"Which One Is My Preferred Ivory Tower?" An Analysis Among Islamic Secondary School Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The higher education environment in most developing countries, including Malaysia have become more competitive, particularly to increase the number of students' enrollment. This paper aimed to find factors that the students consider upon selecting their higher education program. It is crucial for higher learning institution to understand the perceptions and expectations of students and transform them into marketing activities that will attract potential students. Past research stated that higher education has become a positional good in which some institutions and programs offer are seen, in the eyes of students, parents and employers, as better social status and lifetime opportunities. This study involved 1000 respondents among students from Islamic secondary schools throughout Malaysia. Descriptive analysis was used to identify the factors students considered as crucial in their choice and decision making. The findings show that interest to academic program is the highest choice while career opportunities made the second. The findings have implications for related university positioning in a diversifying recruitment market, and for a reconsideration of marketing and recruitment strategy at institutional levels.

Keywords: Higher Education, Islamic Higher Education Institution, Promotion

1.0 Introduction

The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESTP) of Malaysia was formulated and launched on 27 August 2007 with the vision to transform higher education within the context of establishing Malaysia as an international hub of excellence for higher education. This transformation is the foundation towards attaining merit and sustainability for the higher education system beyond 2020. Malaysia needs to produce human capital with a first class mind set in order to face developmental challenges in knowledge and innovation based economy. The desired human capital should be knowledgeable, skilful and possess a superior personality. This is in line with the objective of developing the desired human capital.

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) is the first Islamic university set up by the Government of Malaysia in the 21st century. Formerly known as Islamic University College of Malaysia, USIM is the 12th Public Higher Education Institution (IPTA) in Malaysia. Among the objectives of the establishment of USIM are to uphold and enhance Islamic studies, bring Islamic Studies into the national main education stream, emphasize the use of information technology in education and research systems. Focus is also in mastering Arabic and English language as well as the national language.

In the effort to ensure the above objective is achieved, USIM has limited the enrolment of its' students in order to give special focus on character building, skills, discipline and strong religious faith among the students. In order to achieve the targetted objective, the university need to take into account the fact that the university need to be well known and accepted locally and internationally.

Therefore to ensure that the university is well known and accepted by potential local and foreign graduates that are of quality, the university need to have a sustainable and effective strategy. Amongst such strategy would be having research done on promotion and marketing and how USIM can be made known to the community.

The cosideration and decision made by students on the preference for a particular university is an important factor to the university. A preferred university can be regarded as a good university and well known to the students. With 20 IPTAs in the country, the students has many choices to select according to their preference. The additonal and increased in competition at the state and national level, plays an important role in ascertaining the marketing requirement for a higher learning institution (Smith *et.al.* 1995). The students now has many choices to make a decision and it has become more complex to consider which IPTA will be of their preference (Maringe, 2006).

The institution of higher learning as other service organisations, may want to review their marketing strategy to enable them to compete in the current market. It is important for an institution of higher learning to understand the expectation of the students and translate this information to develop marketing activities that can attract and retain students in institutions of higher learning (Siti Rahayu Hussein, 2000).

The importance of promotion as a marketing strategy to introduce new products or services to potential customers cannot be denied. In the context of education especially higher education, various methods have been used to attract potential students to select the university of their choice as the place to pursue further education. Promotion or the form of communication for marketing products (Programmes offered by USIM) to potential buyers (potential students, parents and public) (Muhd. Abi Sofian Abd. Halim, 2005) is one of the prerequisite for a university to introduce and strengthen the university's brand name to the public. Among the various methods of promotion used by a university are exhibition, talk, roadshow, print media and electronic media. Various methods and programmes were used to promote USIM in the effort to increase the percentage of students intake at par with the other public universities.

1.1 Problem Statements

Information on a topic can now be accessible anywhere and it is important for the potential students to know their future direction after receiving their exam results. In order to attract local and foreign students, especially for the graduate and post-graduate programmes. Various programmes can be implemented. This include preparation of research requirements on promotion and marketing that is attractive and current, participate in education visits and fairs locally and abroad, and subscribe to advertisement in local and foreign magazines.

