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Factors Influencing the Education Decision Making Process

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Abstract

Education is considered an investment in human capital which in turn contributes to knowledge economy and development of a nation. Education is a diverse and dynamic sector and has been ever changing as per the needs of society. Such diverse, dynamic and unpredictable environments make the process of decision making increasingly complex. This study presents a conceptual framework of decision making process undertaken at various levels of education. It further provides an overview of decision behaviors of the expatriate community in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pertaining to the education and integrating psychological, social, and economic perspectives. On the basis of review of literature related to decision making process for education, this research also aims to contribute to the field of decision making process by proposing models for different levels of education in the UAE.

Key Words: Education, decision-making, factors, influence.

Introduction

Education is a form of learning in which the knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits of a group of people are transferred from one generation to the next through teaching, training, research, or simply through auto didacticism (Dewey, 1916). In today's times it forms one of the pillars of Knowledge Economy and hence assumes great significance as most countries today are transiting into Knowledge Economy. The twenty-first century is regarded to be a century of globalization (Bottery, 1999). Through compression of space and time the whole world is akin to a small village, global village. While globalization can take different forms, namely, political, economic, managerial, cultural and environmental, it has a significant effect on developing education for the knowledge-based economies.

United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one such country which is speedily progressing towards Knowledge Economy with simultaneous development of its Education sector. The UAE has become a growing regional hub for education, attracting billions of dollars in investment and witnessing a phenomenal number of enrolment growths across its K-12 and higher education institutions. Educational institutions from all over the world have set up their international campuses with adequate facilities and a wide range of programs to cater to the needs of the residents. One important consideration for all educational institutions while developing their marketing communications as well as course offerings is the uniqueness of the demographic mix of the UAE. The population of the UAE comprises more than 80% of expatriates and approximately 18% of Emiratis. Several reports indicate an increasing influx of students into UAE from other Gulf and Asian countries to gain education, paradoxically though, students from UAE are enrolling for higher studies in other countries. The most popular university programs within UAE are engineering, business, and health sciences (National Qualifications Authority, 2013).

The educational institutions in the UAE are regulated by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with the local authorities of respective Emirates. The Ministry plays a nodal role in regulating, monitoring, and developing systems, quality assurance, and overall growth of the education sector.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of educational decision-making is linked to that of career decision-making which in turn is derived from the models designed for general decision-making. A typical decision-making situation will involve an individual willing to implement a decision to achieve goal or goals. Further, alternatives available to the individual are selected on the basis of certain factors required to compare alternatives. It is essential for the individual to collect and process information while making a decision (Gati and Tal, 2008).

The number of alternatives available to an individual in an educational or a career decision-making situation is not only very large but also equal to the number of information sources used. Additionally, a number of factors are to be considered and an equal number of criteria are to be evaluated, that also includes the significant others such as parents or friends' influence on the final decision (Gati, Asher, 2001).

It is important to note here that the career indecision is caused by the factors on which the career decision is based. Any problem with the elements of decision making process might lead to indecision. According to Gati and Saka (2001), there are three types of problems affecting the

career decision-making process. Firstly and most significantly, it can be an individual's unwillingness to implement the decision, as a result of irrational expectations or lack of motivation. Secondly, the problems can occur due to insufficient or lack of information about the decision-making process, possible alternatives or the sources of information. Thirdly, the problems also occur if there is no consistency in the obtained information.

Several studies related to career decision-making process focus on the influence of individual factors or that of other people individually or rather examine the way the decisions are made (Pappas and Kounenou, 2011; Gati et al., 2010; Germeijs et al., 2012; Galotti et al., 2006).

The current study on the career decision-making process is based on the theory of planned behaviour. The theory of planned behaviour was proposed by Icek Ajzen (2012) to understand, anticipate and simulate the human behaviour in different situations. Unlike its base model theory of reasoned action, the planned behaviour uses three variables instead of two. That is, the new theory by Ajzen (2008) also uses a new variable such as the concept of perceived behavioural control in addition to earlier ones like the attitudes toward the behaviour and subjective norm. All these variables have a resultant impact on an individual's behaviour intention reflecting the actual behaviour. It is possible to measure these variables directly by asking about them. They can also be measured indirectly through examination of individual elements of these factors and the intensity or extent of their influence. This is followed by the evaluation of the corresponding expectations as shown in Figure 1. Even indirect measuring of these variables can be used to examine the influence of these expectations and thus enhance the predicative ability of the tested construct.

