A higher education marketing perspective on choice factors and sources of information considered by prospective first-year students in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

The increasing nature of competition in the higher education sector of Botswana means that universities need to craft strategies to be more competitive. The recipe for competitiveness is primarily hinged on the ability of universities to be cognisant of the factors that influence prospective learners in selecting a university of choice to study. They also critically need to know the sources of information where prospective learners acquire information to redirect their marketing strategies. This paper investigated the factors influencing the choice of university of study. The paper also aimed to examine the information sources used by prospective university students when making university choices. The study followed a qualitative research approach, collecting data from in-depth interviews. Thematic narrative analysis was used to unpack the underlying influences on decision-making. Concerning the sources of information, the main findings of this study indicate that prospective students get their information from multiple sources. The most influential sources identified are (i) family and friends, (ii) career fairs and exhibitions, (iii) social media, and to a lesser extent (iv) the mass media, and (v) promotional materials. Concerning the factors that influence prospective university students’ choice of university, factors such as (i) university location, (ii) availability of accommodation, (iii) perceptions of university reputation, (iv) quality of academic programs, (v) alignment of lifelong interests and desires, and (vi) the perception of employability were found to be more influential. Other factors that are less influential include (i) the degree of persuasiveness, (ii) funding issues, (iii) costs associated with applications, and (iv) government processes and procedures. The findings have potential to influence universities’ marketing strategies and policies in building competitiveness and in improving enrolment numbers.

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Introduction

The 21st century has seen a paradigm shift in the world's higher and tertiary education landscape. With globalization, the once public university-dominated higher and tertiary education market is highly competitive as local and international players have entered and seek to establish dominance (Arifin et al., 2020; Bamberger et al., 2020; Muduli & Trivedi, 2020, 2020). There is stiff competition in tertiary education for students and funding between private and public universities (Ndofirepi et al., 2020). In Botswana like in other countries, the competition between higher and tertiary education institutions is compounded by a sharp increase in the number of competitors (including international ones offering online products), a decrease in government funding for students, and a high unemployment rate coupled with decreasing pass rates at the high school leaving certificate level.

According to Arifin et al. (2020); and Ndofirepi et al., (2020), universities and colleges have adopted marketing principles in their businesses which include the designing and delivery of unique market-driven programs. In the case of Botswana, some programs have been introduced in the market since the government started funding tertiary education in local institutions (Bothlale, 2022). Such programs include among others Real Estate, Quantity Surveying, Digital Marketing, Banking, Investment management,
landscape and Architecture Designing, Metallurgical Engineering, and Medicine (Botswana Qualifications Authority, 2022). Some institutions are more innovative than others but this differentiating factor is easily eroded due to the system used by the Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA). All qualifications accredited are published in the National Qualifications Framework for public consumption. Although this is aimed at standardization of education in the country, this means that programs can easily be imitated leading to innovative institutions losing their competitive advantage. (https://www.bqa.org.bw/he-etsp/(Accessed: 27-03-2024). This has seen some institutions having a critical challenge of decreasing enrolment numbers that may threaten their existence (Suping, 2024). Faced with this situation, (Arifin et al., 2020; Bamberger et al., 2020; Camilleri, 2020; Muduli & Trivedi, 2020; Ndofirepi et al., 2020) argued that local universities must apply marketing strategies that can attract quality new students. However, there is a dearth of local research on factors considered by students when selecting an institution of higher learning. None of the existing studies in Botswana address this aspect (Hondonga & Ramaligela, 2020; Suping, 2024). Given the preceding discussion, this paper seeks to contribute towards closing the existing gap by answering the question: what are choice factors and information sources considered by first-year real estate students in Botswana? Understanding the choice factors will help influence strategies to build a competitive edge by influencing prospective student choices.