In this context, several questions arise. Does the potential students especially students from the religious stream know about the existence of USIM? What are the programmes that will be considered by the students when they do their further education in USIM? What about the public community, will they recognise USIM as an IPTA? How will they recognise USIM? What are the suggestions from the students and public community for improvements for USIM that can be accepted. These are some of the questions that need to be investigated via the proposed research.

1.2 Research Objective

The major aim of the bigger horizon in this research is to ascertain the knowledge of the religious medium students and the community, and the effectiveness of the USIM promotion and marketing strategy. Zooming in to the specific objective of this particular paper, this study is anticipated to identify factors that religious school students might consider when determining their preference for a particular university. This is imperative to show the basis and issues that the students consider while choosing their university to further studies as well as achieving their dreams.

1.3 Importance of the Research

An evaluation on promotion and marketing programs need to be carried out to ascertain the perception of the the religious medium students who are the main entry candidates to USIM. This will further helped the institution to understand the selection pattern among their prospects as well as to assess the effectiveness of the promotion activities being carried out.

The study on the effectiveness is important to evaluate the relevancy of the promotional methods applied before. The findings of the study will be used by the University promotion Committee to evaluate whether the promotional methods currently applied is still relevant and henceforth can be used as an input for improvements.

Although it has been 10 years since USIM was set up, there is still a gap between USIM and the other universities. Last year statistic shows that the enrollment of students in USIM is less than 70 percent than the number of place offered. USIM's target is to obtain 15,000 students enrollment in 2015 as compared to the current enrollment of 6,000. To achieve the enrollment objective as planned, the university has to take into account the aspect that the university has to be made known and accepted locally and abroad. Therefore to ensure that the university is well known and accepted by potential local and foreign graduates that are of quality, the university need to have a sustainable and effective strategy. Amongst such strategy would be having research done on promotion and marketing and how USIM can be made known to the community. This study has developed a structure which begin with identifying issue related to the topic. Selection and decision made by students on their preference for a particular university is the main subject for this study.

2.0 Background of the Public Higher Education Sector in Malaysia

The higher education sector in Malaysia developed rapidly as a result of the continuous effort by the Malaysian Government to expand the higher education industry (Kanji & Malik, 1998). This development can be seen from the various indicators such as the increase in the students' enrolment in the institutions of higher learning (IPT), additional funds and Government expenditure on higher education especially in the public sector, policies developed to promote higher education and the nation's continuous need for quality human resources (Subramani & Kempner, 2002). The history of the development of the public higher education in Malaysia began with the establishment of the University of Malaya (UM) in 1949. Based on the *The Carr-Saunders Commission* Report in 1948, UM was established to make the university as a 'knowledge centre that will unite all race, religion and economic tendencies' in the country at that point of time (Universiti Malaya, 2006).

After the independence of the nation in 1957, the Government's began with the focus on the development of the industry, which became the impetus for economic development. Following this, University Sains Malaysia (USM) was established in 1969 and became the centre of learning base on the development of science and technology. At the end of 1960s, there was demand and need to have a university that could provide specific education to the Malay community and the effort to uphold the Malay language at that time. Therefore with the purpose of developing and strengthening the culture, national values, and national unity, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was established in 1970. Currently, there are 20 Public institutions of Higher Learning (IPT) established throughout the country. National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM) is the latest public IPT established in 2006. On the other hand, Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) is the first Islamic university set up by the Government of Malaysia in the 21st century. USIM is the 12th Public Higher Education Institution in Malaysia.

Among the objectives of the establishment of USIM are to uphold and enhance Islamic studies, bring Islamic Studies into the national main education stream, emphasize the use of information technology in education and research systems. Focus is also put in mastering Arabic and English language as well as the national language. In the effort to ensure that the above objective is achieved, USIM has limited the enrolment of its students in order to give special focus on character building, skills, disciplines and strong religious faith among the students.

2.1 Factors of Students' Preferences for Universities

According to Soutar dan Turner (2002), there are a number of factors that students might consider when determining their preference for a particular university, including:

1. The type of course that they want to do (e.g. business, law, engineering);
2. The academic reputation of the institution (very good, sound or poor);
3. The campus atmosphere (quiet or lively);
4. The quality of the teaching staff (average or above average);
5. The type of university (old or modern, traditional or technological).