The three variables of planned behaviour theory can further be described as:

Behavioural beliefs refer to the chances of possible behavioural consequences and an evaluation of the positive or negative impact of these consequences on the decision maker.

Normative beliefs indicate the expectations of reference groups such as family, friend and peer relating to a particular behaviour, the significance of such expectations and the extent of an individual's willingness to fulfil these expectations.

Control beliefs were included in the theory of planned behaviour to explain the influence of external factors on the behaviour of decision maker. In some situations, an individual's behaviour depends on factors not fully under his control. In these situations, the individual having an intention, may or may not be able to implement certain behaviour due to the factors that restrain or facilitate the implementation of that behaviour. The proposed models of decision making highlight the existence of such factors and control that the individual subjectively assigns them.

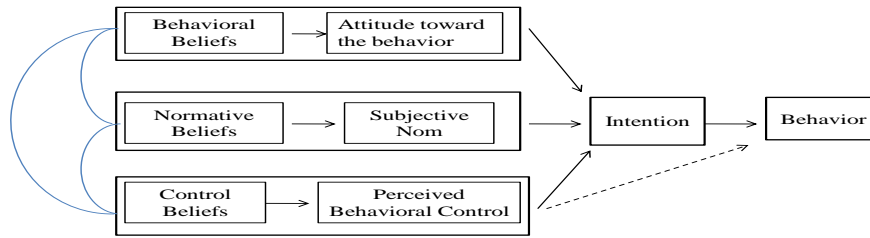


Figure 1 Theory of planned behaviour.

Theoretical Model

Decision making is a cognitive process of making choices by setting goals, identifying and assessing alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision maker. However, there are several factors that influence a decision. The current study examines the factors influencing the decisions on education at K-12 and higher levels within the expatriate population living across the United Arab Emirates. Based on extensive literature review in context of the expatriate community in the UAE, five factors, namely, Socio Economic Status, Reference Groups, Academic Factors, Environment and Facilities, and Personal Attributes with 17 independent variables for K-12 and 24 independent variables for higher level were identified as most determining while deciding on most suitable education plan. The models for K-12 and higher level have been constructed separately as presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Socio-Economic Status

Socio-economic status (SES) emerges as one of the most significant factors influencing the choices of the individuals with regard to their education. Socio-economic Status is defined as a relative standing in society based on an individual's income, power, occupation, education, and prestige (Agulanna and Nwachukwu, 2001; Guntla, et al, 2013). Most of the studies link

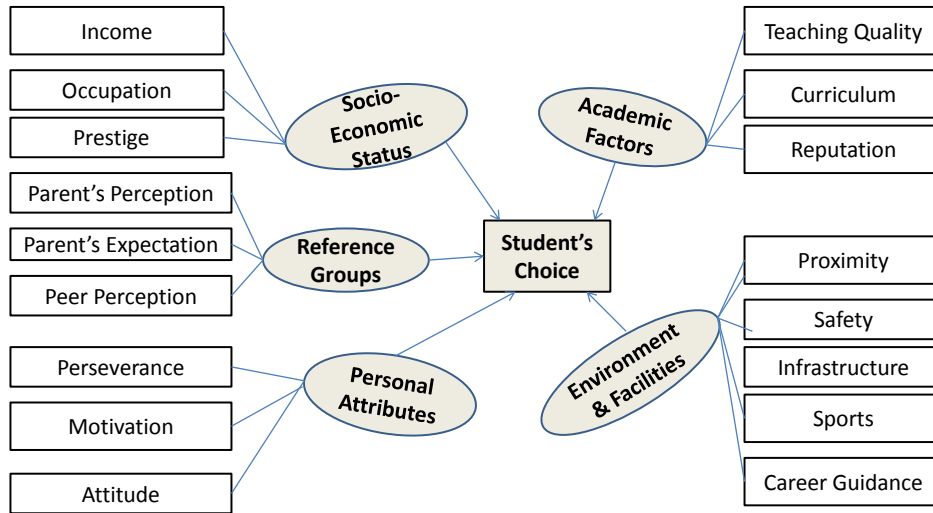


Figure 2 A Model of Students' Choice of K-12 Education in the UAE
 (developed for this research)

