antonion, 1996; Maringe, 2006; Wagner & Fard, 2009; Kim & Gasman, 2011).

2.3. Influence from surrounding people

Among those who have influence on students' choice of university, parents were considered the most significant ones. They not only give their children advice and encouragement but the commitment of financial support and career orientation based on their own educational background is an important motive of students' decision (Purr, 2010). For example, Hosser, Schmidt and Vesper (1999) and McDonough (1997) reported in their studies that most participants perceive their parents to be the most influencing factor to their choice, especially in terms of financial support. Besides, Issac, Malaney and Karras (1992) also found the relationship between parents' educational background and students' choice in that male students' decision were more affected by their fathers' education than their mothers'.

There is also evidence that parents who went to college themselves are of greater help

than parents who did not (Kim & Gasman, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Some researchers, however, argued that parents only have a role in encouraging their children to pursue higher education but have little impact on the choice of which university to apply (Schmit, 1992). Parents' impact on students' decision of university, therefore, needs studying more carefully.

Apart from parents, peers are often mentioned as an important factor (Kim & Gasman, 2011). Results from previous studies showed that having peers who follow higher education is a motivation for students to continue to study (Fletcher, 2008) and they are also a source of necessary information about universities based on which students can make a decision to apply. Furthermore, advice from other relatives and high school teachers were proved to encourage or impede students from applying to a university (McDonough & Antonion (1996); Perna (2006); Raposo & Alves, 2007).

2.4. Communicative effort from the university

Recently mentioned, university's effort to communicate with prospective students is proved to have significant influence on students' choice of university. As reported, students assessed information about the university from different channels. The Internet, especially the university websites were emphasized (Pampaloni, 2010; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Willich et al., 2011). Besides, publications such as printed brochures, mails were still an important source of information (Briggs, 2006). Information gained from visiting campus or receiving direct consultancy from the university counselor is also reported to be significant in students' choice of university Grosz (1987). Recently, however, studies about university's effort of communication have revealed different results about the role of printed documents in comparison with information from advisors (university staff or alumni) (Corley, 1991; Connor, Burton,

Pearson, Poolard & Regan, 1999) This factor is, therefore, worth studying more thoroughly.

3. Methodology

200 first-year students in three main English instructed programs at VNU-IS: International Business (degree issued by VNU), Science of Management (degree issued by Keuka College, USA) and Business (Accounting, Honors) (degree issued by HELP university, Malaysia) participated in the research.

A three-page questionnaire with two main parts was administered within the first two weeks of the start of each program. In the first part of the questionnaire, information about students' personal and family background was collected using multiple choice questions. They then indicated the degree to which 14 variables (appendix 1) influenced their choice of VNU-IS. Responses to the influences were rated on a 6-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 6 (very important). The variables presented were chosen based on a literature review and discussions among the research team, and then subjected to a validation process, which included giving the questionnaire to students to check for item appropriateness and comprehensiveness (face and content validity). Variables listed in the questionnaire were modified based on this review.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to estimate the internal consistency of each factor. The value of alpha of 0.6 or higher is decided to be acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Factor analysis was used to determine whether the 14 variables could be grouped together to create a smaller number of underlying factors. The research team predetermined that variables should correlate with a factor at 0.5 or higher to provide evidence of a strong relationship between the variables and each new factor. Variables that clustered into factors that explained more variance (eigenvalue > 1) than that of a single

variable were retained. The difference in determining the influence of each factor on university choice between students having different personal and family characteristics was examined using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Possible most influencing factors perceived by students were found based on MEAN-comparison test.

Finally, after the questionnaire, in-depth interview were conducted with 10% of all participants chosen randomly from three majors in order to obtain more detailed information which helps explain the results from statistical analysis of the questionnaire.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Students' demography

Of all 200 questionnaire delivered, 174 were completed, producing a response rate of 87%. In terms of personal characteristics, the students' age ranges from 18 to 25 with the average age of 20 years old, and 67% of them were female and 33% male. As regards to study major, 57% of the students follow International Business, 32% follow Science of Management and the rest follow Accounting, Analyzing and Auditing. Their results of entrance exam ranged from 15 to 24.5 points, and out of 30, 57% of the students take English subject in their university entrance exam. In terms of socio-economic background, more than 75% of all students come from Hanoi and big cities. Their parents most work in trading area with normal income of under 25 million VND per month. Regarding educational background, most parents graduated from university.