**Literature Review**

This section discusses what is already known in the area of sources of information and the factors influencing prospective university students in choosing a university of study. Theoretical and empirical literature is discussed as follows:

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

Many theories have been developed to explain how prospective students process information when required to make choice decisions. They include the Hossler and Gallagher model, the Jackson model, the Litten model, and the Chapman model among others. Clayton et al. (2023) and Rosales (2024) stress the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model of institution choice. The theory divides the institution selection process into three stages: pre-disposition, search, and choice. Once they graduate from high school, students must choose which higher education institution to attend when they decide to enroll. Through their interactions with one another, all three phases have subtle and intricate effects on the others (Alexander & Eckland, 1975) as cited by (Rosales, 2024). The first step in the selection process is determining a student's propensity to enroll in a university. The student then looks for universities to attend, and at last, the student decides which university to attend. The predisposition stage is strongly influenced by family and educational experiences. The predisposition stage comprises the establishment of career and educational objectives as well as the start of postsecondary education plans. Many students begin their high school careers in the search stage of choosing an institution. During this phase, students begin to consider their options for continuing their education. The search stage is the process of obtaining and examining critical information needed by students to compile a shortlist of colleges. After first reducing the geographical scope of their options, students consider the specific academic programs offered by the institutions that remain in their choice set. The search stage is influenced by both parental support and the information that is available about institutions. Parental support frequently has significant impact on the student's choice set, which is made up of groups of colleges the student wants to consider and research more before making a decision. Students begin corresponding with potential colleges during the search phase. Campus visits, website and brochure searches, and conversations with friends are some of the ways that people find out information about a university or other higher education institution. A student advances to the selection phase after applying to a small number of universities. Before selecting which university to enroll in, students consider several factors during the decision-making process, including location, cost, and academic standing. The five phases of the Hanson and Litten model show student choice as an ongoing process. It shows the interaction of multiple factors that can be categorized as institutional characteristics (fees, courses offered), personal characteristics (self-image), and background characteristics (parental income and education) all have an impact on the five phases.

The other useful model is the Jackson Model (Deligiannis et al., 2023). This model identifies three stages (Jackson, 1982) namely, the preference stage, the exclusion stage, and the evaluation stage. Students make decisions in the preference stage. Institutions are eliminated in the exclusion stage based on economic considerations like cost, location, and academic standing. The remaining institutions are evaluated based on their merits in the evaluation stage.

According to the Chapman model (Chapman, 1984) as cited in (Rabani & Rabiei, 2023), “… a general concept of life in higher education is created through the interaction of a student's characteristics with outside factors”. Factors such as academic achievement, scholastic aptitude, and educational goals are examples of characteristics of students. In addition, friends, staff members at secondary schools, and institutional features like communication with other institutions are examples of external influences that could also influence the choice of university of study.

**Empirical Review**

**Marketing principles in the education sector**

Marketing is a process that involves the identification, anticipation, and satisfaction of customer requirements at a profit, in a way that is more efficient and effective relative to competition (Elliott et al., 2023, 2023; Kotler et al., 2023). This process entails an understanding of customer requirements before the process can commence. Marketing involves the creation and implementation of responsive marketing mix programs to achieve individual (customer) and organizational goals (Sari et al., 2023). According to (Elliott
et al., 2023; Kotler et al., 2023; Ndofirepi et al., 2020; Sari et al., 2023), the traditional marketing mix entails decisions related to the product, price, place, and promotion. For services, however, like education, the extended marketing mix would apply (Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023, 2023; Jasin & Firmansyah, 2023; Ndofirepi et al., 2020). This includes other variables such as people, processes, and physical evidence.

Product

This entails the marketing programs designed to satisfy the identified customer requirements (Kotler et al., 2023). In this case, it encompasses the different programs (certificates, diplomas, and degrees) offered by educational institutions. In Botswana, they range in sectors including commerce, art and humanities, science and engineering, agriculture, and property.

Price

This aspect refers to the value of the market offering expressed in monetary terms used in facilitating exchanges of value between buyers and sellers (Elliott et al., 2023; Kotler et al., 2023). The amount of sacrifice students make is called school fees.