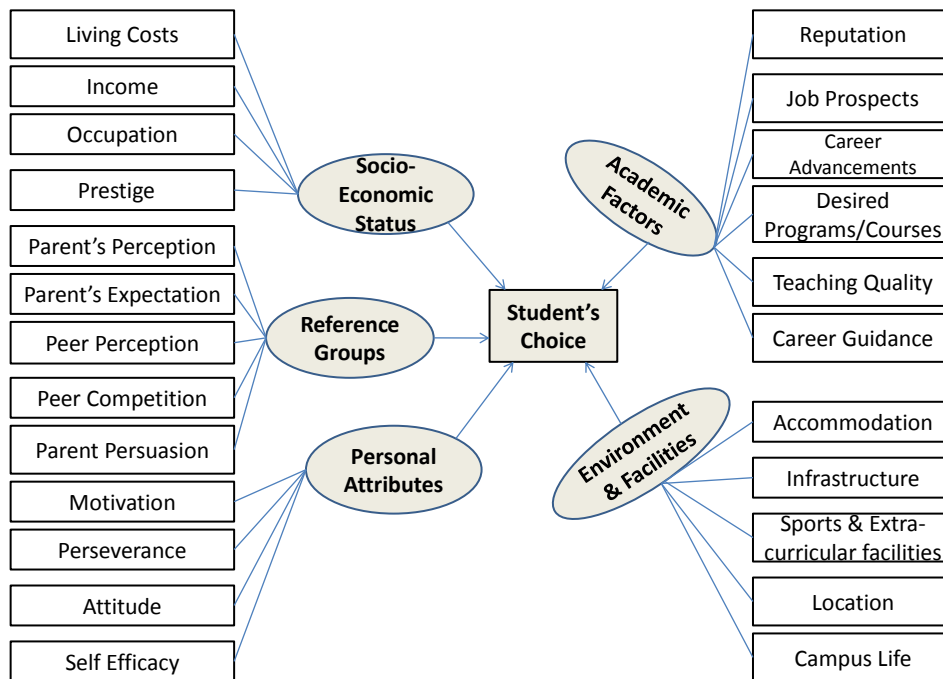


Figure 3 A Model of Students' Choice of Higher Education in the UAE

educational choices with career choices. Hence, educational decisions are seen as steps toward implementing career decisions (Leppel, Williams and Waldauer, 2001). Research also finds SES as 'a significant predictor of educational expectations' that is, their beliefs about their likely educational attainment (Owens, 1992; Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Rojewski & Yang, 1997; St-Hilaire, 2002; Trusty, 1998). Rojewski and Kim (2003) in their study mention SES as 'a defining factor of college-bound, work-bound, and unemployed youth, with two-thirds of all work-bound and unemployed youth being in the lowest two SES quartiles and two-thirds of all college-bound youth being in the highest two SES quartiles.'

Although there are several studies pertaining to the influence of SES on the education attainment and students' performance, very few studies have examined the impact of SES on the choice of education (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Dawson-Threat & Huba, 1996; Green, 1992, pp. 25–27, 45–48; Hackett, Esposito, & O'Halloran, 1989; Polachek, 1978; Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000; Ware & Lee, 1988; Ware, Steckler, & Leserman, 1985). In these studies, socioeconomic status has been one of the significant factors impacting the decision making related to education with interesting results. Davies and Guppy (1997) found that students from households with lower socioeconomic status were more likely to choose more lucrative fields of study. Moreover, research also indicates the importance of parents' occupational status. According to Rehman, Khan, Triq, and Tasleem, (2010), the higher status of parents' occupational prestige involves the higher choice of selecting their children's education. The family's cultural and economic capital influence not only the probability of entering higher education, but also students' choices of programme and type of institution (Kusumawati, 2013).

Reference Groups

Reference groups such as parents, siblings, friends, peers, relatives, teachers and other influential people influence a student's choice of education (Kusumawati, 2013). As the literature review shows, these reference groups can exert a strong influence on students' decision-making in Thailand (Pimpa, and Suwannapirom, 2008), in Malaysia (Wagner and Fard, 2009), in Turkey (Yamamoto, 2006), in Portugal (Raposo and Alves, 2007), and also in California, (Ceja, 2006). These studies highlight the important role of parents, siblings, relatives, friends and peers during the educational institution choice process.