Other than the factors mentioned above, they might also consider more "personal" factors, such as proximity to home (including time taken to get to each university, access to public transport, parking availability), what their family thinks about each university (whether it is held in good or poor esteem), and the university their friends wish to attend (Soutar & Turner, 2002). A study conducted by Maringe (2006) on Sixth Form Students in schools and colleges around Southampton students' is on the dominant factors affecting the decision making for selection of a particular university among the respondents. The research findings by Maringe (2006) is shown in **Table 2.1** below:

Ranking	Preference Factors and Related Elements	Percentage Influence on Selection
1	**Study Programme** (type of study, major, structure of studies, and level of study)	7.8
2	**Price Value** (fees, flexibility in payment, time and financial costs of the distance from home)	7.5
3	**Location** (campus facilities, course credit disciplines, facilities, diversity of student background, class size and student hostels)	6.2
4	**Excellence** (reputation of the university and the faculty, the university's website, and the quality of universities featured in the media)	6.1
5	**Promotion** (advertising, media, publicity about scientific research, academic excellence, university, and marketing communications)	4.8
6	**Prospectus** (book prospectus on university, exhibition materials, study guides)	4.6
7	**Human** (breakdown of gender, graduate profile, excellent instructors, and alumni)	4.5

Table 2.1: Factors on Preference for Study Courses

Despite of the findings in the past research, in the context of selection of students in the public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia for admission to Diploma or degree, personal factors as described by Soutar and Turner (2002) particularly, are insignificant. This is because the selection of students based on student applications through the University's Central Unit (UPU), the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. Suitability of the locality and the inclination factor family interest is not dominant a factor, except for students who complete the program of study at postgraduate level or part-time.

Hooley and Lynch (1981, in Soutar & Turner, 2002) conducted a study on the selection process of a university by students with high prospects in the higher institutions of United Kingdom. Six factors have been identified by Hooley and Lynch (1981) as influencing the selection of a university by students with high prospects as follows:

1. Appropriateness of study program
2. Location of university
3. Academic reputation
4. Distance from home
5. Type of university (old/new university)
6. Advice from parents and teachers.

The study found that the suitability of the program is the most important factor in determining the choice of a university. The highly prospective students will be ready to adapt to all the other factors if they can follow the program of interest.

Soutar and Turner (2002) carried out a study among high school graduates in Western Australia on factors related to the students' choice of preference for higher education institution. They find that the suitability of the course is the most important factor in determining the choice of a university.

It was followed by other factors such as academic reputation, career, campus climate for studies and others. The following table shows the factors that will determine the student's selection for a particular university by Soutar and Turner (2002).

Attribute	Level
Type of university	Is a new/modern university
	Is an old/traditional university
	Is a technological university
Ability to transfer	Offers the ability to articulate/transfer units between TAFE and university
	Does not provide the ability to articulate/transfer units between TAFE and university
Distance from home	Is close to home (less than 10km)
	Is a moderate distance from home (10-20km)
	Is far from home (over 20km)
Academic reputation	Has a poor academic reputation
	Has an average academic reputation
	Has a strong academic reputation
Quality of teaching	Has average quality of teaching
	Has very good quality of teaching
Job prospects	Would equip me with qualifications that provide average job prospects
	Would give me qualifications that provide good job prospects
Family opinion	Is held in good opinion by my family
	Is a university of which my family holds no opinion
	Is held in poor opinion by my family
Friends	Is where my friends will be going
	Is *not* where my friends will be going
Campus atmosphere	Has very little campus atmosphere
	Has a great campus atmosphere
Course suitability	Offers a course that is more or less what I want
	Offers courses that are not really what I want
	Offers a course that is just what I want

Table 2.2: *Factors of Students' Selection for a Particular University* (Source: Soutar and Turner, 2002)