Promotion

This aspect of marketing deals with marketing communication (Elliott et al., 2023; Kotler et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2023, 2023). Educational institutions promote for various reasons (Ndofirepi et al., 2020). Marketing communication is used to inform the target audience, to persuade, to remind, to correct some information, or to create a narrative in building brands. It includes such activities as advertising, public relations and publicity, sales promotion, personal selling, and direct marketing activities. Additionally, some other methods are useful such as using billboards, roadshows, exhibitions, and other promotional materials such as flyers, brochures, and merchandise (Arifin et al., 2020).

Place

This is a marketing task responsible for getting the product to the consumer (student) (Elliott et al., 2023). The methods could be direct distribution or indirect distribution. Some organizations use a hybrid system of combining the two methods. According to (Arifin et al., 2020; Ndofirepi et al., 2020, 2020) direct distribution in education entails direct, face-to-face delivery of teaching and learning. Students interact with instructors physically. Indirect distribution makes use of mainly technology where lessons are delivered online. In modern times, institutions use expert systems to deliver lessons and manage the whole education process. Students can access resources, submit assessments, and effectively communicate using online platforms (Farinloye et al., 2020, 2020; Kumar & Raman, 2020; Television Series and Careers, n.d.). Traditionally institutions would use printed materials such as study manuals to deliver to their customers/ students.

People

It covers all people who are involved in the process of creation and delivery of service (Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023). In this vain it includes those in management, backbone staff, frontline staff as well as customers. Even with the growth in the use of technology, the role of people in service marketing has not been depleted but is increasingly becoming more important (Sadeghi, 2019). In the education sector people include management, administrators, and most importantly the teaching staff, not disregarding the non-teaching support staff members such as finance, information technology, facilities, and cleaning personnel.

Processes

This aspect entails the systems and procedures involved in the production and delivery of services (Arifin et al., 2020; Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023; Menifield et al., 2024; Muduli & Trivedi, 2020). This ordinarily covers the use of technology and guidelines that facilitate service delivery. To be effective, processes must be easy to use and understand, user-friendly, reliable, and compatible. Systems that are less prone to errors and mistakes will result in better quality perceptions of service (Jasin & Firmansyah, 2023). This covers procedures such as the application process, enrolment process, billing and payment process, lesson delivery processes, assessment processes, and communication processes.

Physical evidence

These are the tangible cues that are associated with services marketing. They provide proof of services especially since services are generally intangible (Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023; Elliott et al., 2023; Jasin & Firmansyah, 2023; Ndofirepi et al., 2020). The importance of tangibles ranges according to the servicescape involved, for example on whether services are remote, self-service, or interpersonal. Physical evidence is more important in interpersonal service where customers interact directly with service providers (Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023). It is much less important in remote encounters where there is indirect distribution. For educational institutions, physical evidence includes such aspects as the design and appearance of the facilities, landscaping, parking areas, signage, sports facilities, classroom infrastructure such as furniture, classroom technology, and the ambiance conditions inside the facilities (Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2023; Ndofirepi et al., 2020).
Prospective university students’ sources of information in decision-making

Information is key when purchase decision-making (Miotto et al., 2020). Prospective students, just like any consumers, require a great deal of good quality information to make informed decisions as to the institution of study. Different sources of information could be used for this purpose. Some are personal while others are impersonal (Le et al., 2020). Personal factors mean that prospective students interact directly with other people for information. Impersonal sources mean that they interact with other facilities that are not human beings for information. The credibility of these sources varies with each prospective student.

The universities

According to (Farinloye et al., 2020; Kumar & Raman, 2020) the institutions of higher learning themselves can be useful and more credible sources of information that influence decision-making. Universities interact with prospective students in various ways including using university websites, open day events, university prospectors, billboards, radio or television commercials and programs, social media presence as well as career fairs (Farinloye et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Kumar & Raman, 2020). This source of information provides prospective students with opportunities to interact directly with the institutions to get first-hand knowledge. This could help them to predict the quality of service to expect when they finally enroll.