Survey of various reports and concerted observation indicate that family plays a significantly influential role in the students' educational and career choices. Numerous studies have found that college students and young adults cite parents as an important influence on the choices that they make (Guerra and Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Otto, 1989).

Research suggests that family variables such as parents' education, income, parents' occupation, and family size influence education and career aspirations. According to Papanis, Giavrimis, and Vicky (2011), 'a plethora of family factors determine educational decision: social-financial position and parent's education, culture, mentality etc'. Several researchers have found evidence that mostly students are influenced in their choice of profession by their parents' education level (Wood, 2010; Papanis, Giavrimis, and Vicky, 2011). The studies suggest that parents who have, or are, pursuing a higher level of education or a more prestigious career act as role models for their children. Also, the professional direction and professional ambitions of children are generally influenced by the cultural level of the parents (Papanis, Giavrimis, and

Vicky, 2011). Moreover, the income level of the family also influences the professional choices of the individuals to a great extent. Pimpa (2002) has identified four family variables, namely, finance, expectation, competition, persuasion and information as the source of influence on the choice of international education. The financial factors include tuition fees, living costs in a foreign country, and other related expenses whose affordability indicates the financial capacity of the family. Family expectation stems from the perceived benefits of students obtaining an overseas academic qualification, fluency in a foreign language and life experience. Competition among family members is a catalyst in their decision-making process. Persuasion in the form of 'opinion' and 'comparison' is used to convince the children to study abroad. Information regarding family members' own experience of studying abroad is yet another factor used to influence the prospective students (Pimpa, 2002). Although mainly cited in reference of choice made for international education, these factors do play a significant role in decision making process of youth today.

A range of research strongly discusses the effect parents have on a student's choice of school or college. However, research also indicates that the parental influence on the children is more in their pre-teenage and it slowly wanes as they grow older. Moogan and Baron's (2003) study found parental impact during the initial stages was greatest for non-mature pupils rather than mature pupils in the UK. Wood (2010) states that 'the goals of children and pre-teens are complicated by the fact that their cognitive maturation is still incomplete'. Therefore, individuals at this stage seek parental support and reassurance to shape their career goals. Berger (2005) suggests that adolescents value their peer relationships more highly at this stage of life span development because their friends provide them the freedom to experiment with different possible selves in a way that parents often do not (In Wood, 2010). Some studies also found that family conflict was negatively associated with career decision-making self-efficacy among family members. Family conflict seems to be internalized in a way that inhibits the family member's ability and confidence to make career decisions (Hargrove, Creagh, and Burgess, 2002, Wood, 2010).

Academic Factors

Academic elements such as teaching quality, teachers' qualification, quality of the curricula, scientific research quality, medium of instruction, reputation, prestige and image appear as significant factors in teaching and learning quality (Padlee, Kamaruddin, and Baharun, 2010). Students and their parents get influenced by these factors as they are significant in teaching and learning. However, the reputation of the institution has been found to be the most important factor in a student's decision related to education (Kusumawati, 2013). Researchers identify recognition and reputation of the institutions as the strongest evaluative criteria used by students in their selection of higher education (Ancheh et al, 207; Briggs, 2006, Moogan and Baron, 2003; Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004; Afful-Broni and Noi-Okwei, 2010). A range of studies also highlight the importance of academic factors like variable courses and campus, availability of desired program, quality of teaching, etc. in influencing the student's educational decisions. Teachers' efficacy requires knowledge, interpersonal skills and technical skills which is an important factor in attracting prospective students. Performance of the institution is yet another important factor likely to influence selection decision.

A very important aspect of any academic qualification is the desire to acquire a specific job or career. Education in general and higher education in particular is viewed by the students as a necessary vehicle to secure and lucrative job prospects (Kusumawati, 2013).

Environment and Facilities

Environment surrounding students such as campus life, safety, campus design, social life and people surrounding the campus compounds, are the first set of variables whereas sports facilities, infrastructure, accommodation, library, laboratory, cafeterias, students' union, exchange programmes with foreign universities are the second set of variables. Medical, part-time jobs, banks, financial support, etc. are yet another set of variables. These variables offered by institutions are the elements of convenience and desirability and, therefore, influence the students' selection of an institution. An institution needs to focus on curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities in order to provide holistic education to the students. The education quality depends greatly on the environment of the educational institution itself (Rehman et al., 2010).