In relation to marketing and promotion associated with a university, Krampf and Heinlein (1981) are among the first to pursue research on the marketing the university among prospective students at a university in the United States. The aim of their study, among others, is to identify the needs of the students, analyze the image in the eyes of the university community, and develop effective methods to identify and attract the target group of students who will pursue their university studies. Firstly, by using the factor analysis method, the study found that respondents gave high attention to the following factors to attract them to join a university, namely:

1. Attractive campus atmosphere (including facilities)
2. An informative visit to the campus (to outsiders and prospective students)
3. Suggestions by family members
4. Field of studies that is comprehensive and attractive
5. Distance from the house
6. A peaceful study environment

3.0 Research Methodology, Sampling and Instruments

The current study is part of a bigger study conducted on USIM's promotion and marketing strategy on attracting potential religious school students to choose USIM as a prospective place to further studies. The study was sponsored under the University's research grant.

The objective of the current study is to identify the number of factors that religious school students might consider when determining their preference for a particular university. The data was collected using a survey which was distributed among respondents in several anticipated zone all over Malaysia. This study used a structured questionnaire and focus on the research sample according to the zones that have been divided based on the location of the religious schools involved in this study. The zones in this research are as follows:

- Zone 1: North (Pulau Pinang,Perak, Kedah and Perlis)
- Zone 2: East (Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang)
- Zone 3: South (Johor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan)
- Zone 4: Central (WP Kuala Lumpur, WP Putrajaya, Selangor)

A purposive sampling method was used to ensure sufficient data collection for this study. Students' data were collected from 20 schools from four main zones that have been identified. Each zone contains five schools randomly selected across the country. Each zone consists of 250 respondents. The total of respondents took part in the study were 1000 persons.

The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire that was developed based on the past research of Julinawati, et al. (2010), Krampf and Heinlein (1981), Maringe (2006) and Soutar and Turner (2002). A questionnaire were developed which consists of two major parts – respondents' demographic questions and factors of respondent selecting USIM as a place to further studies. In measuring respondents' responses for the later part, the instrument applied 5-stage Likert scale from 1 (Disagree So Much) to 5 (Agree So Much). Example of a question is I will choose USIM to further my study because of its conducive environment. The data sought in current study were analyzed using descriptive analysis such as frequencies, percentage, and mean score.

4.0 Research Findings

The study is divided into 2 groups consisting of the group of students entering USIM and students from the religious school that has been categorised under the general respondent group.

Table 4.1: Demography of Respondents from the Religious School

Demographic Information	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age		
Mean = 17.21		
Std. Deviation = 6.15		
Gender		
Male	416	41.6
Female	583	58.4
Education Level		
PMR	743	74.3
SPM	228	22.8
STPM/STAM/Diploma	17	1.7
Bachelor	-	-
Master	-	-
PHD	-	-
Race		
Malay	986	99.2
Chinese	2	0.2
Indian	-	-
Others	4	0.4

Table 4.1 shows the demographic information of the respondents resulting from the questionnaires distributed on the promotion and markerting of Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia.

The average age answering the questionnaire is 17 years old with a standard deviation of 6.15. The number of respondents in the study is 999 with 583 females or 58.4 percent and 416 males or 41.6 percent. 743 or 74.3 percent of the respondents have PMR education, 22.8 percent or 228 respondents passed SPM while the balance of 1.7 percent or 17 respondents have STPM, STAM and Diploma. The findings of the study is also taken from from Malay respondents. This is evident from the above table where 986 respondents or 99.2 percent are Malay, 2 or 0.2 percent Chinese and 4 or 0.4 percent are among other races.

Table 4.2: Selection factors for preferred University by religious schools students

Statement	STS	TS	TP	S	SS	Mean	S.D
Interest in the field of study	0.40%	0.50%	5.60%	41.90%	50.80%	4.43	0.66
Employment opportunities	0.30%	1.00%	16.00%	44.00%	38.70%	4.2	0.76
Reputation of field of study	0.40%	1.20%	17.10%	55.30%	26.00%	4.05	0.72
Reputation of the institution	0.60%	1.30%	18.20%	53.10%	26.80%	4.04	0.75
Advice from parents / family	1.70%	6.50%	21.10%	48.60%	28.00%	3.93	1.59
Promotions that is attractive and convincing	1.40%	2.80%	27.30%	44.20%	24.30%	3.87	0.86
Field of study that is easy to learn	1.10%	3.00%	29.30%	44.10%	22.40%	3.84	0.85
Campus with a conducive environment	0.40%	1.60%	37.70%	38.40%	21.90%	3.8	0.81
Discussion with friends	1.80%	6.40%	24.60%	48.60%	18.60%	3.76	0.89
Advice from teacher/counselor	1.70%	9.20%	25.40%	46.70%	17.00%	3.68	0.92
Distance of university nearest to home	25.20%	28.60%	24.70%	14.00%	7.40%	2.53	1.56