Current and former students

Some universities use their current students for marketing engagements (Le et al., 2020). They are used as ambassadors for the school and its various programs/products. They share their first-hand experiences and they provide opportunities for interaction with prospective students. This allows for pertinent questions to be answered in a more conducive way. Prospective students may be taken on a tour of the facilities to gain an appreciation of the facilities (Camilleri, 2020; Muduli & Trivedi, 2020). Usually, students in the student boards are used for this purpose. Sometimes these are used in conducting outreach programs to feeder schools. They target the graduating classes and they provide group and personalized attention to answer questions of importance.

Friends and family

Friends and family members can significantly influence the choice of university of study in many ways (Posey-Maddox, 2014). They can provide recommendations and or endorsements. This could be testimonials based on past experiences or other peoples’ experiences. (Eldegwy et al., 2022; Miotto et al., 2020; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Starnawski & Gawlicz, 2021) posit that friends and family members share details that they know pertain to locational advantages and disadvantages, associated costs, crime rate, climate, reputation and credibility, and employability issues. Prospective university students often seek advice from friends and family before making university choices because they regard them as credible and legitimate sources and therefore are influential (Eldegwy et al., 2022; Miotto et al., 2020; Starnawski & Gawlicz, 2021). This is regarded as a more credible source of information due to the innate trust they have.

Mass media

Media is a useful source of information (Kumar & Raman, 2020). Both above-the-line and below-the-line media could be useful sources. (Farinloye et al., 2020; Gorard, 2019; Kumar & Raman, 2020) argue that information is provided in various ways including news or as commercials. Institutions may advertise on media or stories about their institutions may be news. Talk-show programs are such common methods of communicating with prospective learners. They allow institutions to interact directly with their potential clients. Following advances in technology, social media has become a critical part of media communication (Farinloye et al., 2020). Prospective students no longer have temporal or spatial constraints in accessing universities.

Choice factors in Selecting an Institution of study

When prospective students make decisions about the institution of choice, their decisions are influenced by many factors. Factors influencing choice can be understood from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Empirical perspectives on prospective student decision making

Many factors have been discussed in the literature that influence prospective students’ choice of the University of Study. Harahap et al. (2023) and Sutrisno et al. (2023) posit that there is a range of factors that influence the choice of university of study. Many authors including (Adeyanju et al., 2020; Calitz et al., 2020; Cheslock & Riggs, 2021; Do-Van-Anh et al., 2020; Harahap et al., 2022, 2023; Nuseir & El Refaie, 2022; Panda et al., 2019) argue multiple factors including university location, the level of applicable fees and availability of funding opportunities, the perceptions of the prospective students and their guardians have the reputation of the universities, the employability factors, the products offered, and the compatibility of these to students’ interests, the quality of programs, other extra-curriculum activities and facilities, the level of persuasion, government policies and regulations and processes among others. The key to all these is the availability of information on these issues and the level of processing of this information to affect decision-making (de Jager, 2010; Harahap et al., 2023).
Research and Methodology

A research methodology is a blueprint of strategies and methods followed to collect and analyse relevant data in addressing the research problem (Verma et al., 2024). In a quest to understand the underlying reasons that prospective tertiary education learners in Botswana consider in the selection of a university of study, this study followed a qualitative research methodology. This was influenced by the envisaged reasons that are intrinsic to each prospective student and may be influenced by the need to understand the personal views and thought processes of individuals in behaving in a particular way when making choices. In this case, the primary intention was to explore factors that influence decision-making concerning the choice of university of study. The in-depth interview method was used for gathering data as this allows for probing and therefore leads to a deeper appreciation of the reasons behind prospective learners’ decision-making processes. The qualitative data obtained through interviews was analysed using the thematic-narrative analysis method. Data was categorized into themes that relate to factors influencing the choice of the institution of study. The themes relate to personal, external influences, and marketing influences. A multistage sampling method was used to identify respondents. The study followed a hybrid of stratified and convenience sampling techniques. The population of study (all prospective learners), was subdivided into two categories namely private and tertiary education institutions. A convenience sampling technique was used in each stratum to identify the interviewees. A sample of fifteen respondents was used, seven from private and another eight from public tertiary education institutions.

