

A Qualitative Study of the Factors Influencing Student Choice: The Case of Public University in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Like any other business institution, a higher education institution needs to understand its customer needs and wants in order to remain competitive and survive among higher education providers. Extant literature has probed the importance of student choice criteria as the decision is crucial on an individual's future life. Although studies on student choice criteria have been carried out, none have addressed these in an Indonesian context. This paper aims to explore the factors that influence student choice in the selection of an Indonesian Public University. Qualitative research through semi-structured interviews was carried out with 48 first-year undergraduate students in five Indonesian public universities in the two most populated regions. Preliminary results indicate that students considered 25 criteria for selecting an Indonesian public university. The five most important factors are cost, reputation, proximity, job prospect and parents. The findings imply that the factor mentioned by Indonesian students might be unique to Indonesia higher education context. By determining what is important to students when they choose universities, this current study will help universities to promote their institutions and to have a greater knowledge about the underlying motivations of students for furthering study in higher education. Limitations of the study are discussed and future research direction is provided.

Keywords: choice criteria, public university, qualitative study, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The governance of the higher education system throughout the world has changed considerably in the recent years, transforming from the dependency of funding by government to competitive markets [1]. Some universities have responded by engaging in structural reforms to become more efficient and effective in decision-making and operations and to be more economic within the limits of available resources [2]. The transformation in higher education has been also influenced by intensifying global competition, declining funding and changing demand patterns [3][4][5][6]. As competition increases in the higher education institution (HEI) sectors, public and private universities increasingly view students as consumers and try to market their institution intensively. These changes indicate that universities have to compete for students in the recruitment markets.

However, HEIs are not immune from having to respond to competitive pressures by improving service delivery and better governance [7][8]. Consequently, there have been calls to respond to such challenges by understanding and influencing the HEI choice process among prospective students [1][9]. This current research is one of the first consumer studies undertaken in the context of student choice criteria for selecting an Indonesian public university.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Higher Education in Indonesia

Indonesia is facing new challenges in the higher education sector. These challenges include government reforms in higher education, namely, a move towards establishing institutions as legal entities and changes in university autonomy and funding mechanisms. The main driving force behind changes is that universities in Indonesia were seen as being inefficient and ineffective [10]. Some overseas universities responded to the same criticism by engaging in structural reforms to become more efficient and effective in decision-making and operations, and to be more economic within the limits of available resources [2]. In spite of these efforts, there are still calls for universities to improve the quality of education services and the efficiency of education expenditures [11].

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Higher education system in Indonesia has changed. Introduced after the enactment of Law 22 in 1999, the principle of educational decentralisation was subsequently extended by the Presidential Decree 61/1999 to facilitate the plan to transform public universities into autonomous universities or “state owned legal entities”. The regulation significantly increased the academic and financial autonomy of universities, and formed the structure of the Basic Framework for Higher Education Development, KPPTJP IV (2003-2010), resulting in four HEIs achieving the new status of “State Owned Legal Entities”. Some institutions have achieved autonomy status (privatised, and no longer under the control of the Indonesian Government). Indonesia has 48 public universities that are spread over different provinces and islands. The largest number of public universities are located in the Java region (37.5 percent), followed by Sumatra (23 percent).

One of the most delicate issues in the transformation toward a legal entity is changes in university funding [12]. The government acts more as a funding agency and implements a block funding mechanism based on output or the number of graduates produced instead of student enrolments ([13]. In addition, universities are also free to generate income in other ways, such as through consultancy or cooperation with industry [13]. The quality of HEIs is monitored through a quality assurance board [14]. Thus, university management has shifted towards a more corporate system [15].

Indonesian universities are aware that the government’s financial support cannot keep up with the need to improve quality. While tuition fees act as one source of revenue [16], the responsibility for setting the level of tuition fees is no longer in the hands of the central government. As part of this autonomy, universities may now collect tuition fees directly from the students and may set their own tuition fee levels which were previously set by the central government [17]. In this situation, universities are operating in more competitive recruitment market. Therefore, it is important for the universities to understand about how to attract students and how to market themselves.

Much of the existing literature on choice criteria in relation to the selection of universities has been conducted in developed country settings focussed on attracting international students [18], such as New Zealand [19][20], Australia [20][21][22][23][24], the UK [26], the USA [27], Canada [28], and Europe [29]. As Indonesian universities are focused on the local market which is usually confined to students from their specific region, attracting local students to study at the university is still a major concern in Indonesia. Therefore, this current research will explore the most relevant factors that emerge in Indonesian higher education institutions context.

