Institutional and communication factors affecting students’ decisions to choose a university: The case of Mountains of the Moon University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the major factors for students’ choice of a university in Uganda, using Mountains of the Moon University as a case study. In this study, 200 registered students were randomly selected and 200 students’ application forms from different course offered at Mountains of the Moon University were used. The results of the study showed that institutional factors, such as students life and activities, university fees policy, quality of staff, having friends studying at the university and students-staff relationship, had a high strength in influencing students’ choosing a university. The results further showed that electronic media, university students, and alumni are the most effective medium of information about the University strength to probable clients of the university.

Key words: Communication factor, institutional factor, decision, choice, student and university.

INTRODUCTION

According to NCHE report (2011), there are many universities established in Uganda with almost similar faculties or schools, entry requirement, and course offered. Much as most universities offer similar programs, they do not attract students in equal proportions in these programs, the numbers of students vary from one university to the other in Uganda. Also, in particular, the number varies from year to year and so the enrolment is at increase or decrease.

The increased number of universities and other institutions brings about competition for students between MMU and other related institutions. As of 2015, there were 108 tertiary institutions and 29 university in Uganda (NCHE, 2011). All these are competing for the same market of students in the country. This has greatly affected the students’ enrolment at Mountains of the Moon and subsequently affecting the income of the university realized from students since the biggest percentage of the university budget is realized from students’ tuition (University budget 2016/2017). There is a need for increased number of students if the university is to meet its budget and provide adequate services to its clients. If this is not addressed, the university will continue receiving little income which is not enough for its capital and operation expenditure. According to Avram (2014) in Norman and Tirumalai (2017), to study the factors that influence students’ choice of a university or college is a critical marketing strategy for students’ recruitment.

According Agrey and Lampadan (2014), students use a variety of factors in making their final selection of a university. According to them, these factors include support system, learning environment, job prospect, sport facilities, students’ life program and activities and finally a safe and friendly environment. According to Yamamoto (2006), factors that affect students’ decisions on where to study from and what to study vary from one student to another. These factors are grouped into two categories according to Ming and Kee (2010): institutional characteristics and communication channels/strategies. Norman and Tirumalai
(2017) provides a conceptual framework that highlights the relationship between factors and decision to choose a university on which this study was based on (Figure 1). The framework suggests that the two factors have to be interwoven (are complements).

Mountains of the Moon University, similar to other universities in Uganda, has been faced with ever-increasing challenge of attracting students. This has led to fluctuating and few number of students in the different programs offered at the university from year to year. The main purpose of this study was to measure the strength of the Mountains of the Moon University in terms of attracting students and the main factor(s) that attracts students at Mountains of the Moon University so that they can be strengthened.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

During the study, 200 students’ applications forms for the 2016/2017 intake were randomly selected to give an insight on the applicants’ home districts and how they got to know about the university. This information was readily available in the application forms. Also, 200 registered students of 2016/2017 intake were selected from various schools of the university to provide information on other institutional strengths that attracted them to the university. A descriptive design was used and the study was based on two research questions that were related to students’ choice of a university: the communication strategies and the university- institutional environment. An open ended questionnaire was administered and analysis was done using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) and excel analysis ToolPak.

RESULTS

Bio data of respondents

The bio data of the responded in the study included gender, home district and school (faculty). The results are presented hereafter.

Distribution of respondents according to schools

The respondents were chosen from five schools in the university: school of education (SOE), school of agriculture and environmental sciences (SAES), school of informatics and computing (SOIC), school of health sciences (SHS) and school of business and management studies (SBMS). The
results are shown in Figure 2.

Based on the result shown in Figure 2, the SBMS had the highest representations with 39%, followed by the SOE with 35%, the SHS with 12%, and SAES with 10%. The SOIC with 5% had the least representation. This suggests that the school of business and management studies had the highest number of enrolment in the 2016/2017 intake of the university, followed by the school of education, school of health sciences, school of agriculture and environmental sciences, and lastly school of informatics and computing. The reasons for this difference in numbers across schools is due to factors that are beyond the scope of this study. However, it can be observed that schools that are science oriented have fewer numbers as compared with the other schools that are non-science oriented. This means that there is a need for the university to emphasize the development of strategies to boost science units.