Findings and Discussions

This section is divided into two, the findings section and the discussion section.

Findings

The findings relate to multiple factors such as location, costs applicable, funding opportunities, reputation perceptions, perceptions of employability, quality of programs offered, alignment to lifelong personal interests, level of persuasion, government regulations, and the amount and quality of information available. Data was collected from fifteen respondents drawn from both private and public institutions. Eight first-year students were selected from public institutions and 7 were drawn from private tertiary education institutions. Five were from a science and engineering discipline, 5 from commerce and humanities, while the others were drawn from the art discipline. The total significant variable indicates that the issue is more important in influencing the decision-making of an institution of choice. The total insignificant total indicates that the variable is less important in influencing the choice of educational institution. The responses were summarized as shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1: Sources of information in influencing choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total significant</th>
<th>Total insignificant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career fairs and road shows</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities (open day, direct sales)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass media</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billboards and other promotional materials</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many factors were found to be influencing prospective university students’ decision-making. The summary of findings is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary influencing university choice factors by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total significant</th>
<th>Total insignificant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of accommodation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of university reputation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of programs offered</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment to my lifelong interests</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of employability</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of persuasion</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of funding opportunities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs associated</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government regulations and processes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings show that people make decisions based on the availability, and the comprehension of information available. The credibility of the source also has a significant impact on influencing decision-making. The information sources that influence the choice of university of study as depicted in Table 2 above.

Discussion of findings

Sources of information for decision-making

The following sources of information were found to be more significant when prospecting university students are making purchase decisions:

Career fairs and roadshows

This is a highly significant source of information for prospective university students in Botswana. The Human Resources Development Council (HRDC) together with other stakeholders such as the Department of Tertiary Education Financing (DTEF) organizes these annual events. Roadshows cover the whole country meaning that it gets to all the villages, cities, and towns throughout Botswana. Multitudes of prospective students and parents and guardians have easy access to tertiary education institutions for personal engagements. Two national career fairs are held in the major cities of Gaborone and Francistown. Institutions have the opportunity to reach their targeted customers. Respondents regarded this as the main and consequential source of information influencing decision-making.

“... I had never had access to universities because I live very far from the city, the HRDC career fair and roadshows helped me a lot to get access to the information I needed to make my choice”. These events are a one-stop shop for information to do with the tertiary education landscape in Botswana.

Word of mouth from Family and friends

This is the most trusted source of information. As young people make decisions from a lack of experience, they rely on advice and recommendations from those that they trust and who are in their connections.

“...my senior brother attended the same university and did the same program, seeing his success and listening to his advice made me choose this university”. This finding confirms the conclusions by (Eldegwy et al., 2022; Starnawski & Gawlicz, 2021; Venant et al., 2021, 2021) who emphasize one’s connections that can be a useful source of credible and legitimate information.

Social media and mass media

The advent of modern communication technology such as Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp among others means that people have unfettered access to a wide variety of information. This information is ubiquitous as generated by individuals, government departments and corporations is a valuable source of information. There are opinion leaders on social media whose opinions are influential.

“... I don’t know when the last time I watched TV was or listened to the radio, our generation uses social media that’s where we get the information that we use to make everyday decisions”.

This means that people get influenced sometimes by people that they do not even know personally. This confirms the findings by (Farinloye et al., 2020; Kumar & Raman, 2020) who stressed that organizations are taking advantage of social media to their advantage. Young people have reduced significantly their use of other mass media as sources of information to using social media.