An understanding of the student market requires HEIs to gain knowledge regarding the institution selection process. Studying the student choice criteria provides a basis for higher education institutions to understand their customers and to develop their service quality, since it presents an integrated view of all the characteristics that may influence the students’ satisfaction and their word-of-mouth communication about the HEI. If the universities know which factors students use to evaluate and choose a university, they can ensure that they address those factors through their service and other marketing strategies.

The identification of the institutional factors that a student may consider in selecting a university is a matter of importance to HEI administrators who are concerned with the long-term effectiveness of their institution enrolment practices. As pointed out by Hoyt and Brown [30], it is important for an institution positioning itself in the academic marketplace by identifying those choice factors that would aid researchers and university marketers to better understand the student target market.

Factors Influencing Choice of University

Several researchers have attempted to explain student choice model. According to Hossler [31], most studies that have tried to understand the university choice process could be included in one of the following categories: economic models, status-attainment models and combined models. The other combined models in the literature proposed by Jackson [32], Chapman [33], Hanson and Litten’s [34], Kotler and Fox’s [35], and Hossler and Gallagher [36] have become the most widely accepted in enrolment behaviour [37][38][39][40][41][42][43][44][45]. These models are related to the various general consumer behaviour and decision making models such as those of Engle, Blackwell and Miniard [46][47], Perreault and McCarthy [48], Schiffman and Kanuk [51] and Kotler and Keller [52]. A comparison of these models is summarised on Table 1.

The decision to enrol in higher educational institutions has the potential to change an individual’s life, and therefore, is an important policy issue. However, the processes that influence this decision are lengthy and complicated. Student choice research has focused on factors that influence students’ ultimate decision to attend college. Several studies have investigated the factors that influence students in their decision to attend a university or college [51][52][54][55]. These studies can be viewed according to the stimulus-response model of consumer behaviour, where students are faced with external stimulus such as the institutionally controlled marketing vehicles [1], institutional attributes [56][57] and non controlled factors like parents and friends’ personal influence [58][59].

A range of research strongly discusses the dramatic effect parents have on a student’s choice of college [58][56][59][51][60]. Moogan and Baron’s [58] study found parental impact during the initial stages was greatest for non-mature pupils rather than mature pupils in the UK. Al-Yousef [60] revealed that parents’ level

of education effect on their involvement in their daughters' higher education choices in UK and Saudi Arabia. In Portugal, Raposo and Alves [51] underlined that parents have a strong influence in the choice process of selecting a university, as well as school teacher's recommendations. On the contrary, Domino's et al. [56] study discovered that parents had little or no influence at all in their child's decision of a college.

Table 1. Models of the Stages in Consumer Decision Making and Student Choice

Authors	Consumer Decision Making and Student Choice Model				
Engle, Blackwell and Miniard (1995; 2001)	Need Recognition	Information Search	Evaluation Process	Outlet selection and purchase	Post purchase process
Schiffman and Kanuk (2007)	Need Recognition	Pre-purchase Search	Evaluation of Alternatives	Purchase	Post purchase evaluation
Kotler and Keller (2009)	Problem recognition	Information Search	Evaluation Alternatives	Purchase Decision	Post purchase behaviour
Perreault and McCarthy (2005)	Need-want awareness	Search for information	Set Criteria and evaluate alternative solutions	Decide on solution	Purchase product
Chapman (1981)	Pre-search	Search	Application	Choice	Enrolment
Hanson and Litten (1982)	Deciding to go to College	Investigating Colleges	Application, Admission and Enrolment		
Jackson (1982)	Preference		Exclusion	Evaluation	
Hosler and Gallagher (1987)	Predisposition		Search	Choice	
Kotler and Fox (1985)	Initial decision to investigate college	Information gathering	Evaluation and elimination of choices to generate set of options	Choice	

Sources: Kusumawati [53]

Studies in Asian countries predominantly found that reference groups such as siblings, friends, peers, relatives, teachers and other influential people influence a student's choice of a university. Teachers from secondary school, and parents, for example, can exert a strong influence on students' decision-making in Thailand [57]. Wagner and Fard [55] also discovered that families, friends and peers have a strong influence on the student's choice of university in Malaysia. Furthermore, there is a significant relationship between influences from families, friends, peers and students' intention to study at a higher education institution. Yamamoto [59] reported that parents and friends are also considered as external influences to the student selection of a university in Turkey. However, in California, the qualitative study of Chicana students by Ceja [61] also contend that parents and siblings as influential people on their choice of university. These studies highlight the important role of protective agents, namely parents, siblings, family and relatives during the college choice process.