**Respondents’ gender**

It was found that 52% of the respondents were male, while 48% were female. This indicates a slightly higher representation of male than females and it mean that there were also most equal female and male in the 2016/2017 intake at the university. This is a good results as it shows that females are accessing university education at almost same rate as males.

**Respondents’ home district**

The respondents’ home districts were determined and were grouped into three regions: (1) Rwenzori regions (URR) consisting of the Ugandan students whose home districts are in the university neighborhood that is, Kabarole, Kyenjojo, Kyegywa, Kamwenge, Kasese, Bunyangabu, Ntoroko and Bundibugyo. (2) Beyond Rwenzori region (UBRR); consisting of the Ugandan students whose home districts are not in the Rwenzori region. (3) Non-Ugandans (NU) consisting of the non-Ugandan students. The results are shown in Figure 3.

The results in Figure 3 shows that most (75%) of the respondents have their homes in districts within the Rwenzori region, few (21%) of the respondents have their home in districts beyond the Rwenzori regions, while very few respondents were non-Uganda (4%). These reflections suggests that the Rwenzori region contributed more students to the University in the 2016/2017 intake as compared with other regions beyond both Rwenzori and the country at large. It further suggests that the non-Ugandans that were enrolled in 2016/2017 were very few. Therefore, there is a need for the concerned individuals in the university to ensure that they communication about the university’s strengths and available opportunity in the areas beyond the Rwenzori region and across the international domain.

**Institutional characteristics (factors) and students choice of the university**

The institutional factors were conceptualized as university location, students-to-students relationship, friendly environment, uniqueness of the programs offered, Educational facilities, quality of staff, having
Table 1: The percentage strength of the influence of institutional factors on students’ choice of the university.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional factors</th>
<th>HA(%)</th>
<th>SA(%)</th>
<th>NA(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University Location</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly environment</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-Students relationship</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness of the programs</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of staff</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General outlook of the university</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students life and activities</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having friends/relatives either studying or working at the university</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of educational facilities</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University fees policy</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accordingly, the results in Table 1 show that there are institutional factors that affect the students’ decision to choose a university. These factors form the strength of the university and the university has control over them. It is indicated in the table that each of the factors has an influence however minimal it may be. However, it can be observed that there are factors that have huge effect than others. These factors must be magnified in order to increase their overall effect.

Table 1 shows that the university location highly affected the decisions of 22% of the respondents, while it slightly affected the decisions 19% and it did not affect the decisions of the majority (59%) of the respondents. A reasonable number (40%) of the respondents reported that their decisions were highly affected by the friendly environment, decisions of 25% were slightly affected, while decisions of 35% of the respondents were not affected at all. Staff-students relationship came out as having affected decisions of 84% of the respondent, while only decisions of 15% were slightly affected and very few (1%) reported that their decision were not affected by this factor. The uniqueness of the university programs highly affected decisions of 78% of the respondent and slightly influenced decisions of 15% and did not influence decisions of 16% of the respondents. Additionally, quality of staff highly affected decisions of 78% of the respondents, slightly affected decisions of 17% of the respondents and decisions of 5% were not affected at all. It was further observed that the university general outlook affected the decisions of 41% of the respondents, slightly affected the decisions of 29% and did not affect at all decisions of 30% of the
respondents. A high number (80%) of the students indicated that their decisions to enroll at the university were highly affected by students’ life and activities such as sports activities, students associations and clubs, while 9% indicated that their decisions were slightly affected and only 1% indicated that their decisions were not affected at all by this factor. Having friends/relatives either studying or working at the university was indicated to be the most factor that affected the decisions of most (80%) students, which also slightly affected the decisions of 12% of the student and did not at all influence decisions of only 3% of the students. It was also shown that 49, 28 and 23% of the students indicated that their decisions were highly influenced, slightly influenced and not influenced at all by the educational facilities, respectively. Finally, the university policy of 50% bursary scheme and installment payments was reported to highly influenced 82%, slightly influenced 12% and not at all influenced the decisions of 6% of the students.

The analysis of Table 1 yields five institutional factors that highly influenced the decisions of students at the university. These included quality of staff, students’ life, having friends/relatives either studying or working at the university and activities and university fees policy.