Universities

Institutions of higher learning take the initiative to create opportunities to communicate and provide credible information to prospective students. They use a plethora of strategies to achieve this. Some institutions create relationships with young people while they are still in high school. “... I got to know about this institution of choice when I was still in high school. They used to invite us to campus for engagements and sometimes they visited our school”.

This is in line with (Farinloye et al., 2020; Kumar & Raman, 2020) who noted that more marketing literature in terms of university prospectus is also made available in high school libraries and that it is used for career guidance purposes. Learners are more inclined to choose the institutions they know than the ones they don’t know. “...I used to win a lot of performance awards sponsored by this university”. This indicates that bonds were created in the past owing to past engagements.

Billboards and other promotional materials

Billboards are planted in public places and along the roads. This means that only those prospective students who happen to be in the same vicinity as the billboards will be able to use them for information. “...I have never seen, not even once, a billboard of a university”.

This shows that they are much less influential in making choices of university of study.
Promotional materials such as T-shirts, hats, bags, cups, and stationery are used in marketing. However, their significance is very limited according to the results.

“... I wouldn’t make a lifelong decision based on something insignificant as promotional materials”.

This shows that they are much less important. They are however useful when used together with other methods of communication. At career fairs and roadshows, these are useful to attract prospective students to the university counter but may have very little in influencing decision choices.

Factors influencing choice of educational institution

The following factors were found to be more influential in decision-making by prospective university students:

Location of educational institution and availability of accommodation

This factor encompasses the geographical positioning of the institution of higher learning. This relates to towns or villages, and proximity to suburbs. Some campuses are located in remote villages while others are in urban areas. In towns, some campuses are near industrial sites while others are closer to residential suburbs. This factor was especially pronounced in the students who are studying at private universities. These institutions ordinarily do not provide accommodation and as such learners prefer those that are closer to residential suburbs.

“... I chose this institution because it is closely located to residential suburbs, not just any suburbs but low-cost residential places like Mogoditshane. Accommodation prices are more reasonable and highly available than other institutions”.

Most public universities provide accommodation but sometimes it is not adequate. However, universities try to prioritize first-year students for campus residences.

“... I chose my university because it offers accommodation for first-year students. If not I knew I was going to struggle since I come from a very far away village. Probably I could have chosen a different institution if UB did not provide accommodation”.

This shows the significance of location in decision-making as was also found by (Harahap et al., 2023). Those who originate in the capital city however did not think it was a very important factor to them although they indicated that it was the reason they did not choose other campuses outside of Gaborone.

“... for me, this was somewhat significant. I already come from Gaborone and my parents’ house is closer to the campus. That’s why I chose not to go to other campuses in other towns and cities”. Regardless of the position of each respondent, this factor was considered a significant determining factor of the University of Choice.

Perceptions of university reputation

Universities in Botswana have different brand strengths based on customers’ perceptions of quality. This is generally determined by several factors such as the university’s age, ownership structure, quality of programs, image, publications, and collaborations as well as the influence of alumni. Prospective students select the University of Choice based on what they know or what they have heard. Some institutions have bad publicity as a result of poor management of different kinds of crises.

“... I could have not chosen University A, they have a very poor image. We hear of many scandals and would not want to be associated with such an educational institution”. Some institutions have the benefit of good perceived quality of programs.

“... although the institution where I am enrolled is private and relatively young, it has a reputation for the best quality programs that are relevant and market-driven. We hear that you won’t go wrong with a qualification from this institution. They have all the necessary facilities and class sizes are much less than in public institutions. They attract the best staff members and I think I will recommend others to enroll here”.

This shows that the quality of facilities, teaching staff, and institutional image are significant in influencing choice.