Two other factors considered important in decision making of an institution are location and proximity. The strategic location of an institution makes it popular among the students (Yaacob, et al., 2014). The location of an institution in a country or city perceived with high image and bright future prospects make it strategically significant. In addition, the location of the institution needs to be convenient with transport facility available for the students (Goldring and Rowley, 2006). Research studies suggest that proximity to home is one of the strong influences in the choice process of selecting an institution (Raposo and Alves, 2007; Dawes and Brown, 2002; Paulsen, 1990; Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004, Wagner and Fard, 2004). However, Bernal (2005) stated that 'there are particular groups from the middle class families who do not bother to send their children to the nearest school. They have considered that the nearest school in their neighbourhood may not be the best education institution for their children' (in Yaacob, et al., 2014).

Personal Attributes

Perceptions, preferences, beliefs, values, learning, memory, motives, personality, emotions and attitudes are the various attributes of an individual. Previous studies on choosing an institution have also explored the influence of these personal attributes (Raposo and Alves, 2007; Yamamoto 2006; Dawes and Brown, 2002) and found that 'personal preference was the most influential factor in university selection'. Dawes and Brown (2002) detected that 'before choosing university, students went through three decision sets namely the students' awareness set, consideration set, and choice set'. Dietrich (2010) states that an influence on decision making is the belief in personal relevance. When people believe what they decide matters, they are more likely to make a decision. Self-perception, self-assessment, and self-motivation affect students' decision to attend an institution. Freeman (1999) grouped 'the factors affecting educational decision process into three main categories: family or self-influences, psychological or social barriers, and cultural influences'. According to Haris (2012), 'cognitive biases and belief in personal relevance' could also be an influencing factor for decision-making (Bruin, Parker, & Fischhoff 2007; Sanz de Acedo & Cardelle-Elawar et al. 2007; Juliusson, Karlsson, & Gärling 2005; Stanovich & West 2008; Acevedo & Krueger 2004). Haris further states that the individual or personal factor is considered as the most difficult to control or to predict in the decision-

making process. Factor of individual or person mostly corresponds to psychological aspect of decision-maker.

Research Propositions

The above theoretical framework allows us to set forth the following research propositions:

- Hypothesis 1: The academic factors teaching quality, curriculum and reputation has direct positive correlation on students' choice of K-12 study.
- Hypothesis 2: The job prospects, desired programmes and reputation influence the decision to join an institution for higher education.
- Hypothesis 3: The level of students' perception on socio-economic status positively correlates their choice in choosing an educational institution and a program.
- Hypothesis 4: The students' interpretation of their personal ability in coping with the perceived demands imposed in study is positively correlated to their eventual choice.
- Hypothesis 5: Environment and facilities have correlation with the choice of institution.
- Hypothesis 6: Peer perception and competition and parents' perception and expectation influence the educational decision of the students.
- Hypothesis 5: Country image positively affects institution image.

Conclusion

Until now, there is no recorded research study conducted in the UAE that specifically explores the factors that influence youths in their choice of the K-12 study. The literature review shows the focus on the performance of the various institutions with respect to the standards stipulated by the regulatory authorities. As for the higher education, the studies are mainly targeted towards international education. Furthermore, there is no study which includes the choices of students at both K-12 and higher levels or there is no amalgamated point of view; which is the central focus of this paper.

The main challenge faced by the policymakers is to promote education in not only the completion of the courses but also the relevance of the curriculum to prepare for the competition, future development, improve the capabilities with additional skills and knowledge for the attainment of the suitable jobs in the dynamic environment. This study would help the education providers and policy makers to understand the needs and preferences of the learners. For all the levels of education to function properly, there is a need to align each course or program as operating with the harmony of the other levels along with learning outcomes. A theoretical model is suggested that integrates different factors that influence the enrolment choice of entering the schools, colleges and universities. The model presented in this paper demonstrates how enrolment choice is dependent on five factors: socio economic status, reference groups, academic factors, environment and facilities, and personal attributes. These factors provide an explanation on the interplay in the decision making process and as a predictor of enrolment choice made by the student.

Education is based on the outcomes and satisfaction at all levels while the input variables are different at each level. Access to the information acquired through this study may assist in the creation of specific marketing strategies and profession-friendly work practices by education industry of the UAE; which may help arrest or reverse the current trend by enticing school-leavers to join the higher education here.

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