4.2. Questionnaire evaluation

Based on literature review and discussion among the research team, 14 items were included in the questionnaire and it was predetermined that they form four groups of factors which may impact students' choice of VNU-IS: personal characteristics (F1), university characteristics (F2), relatives and

friends' impact (F3), and university's effort in communication (F4).

Cronbach's alpha coefficients, estimating internal consistency of each factor, were calculated as $\alpha = 0.85$ for personal characteristics, $\alpha = 0.72$ for university characteristics, $\alpha = 0.65$ for relatives and friends' impact and $\alpha = 0.71$ for university's effort in communication. An alpha coefficient of 0.8 (out of 1) is considered the "gold standard" and indicative of high reliability. These coefficients are in the range that suggest moderate to high reliability.

The exploratory factor analysis on general factors that impact students' choice of

university produced 4 factors that used 13 of the 14 variables; 1 variable (relatives' orientation) failed to correlate with any of the factors. One factor was renamed by the authors according to how the variables grouped together, so the new four factors found were as follow: personal characteristics (F1), university characteristics (F2), university's effort in communication (F4) and other objective information (F3) including reputation of joint training partners, reasonable tuition fee and impact from high school teachers and friends (Table 2). These 4 factors collectively explained 63.72% of the variance in the responses. (Table 1)

Table 1. Total variance explained of significant factors

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.869	29.761	29.761	3.869	29.761	29.761	2.205	16.961	16.961
2	2.017	15.518	45.279	2.017	15.518	45.279	2.186	16.813	33.774
3	1.314	10.109	55.388	1.314	10.109	55.388	1.961	15.083	48.857
4	1.084	8.341	63.729	1.084	8.341	63.729	1.933	14.872	63.729
5	.895	6.888	70.617						

Table 2. Rotated component matrix of impacting factors to university choice

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Information from direct consultancy (P1Q12)	.833			
Information from mass media (P1Q13)	.769			
Information from alumni network (P1Q14)	.615			
Instructed in foreign language (P1Q7)		.790		
Prestigious majors (P1Q3)		.644		
Prestige of VNU (P1Q4)		.607		
Foreign language supported program (P1Q6)		.536		
Impact from peers (P1Q10)			.647	
Tuition fee (P1Q11)			.635	
Prestige of the university's foreign partner (P1Q5)			.611	
Impact from high school teachers			.606	
Personal interest (P1Q1)				.912
Personal ability(P1Q2)				.879

4.3. Difference in judgment of students grouped by personal and socio-economic background

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) and t-test was applied in order to recognize the difference in judging the role of various factors in students' choice of university between different groups of participants. The groups were divided based on two categories: (i) personal characteristics and (ii) socio-economic background.

In terms of personal characteristics, it was found that there was difference between groups of students with different majors in judging the

importance of VNU-IS related factors such as reputation of VNU-IS, high-qualified programs, instruction given in foreign languages or foundation foreign language program (Sig 0.046<0.05). This result may be originated from distinctive features of each major in terms of entrance requirement, program curriculum or degree issuing agent. For example, for program with degree issued by Vietnam National University, Hanoi, students may rank the reputation of VNU at higher level of significance in their decision. (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in judgment of students grouped by personal characteristics

Factor	Sig.			
	Gender	Entrance exam results	Major	Group
F1	.386	.665	.228	.320
F2	.534	.074	.046*	.409
F3	.159	.411	.192	.496
F4	.076	.650	.213	.609

As to socio-economic background, there was significant difference (Sig. 0.014<0.05) between groups of students divided by fathers' educational background in considering the role of reputed foreign partners, tuition fee or high school teachers and friends' opinion when students make choice of university to apply. This result is compatible with studies about the role of parents' education in students' application of university. It can be explained

that the father is an important source of advice when students choose a university to apply. With different educational background, the father may have various orientations to students, and this may lead to the difference in students' perception of the importance of tuition fee, opinion of high school teachers and peer or reputation of joint training partners when making decision. (Table 4).

Table 4. Differences in judgment of students grouped by socio-economic background

Factor	Sig.					
	Hometown	Family income	Father's job	Mother's job	Father's education	Mother's education
F1	.431	.700	.810	.614	.376	.614
F2	.406	.280	.240	.096	.513	.096
F3	.381	.487	.491	.063	.014*	.063
F4	.398	.690	.332	.160	.220	.160

In order to determine possibly significant factors which have impact on students' choice

of university, mean-comparison tests of all variables were used (Table 5).