Quality of programs and Employability

The quality of educational programs can also be a significant factor in influencing the choice of an educational institution (Deligiannis et al., 2023; Rabani & Rabiei, 2023, 2023). The quality is determined by relevance in the market. This also includes alignment of a program with one’s future aspirations and lifelong interests. Some prospective students have predetermined qualifications that they love, meaning that any other factor will not be more important. Some had dreams for example to become entrepreneurs while others had aspirations to become top-quality engineers. This position significantly influences their choices. “... I have always wanted to be a Quantity Surveyor so when I saw that this one institution was the only one offering this program in the country, I did not think twice – the selection was naturally obvious”. This factor could also be influenced by advice applicants get from friends and family.

“... My parents always told me that I don’t need the education to be an employee but rather to create and manage my own business. I want to follow in the footsteps of my brother who studied entrepreneurship at this university, so I chose the same program and in the same institution he studied”. This shows the power of others who can be regarded as opinion leaders in decision-making.
Employers prefer to hire from institutions that have credibility, and with good image (Panda et al., 2019). Perceptions are that institutions with good reputations result in more employable graduates.

Degree of persuasion

This factor has a moderate effect in influencing prospective students’ choices. This means that some prospective students could be influenced when others were not. This aspect shows the power of university marketing and sales strategies (Clayton et al., 2023; Petrea & Puiu, 2023). The charisma and quality of presentations of the sales staff may have some degree measure of influence. Roadshows, open-day events, and career fairs are some of the factors that influence decision-making. The personal interactions that the universities have are more influential than communication done through non-personal means like advertisements, billboards, and other promotional methods. Although the effect of these varies depending on the stage of choice, above-the-line media helps create awareness while below-the-line communication helps close the sale/make the final decision.

“... I made a decision last year when I was in high school, we were given the chance to come to this university to see the facilities and interact with the institution. At that moment I knew I was at the right place and my choice was influenced by exactly this point”. Others may never have interacted with the institutions and will be convinced by the sales pitch done at the moment of truth.

“... It was my first time to interact directly with universities, the career fair provided this opportunity for me. Others were not very convincing. My choice was influenced by the marketing guys, wow they were very professional and answered all the questions I had, they also gave me university-branded merchandise such as a T-shirt, a bucket hat, pens, and a bag”. This shows the power of persuasion. However as found by (Baliyan & Mokoena, 2024; Chiya et al., 2023), some prospective students visit the career fair to only confirm decisions that have been made already, so other marketing and sales tactics will have minimal effect.

Associated costs and funding issues

Some institutions charge a small amount of application fees when others have removed it. Very few people indicated that they are influenced by this aspect. This is primarily because the total cost of education in Botswana is borne by the government through the Department of Tertiary Education Financing (DTEF). Prospective students only need to select the university and program of choice and complete an application to DTEF to have the fees and allied costs financed. This means that the availability of funding opportunities is guaranteed for all Botswana citizens who scored a minimum of 36 points at the high school leaving certificate level.

“... I didn’t need to worry about this, I knew I scored enough points to be funded by DTEF so I could study in any institution of my choice in the country. I knew the government policies, regulations and guidelines would be favourable regardless of the choices I make”. This shows that this factor is less significant in the Botswana educational landscape as compared to other countries as was also found in other countries that fund education (Rabani & Rabiei, 2023).

Conclusions

The study concludes that there are several significant sources of information that prospective students may use to make decisions. The most significant ones in Botswana are career fairs and roadshows, recommendations from family and friends, and social media platforms. Other sources are important but they are less significant such as mass media and the use of billboards and other promotional materials. This is not to say they are not useful, but that they are less significant – meaning they can still be applied. Furthermore, this study also concluded that multiple factors could influence the choice of a university by prospective students, some are more significant while others are less significant. The findings show that factors such as university geographical location, availability of accommodation, perception of university reputation, quality of programs offered, programs alignment to lifelong interests, and perceptions of graduate employability are more significant in influencing the choice of university of study. The degree of persuasion by marketing and sales tactics has a moderate influence while opportunities for funding, costs associated, and government regulations and procedures have less significance in influencing the choice of university.

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