**Communication Factor and students’ choice of the university.**

The communications factors are the marketing strategies the university use to reach its potential clients. These channels also influenced students’ choice of a university. These were conceptualized by as electronic media (use of radios and televisions), social media (use of what up, twitter and Facebook), Press media (use of literatures such as brochures, posters, magazines, newspapers and flyers), Alumni (using brand ambassadors among staff and graduates from the university), University students (brand ambassadors among students who are still undertaking their studies at the university), University visits (making visits to high schools, inviting high school learners to visit the university and making functions outside the university) and lastly university website (sharing all the university activities and development on the whole world via the university website). In this aspects, students’ applications forms were used to ascertain the distributions in terms of communication channel through which each student got to know about the university. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that majority of the students of the university obtained information about the university through university students or electronic media or Alumni and their decisions were therefore influenced by the same. It was observed that students who obtained information about the university using social media were the fewest. This is due to limited contact between the potential clients of the university and the university itself; since it was noted that after applications most students reported to have received a call from the university. Students who obtained information through press media, university visits, and university websites were equally few. The outstanding communication channels that reach and influence decisions of the biggest number of potential customers of the university were indicated to be electronic media which includes radio announcements, radio advertisements, and radio talk shows, the Alumni that includes all graduated student from the university and all staff employed by the university and finally the university students (persons who are still under taking studies at the university).

**DISCUSSION**

Much as the study was tailored to one university and just one intake within the university, the results may indicate findings that outspread to the wider world. The results of study show that universities initially attract students within its neighborhood and expand to other parts gradually. The rate of expansions is affected by many factors which relate to those that influence students’ decisions on choosing a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication factors</th>
<th>Percentage respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electronic media</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press media</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University students</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University visits</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University website</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The communication factors (channels) from which student get informed about the university.
The results of the study also showed that science units of universities attract lesser number of students as compared with non-science units. These is brought about by the fewer number of student available for science programs in Uganda. Universities are therefore encouraged to initiate attractive science based programs that can easily fetch good number of student outside the country. It was also observed from the study that there was slightly equal proportion of female and male students in universities. This indicates that there is gender equality in access to university education.

The study showed that there exists a number institutional factors that affect the students’ decision to choose a university which form the asset part of the university. Some of these factors significantly affect the decision of the students while other do not significantly influence the students’ decision to join a particular university.

It is important to note that Staff-students relationship, the uniqueness of the university programs, quality of staff at teaching and management, students’ life and activities such as sports activities, students associations and clubs, having friends/relatives either Studying or working at the university highly influence students’ decisions to join universities. Some of these factors were also revealed in the study of Agrey and Lampadan (2014).

The communication channels used by universities vary. It was found that the channels that attract and provide reliable information to prospective university clients were university students, electronic media, and friends and relatives working or studying at the university. There were other channels such as university website, social media and university visit. These yields little impact and so universities are discouraged from relying on them for the entire customer-communication process. This is supported by the results of Norman and Tirumalai (2017).

The outstanding communication channels that reached and influenced decisions of the highest number of potential customers of the university were electronic media which includes radio announcements, radio advertisements, and radio talk shows, the Alumni that includes all graduated students from the university and all staff employed by the university and finally the university students (persons who are still under taking studies at the university).

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Potential clients, friends and relatives working at a particular university will attract such clients to offer programs at that university. Students-staff relationship that is friendly and caring within a university also plays an important role in attracting students to join that university. Students’ life and activities at the university, such as sports, outing functions, clubs and associations, build a firm ground for attracting students to join a university. Fees policies that are friendly and economical will serve as attractive grounds for privately sponsored students. Finally, the quality of staff in terms of teaching and management creates an avenue for students’ attraction into the university. Communication strategies are equally important in informing potential university clients and influencing their decisions to choose particular universities. The outstanding communication channels that are highly influential to university forthcoming clients are through electronic media such as use of radios and televisions, use of university students and university staff, as well as formerly graduated university students both as brand ambassadors of the university programs.

In line with this study, universities are encouraged to strengthen the institutional factors and then create platforms to communicate to their clients and the public at large on the existing opportunity available for them within the universities at all time.

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