

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ON SPECIALIZATION SELECTION
IN THE BACHELOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION: SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA, SRI LANKA**

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Abstract

Recent years, the number of students selecting their specialization for their bachelor degree is changing dramatically. The purpose of this research to understand the behaviour of the students towards their selection of specialization in their bachelor degree. This research pay attention to investigate the insight of the factors which influence on student's decision making in selecting their specialization. This qualitative research employs focus group interview of the third-year students from four specializations namely Accounting, Financial Management, Accounting, and Marketing from Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna. This methodology focused on data collection considering the four specializations for selecting specialization as their carrier choice. Results revealed that learning material, courses attended, assignments, perceived difficulty, teachers' characteristics, entry

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requirements, advice of senior students, job demands, well paid job in the market, diversity of jobs, the curiosity, parents' advice, peer pressure, department regulations, safe job after graduation, and gender-based job opportunities.

1.Introduction

The higher-education landscape continues to evolve at a rapid pace where the institutions are under growing pressure to cater to the needs of the students. With the environment getting increasingly competitive, the role of marketing has come to the surface. In this regard, an important aspect worth considering, according to Gunawardana (2013), would be to figure out student attitude in selecting their preferred university. Such an understanding of prospective students' choice process has high potential for developing university marketing strategies (Kusumawati, 2013)

These days, criticism about the output of the graduates and their ability to fit with the job market expectations is increasing regardless of their field. Some argue that the student behaviour in relations to their decision about the specialization plays major role to get the job in the job market. Students without considering the job demand and their ability to fit with certain specialization struggle to pursue their education. Lack of research in this issue raises the alarm to conduct a research to find out the factors which influence on students' decision making to the selection process to guide the students. The student's behaviour is unpredictable based on their past selection process. There is a fluctuation in the number of students who opted to select the specialization. The performance of the Faculty is heavily depending on the performance of the students after the graduation specifically their achievement in the job market. Students who make wrong career decisions due to misguidance often join jobs they are not interested in pursuing. If the students fail to select the suitable specialization which fit to them will face difficulties to get the good and well-paid job. A student who chooses a complicated subject as specialization area can be compelled to drop it due to poor performance. This study therefore examined the factors

influencing selection of specialization as career subject among Bachelor of Business Administration students from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. With the higher education landscape getting increasingly competitive. The current study is conducted to prioritise the determinants affecting the attitude of the students pursuing their studies in a particular specialization at the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

Specifically, this study seeks to prioritise the important determinants that influence the attitude of the students regarding their preferred choice of a particular specialization. In doing so, it seeks to gain an insight into the appropriate marketing strategies required by the particular department as it navigates an intensely competitive landscape of higher education (Anam, Haque, 2014).

2. Literature Review

Subject lecturers significantly influence on how students perceive the usefulness of a particular subject (Wilhelm, 2004). Currn and Rosen (2006) pointed out that teachers influence students' subject preference. They further indicated that most students tend to have a larger preference for the knowledge they receive from subject as opposed to a teacher's influence. Teaching styles of the teachers also important as equal as to the subject matter being taught (Babad and Taybe, 2003). In addition, student's attitudes towards a teacher largely affect their attitude towards a given course. Consequently, Students tend to prefer subjects whose teachers are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and articulate as against to those who are less enthusiastic and inflexible (Babad and Taybe, 2003). On the contrary, unclear and rigid teachers are always unpopular among students because they find it difficult to learn from them.

Von Mizener and William (2011) conducted the study on the effects of student's choice on academic performance and the result showed that the academic performance degraded if the student did not have goals in the selection. Meanwhile, Matusovich, Streveler and Miller (2010) stated that it was difficult to recruit and train the future employees if they did not understand their goals, objectives, and criteria in the decision-making process. It could be anticipated that individual student's objective would determine how they perform throughout the study.

Wiese et al. (2010) identified the factors to attract the right calibre students, to create unique position, to segment the student market more appropriately and to gain competitive advantage. The study revealed quality of teaching as the most important choice factor. The choices also varied among different language and gender groups with multiculturalism scoring a high point among the respondents.

A study conducted by Ashleigh and Janell (2010) on the influence of communication sources on a student's selection shows that students consult various communication sources including traditional, word of mouth and electronic word of mouth. In addition to these, trustworthiness, relevance, risks and expertise contributes in evaluation of the communication sources to allow for better understanding of their influence. The findings of the study show that traditional and word of mouth are the dominant sources consulted.

The argument for acknowledging the different criteria that would influence student's subject of choice is imbedded in Image Theory, which focuses on an individual making a decision in the context of a relationship or organisation. Image theory uses the term 'image' to refer to the schemata involved in decision making-in other words the cognitive frameworks that help decision makers organise their world and provide meaning and structure to information that aids the ultimate decision made (Beach and Mitchell, 1987). Decisions are made based on the extent to which alternatives fit with images. The decision maker's image of what should be must resonate with the image of the department which offer the specialization.

Based on this observation, any changes in an individual's choice is a function of changes in other elements. Evidence has shown that both cognitive and affective elements of attitude have some close relations. The affective element reflects positive or negative emotions about individuals' feelings (Feldman, 1990). Conversely, the behavior aspect shows intention or the tendency to act in a given way based on a person's preference. Finally, the cognitive element focuses on beliefs and thoughts of an individual reflected on preference. As such, students may opt for History as a field that is important and, thus, this notion leads to formation of preference.