Table 4.2 describes the selection factors for preferred university by religious school students. The findings show an interest in the field of study as the most agreeable and dominant factor for the university of preferred choice (Mean = 4:43, SD = 0.66).This was followed by factor of job opportunities after graduation (Mean = 4.20, SD = 0.76), reputation of the field study (Mean = 4:05, SD = 0.72), and the reputation of the institution (Mean = 4:04, SD = 0.75). It was found that the distance factor of university nearest to the home (Mean = 2.53, SD = 1:56) gave the least influence in the selection of the preferred university by students of religious schools. Similarly for the factor of advice from a teacher/counselor (3.68) and discussion with friends (Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.89).

Comparing findings by Maringe (2006) indicated that study program, price value and location of the campus gives the top three highest influence in the factor of choosing a universities in UK comparing in Malaysia especially by the student from religous school in Malaysia, the findings show an interest in the field of study as the most agreeable and dominant factor for the university of preferred choice followed by factor of study program (type of study, major, structure of studies, and level of study). Second is type of study, major, structure of studies, and level of study) and the third choices factor is location (campus facilities, course credit disciplines, facilities, diversity of student background, class size and student hostels)

The study aims to establish the inportant criteria for student selection when choosing a particular higher learning institution. Based on comparison from this study and Soutar and Turner (2002) (refer to table 2.2)carried out a study among high school graduates in Western Australia on factors related to the students' choice of preference for higher education institution. They find that the suitability of the course is the most important factor in determining the choice of a university. It was followed by other factors such as academic reputation, career, campus climate for studies and others. All these factors are quite similar from the religous schools in Malaysia, whereby interest in the field of study as the most agreeable and dominant factor for the university of preferred choices for the religious school same as the in Western Autralia.

5.0 Conclusion and Recomendations

The factors that influence the selection according to priority by students are interest in the field of study (Mean 4.43), employment opportunity (Mean 4.2), reputation of studies (Mean 4:05), reputation of institutions (Mean 4:04), advice from parents/family (Mean 3.93), attractive and convincing promotion (Mean 3.87), field of study that is easy to learn (Mean 3.84), a conducive campus environment (Mean 3.8), discussions with friends (Mean 3.76), advice from teacher/counselor (Mean 3.68) and the distance from the university that is close to home (Mean 2.53).

These findings provide guidance that other job opportunities, reputation of study field and the reputation of institutions, interest is one of the most important factor why students choose an institution to pursue their education. Therefore USIM have the option to offer programs of interest to students or to encourage interest in students towards the programs offered in order to make it as the preferred university.

In addition, the factors of employment, reputation of education and the reputation of the institution's was also a key factor in the selection of university by students where in general, these three factors are closely related to the students' perceptions of a university. To become a leading and preferred by the student, University must first build a good reputation in the eyes of the public and students. Universities authorities must be aware of the requested students' needs and student selection criteria. University should strive to ensure that students are given a holistic educational experience and not just a paper qualification. In doing all these higher learning institutions must deliver higher quality services that satisfied the student needs.

In general, the proposed improvement on the strategy to promote university's as submitted by the respondents are broadcast media, visit and talk and using the medium of social interaction such as *Facebook*, educational exhibits and strengthen the program and the quality of teaching. Image reputation, promotion should be targeted to relevant groups such as the students, and their friends and family.

Future studies should include the Schools under the state government and private religious schools that are not involved. They also should focus on in depth study and use the focus group technique process. Researcher can also consider looking into other aspect on student decision making process such as academic achievement, family background and personal factors.

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