Table 5. Students' judgment of significant factors to university choice

N = 174	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Coefficient of variation
Prestige of VNU	1	6	4.85	.986	0.20
Instructed in foreign language	1	6	4.84	.999	0.21
Prestigious majors	1	6	4.37	1.005	0.22
Personal interest	1	6	4.11	1.125	0.27
Personal ability	1	6	4.03	1.145	0.28
Foreign language supported program	1	6	3.83	1.353	3.53
Prestige of the university's foreign partner	1	6	3.79	1.089	2.87
Information from mass media	1	6	3.41	1.164	3.51
Information from alumni network	1	6	3.33	1.507	4.52
Information from direct consultancy	1	6	3.20	1.295	4.04
Tuition fee	1	8	3.16	1.367	4.32
Impact from high school teachers	1	6	2.38	1.349	5.66
Impact from peers	1	6	2.20	1.299	5.90
Valid N (listwise)					

Results from mean-comparison tests indicate that from students' perception, characteristics of university such as reputation of Vietnam National University (Mean = 4.85), high-qualified majors (Mean = 4.37) and reputation of degree issuing foreign partners (Mean = 3.79) are important in their choice of VNU-IS. Also, instructions given in foreign languages, the unique feature of training program in VNU- IS, was highly appreciated by students when they make decision (Mean = 4.84). This result is in agreement with information received from the in-depth interview. On the contrary, the provision of foundation foreign language training prior to students' official entrance was perceived to be less important (Mean = 3.83). One explanation for this can be the lack of information provided in marketing campaigns and documents of

VNU-IS. However, due to high coefficient of variation (3.53) it is not possible to conclude students' general perception of foundation foreign language training in their choice of VNU-IS.

Personal related factors such as interest or ability were considered to be significant by the participants. In terms of the university's effort in communication, information from three main channels including mass media, direct consultancy and alumni network plays quite important role (Mean from 3.20 to 3.41). Results from in-depth interview also confirm that most students get to know VNU-IS via means of mass media, their relatives and the "Guide to university programs" book published by the MOET, and make decision partly based on them. Although opinions from family, relatives and friends seem not crucial to

students' choice of VNU-IS (Mean <3), high coefficient of variation make it impossible to conclude the role of others' opinions on students' decision, so is the tuition fee. This result, in fact, agrees with diverse results from previous studies.

4.4. Recommendations on enhancing student enrolment quality and quantity at VNU-IS

Based on the findings of the study on possible factors influencing students' choice of university, some recommendations can be made as follows.

First of all, the school's potential students should be well-informed about the prominent characterized features of VNU-IS such as completely training students in foreign languages. This feature was valued as the most important factor when the respondents chose which university to enroll. As well as this, the benefits of the General English Training Program should also be emphasized so that potential students could be fully aware of their wide access to possess high foreign language competency before actually starting university, thus gain more confidence in their choice of foreign language university program.

Additionally, as the university prestige and ranking plays a crucial role in students' choice of school, VNU-IS should advertise widely about the well-qualified degrees and high training quality of VNU as well as the high ranking of its partner universities.

Besides, enrolment counselors should find variously intriguing ways to demonstrate the professionalism and stimulation of the learning environment in VNU-IS. This could be achieved by programs such as "a tour around VNU-IS" or "a day being a VNU-IS student". These activities are believed to arouse students and well as their parents' interest in the school, besides providing students a chance to see how appropriate the school is to their interest and ability.

Lastly, various media channels should be fostered. Beside a wide range of mass media,

VNU-IS should enhance the roles of the alumni in advertising the schools' prestige to students and their relatives. Furthermore, information about the school presented in the "Guide to university programs for high school students" published by the MOET should be impressive enough to attract students' attention to the school programs, possibly leading to higher enrolment in the school.

5. Conclusion

The study mainly focuses on factors which affect students' choice of VNU-IS for higher education. The evaluated questionnaire reveals four possible influencing factors. Results from statistical analysis and in-depth interview show that there is significant difference between students grouped by major in determining the importance of VNU-IS' characteristics; meanwhile, there is also difference between students with various fathers' educational background in considering the role of other objective variables such as prestigious training partner, tuition fee or other's opinion in their choice of the university. Besides, results from mean-comparison test and in-depth interview revealed students' perception of significant factors in their decision making, including characteristics of the university, communicative effort of the university and students' interest and ability.

Based on these study outcomes, some strategies including the provision of training information, the promotion of the VNU-IS' prestige, the introduction of VNU-IS learning environment and the enhancement of various media channels were given in order to strengthen VNU-IS' effectiveness in recruitment. It would be beneficial if research on factors affecting students' choice of university is conducted regularly by the university and the use of linear regression analysis for more objective results of important factors affecting this choice.

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