Extensive research has been conducted on students' decision making regarding their programs and universities (e.g. Moogan and Baron, 2003; Vrontis et al., 2007). These kinds of choices are usually made by students before starting their careers in education. Other research papers focus on student's choices made during their studies (Hugstad, 1997; Newell et al., 1996; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). The consumer decision making is considered to be a process that comprises several phases (e.g. Moogan and Baron, 2003; Solomon et al., 2002; Vrontis et al., 2007). The first stage consists of the problem recognition, where the students realize that they have to make a choice regarding their education. In the second phase students start to look for information on the issues that they consider relevant for their decision making.

3. Research Methodology

Focus group interview method is employed to explore the factors which influence on student's decision making in relations to their specialization. Purposive sampling technique is used to select the samples 32 students were selected from third year considering eight students per their specialization at the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna. Moderator clearly explained the purpose of this focus group and provided the topic to discuss and facilitated the debate about their choice of subject specialization and instructions were given to focus on the subject matter. Focus group guide used as the instrument which include the research questions to investigate their decision process (Why did you select the particular specialization), the idea (How did you get the idea to select the specific specialization), cognition (what sort of knowledge influenced on your decision), attitude (What factors contributed to select your favourable specialization). Further, some imaginative questions (If you are a teacher of the specialization x and wish to attract the students at your department, what would you do).

The interviews were conducted a week after students commenced the specialization. The focus group session was conducted consisting same specialization student in one group. Filter questions (Are you from X specialization? Are you willing to participate the discussion about selection of your specialization) were used to select the students to select the potential student who can express his or her opinion. Each student was given chance to express their ideas.

4. Results and Discussion

The data analysis for each group is done by transcribing their statements, coding and grouping in categories. A series of findings identified first then categorized by key issues. The following categories were identified;

a) Consideration of specialization. Every student took into consideration 2-3 other specializations besides the preferred one and have the priority.

b) Perceptions about specializations. *Accounting specialization* “has a great demand from students”, “you have to study a lot“, “High reputation for accountants”, “High salary for accountants”; *Financial Management* is about a lot to study; it is difficult to promote at the work place, “you learn by heart for exams”, “Risk and return is the key for business”; Human Resource Management: “you learn how to start a business” , “how to manage a company“; *Marketing Program*: “you learn to work on projects, to organize events”, “there are a lot of projects”, “you must be creative”, “you learn how to discover needs”, “focus on promotions”, “it is easy to find a job in this field”, “you can work in teams”, “anyone can graduate marketing with a little effort”, “requires creativity”, “you conduct marketing research”.

c) Important criteria for selecting the right specialization

Skills: “I learn to work in teams”, “I want to start my own business”, “My language ability to write essay questions”; “My presentation skills”; *The familiarity of the subjects*: “I am interested in a particular subject”, “I am quite confident about the subject”, “I have good results in the relevant subject specialization in the first year and second year”, *Finding a job*: “There is a demand for my choice of specialization”, “It is easy to get a job in this field”, “Opportunities in the Government Sector”, “Variety of job opportunities”, “Flexibility in the working condition”; Well paid jobs: “Seniors make a lot of money in this field”, “I can make good money by getting job in this field”. Structure of the specialization: “I heard it is easy to study here”; “Flexible approach in the Department”; Curiosity: “I was curious”; Learning material: “I have read about courses made at this specialization”; Assignments: “I have heard that you have to work a lot with projects”, “you have to make projects like video and poster”; The opportunity to gain practical experience: “I learn to work in practice”, “you have to learn by heart”; Teachers: it is important to have good teachers, who can understand us and communicate with us”, “I have heard there are

teachers who explain what students don't understand; "There are staff who provide support to the students in need"; Achievements: "I want to get first class or second upper", "There are lot of first classes from the specialization"; "It is difficult to get "A+" or "A" grade in some subjects in some specialization"; *Attendance requirements*: "No students penalised for poor attendance in the specialization", "They are strict on attendance", "I want to do some part time job".

d) Information-gathering sources: *Students from the same year*: „I would have chosen another specialization but a lot of my colleagues decided to study another program", "it is easier when you have familiar people at your specialization", "it is important to have people who know you and who can help you"; *Senior Students already studying this specialization*: "I have asked a friend from this specialization; "Senior students in this specialization can help me to do assignments"; "Senior students described the teachers characterises". Faculty teachers: "I liked the way my teacher explained the concepts to us", "Teachers from this specialization delivered the lectures in first year and second year impressed me", "I had bad experience with some teachers in the previous years".

e) Lack of information: Most students consider that no specialization makes efforts in order to promote itself. Every specialization must promote its services. They want to get more information about each specialization in the first and second year of study.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveals that different criteria influence on the student's decision-making process to select the specialization. The findings aligned with the results of the other researchers perceived difficulty (Babad, 2001), teachers' characteristics (Babad, 2001; Maringe, 2006), the skills, well paid job in the job market, easy to find the jobs, advice for seniors (Deuren and Santema, 2012), learning material, subjects attended, assignment requirements (Owen and Jensen, 2004; Duren and Santema, 2012). Personal interest in subjects, fit with personal capabilities, reputation, career opportunities (Deuren and Santema (2012), friends (Owen, Jensen, 2004), teachers (Malgwi et al., 2005).

Managerial implications.

This study revealed the results which is very useful to the head and staff of the departments which offer the specialization. The data can be considered for design strategies to attract the

students in future for their specialization. The staff can use these data to improve the areas where they feel improvement is needed. Considering this data, they can design their courses structure to achieve the success.

Limitations and Future research directions.

This research has the limitation as only considering few students to explore their ideas in selecting their specialization. This study carried out to explore the factors which influence their decision-making process to select the specialization. Future research need to be focused on quantitative methods to determine the degree of influence of these factors. This study only focused the students in the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce. Future research should be extended to the other disciplines.

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