Previous studies on choosing a university have also explored the influence of personal factors. Raposo and Alves [52] noted that personal factors show the greatest positive influences on student choice of a university in Portugal. For Turkish students, Yamamoto [59] found that personal preference was the most influential factor in university selection. However, in this study, perception, learning, memory, motives, personality, emotions and attitudes were not discussed in detail. Dawes and Brown [62] detected that before choosing university, students went through three decision sets namely the students' awareness set, consideration set, and choice set. Individual background is also relevant to the student choice of a particular university according to Kim [63], Nora [64] and Dawes and Brown [62]. Nora [64] identified that all students, regardless of their ethnicity, were more likely to re-enrol if they felt accepted, safe, and happy at their colleges. However Tavares [54] revealed that in Portugal, students' choices seemed to be most influenced by gender and family background. The family's cultural and economic capital influenced not only the probability of entering higher education, but also students' choices of programme and type of institution.

In South Africa, geographic location is considered second most important, campus safety third [65]. In Portuguese, Tavares et al. [54] identified relevant institutional characteristics include teaching quality, prestige, infrastructure, library, computer facilities, location, quality of the curricula, scientific research quality, administrative support, extra-curricular factors (sports, leisure, canteens, etc.) and the availability of exchange programmes with foreign universities as influential factors. The importance of facilities on students' choice of institution was also noted by Price et al. [66] in UK context. He revealed that for many institutions, facilities, where provided to a high standard, were perceived as having an important influence on students' choice of institutions.

In terms of location, Raposo and Alves [52] and Dawes and Brown [62] pointed out that proximity to home is one of the strong influences in the choice process of selecting a university in Portugal and the UK. In addition, Paulsen [67] indicated that the closer to their home, the higher the university was ranked by students. Veloutsou et al. [6] also noted that the location of the university and the geography of its surroundings were some of characteristics that were of pivotal importance for students at various universities in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These institutional characteristics suggest that a university nearby is one of the important stimulators of a students' decision to further their education. In addition to those above, Wagner and Fard [55]

detected that in the Malaysian context the proposed factors such as physical aspect and facilities have significant relationships with a students' intention to study at a higher educational institution.

The reputation of the institution was found to be the most important factor in a student's decision of a place of further study in South Africa [68][65]. According to Ancheh et al. [69] recognition and reputation of the institutions are the strongest evaluative criteria used by students in their selection of higher education for both private universities and colleges in Malaysia. Briggs [51] also noted that reputation is one of ten factors that influence the selection decision by university students. Using the decision making model from Kotler and Keller [70], Moogan and Baron [58] exposed that at the problem recognition stage, reputation is important for students. Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton [6] also highlighted that in addition to the variable of courses and campus, the most important factor that candidates seek is related to the university's reputation. In Ghana, Afful-Broni and Noi-Okwei [71] identified that academic factors included availability of desired program, academic reputation and quality of teaching were the main reasons influencing the students to enrol at university. Furthermore, Ho and Hung [72] and Hoyt and Brown [30] argued that academic reputation is one of the college choice factors that determines the success of university marketing strategies.

In terms of job prospects, Băcilă et al. [73] and Băcilă [74] in a study among 12th grade pupils from 16 counties in Romania found that the most important factors when pupils select their faculty is job opportunities. However, for South Africa students employment prospect were listed as second important choice factor after quality of teaching [6]. While in Cambridge University recruitment, Whitehead, Raffan and Deaney [75] discovered that according to post-16 year old students the most popular reasons for wanting to enrol in university are the enjoyment of the subject, need for a degree for a career, better job, new subject areas and the enjoyment of student life. A similar situation was found in Western Australia [76] and in Turkey [77]. However, based on Tavares's et al. [54] study in Portuguese universities, 'vocation' or specialization was a stronger reason for programme choice than employment prospects.

Many researchers have investigated the influence of price in the choice of a university [56][55]. Although, for South African students, tuition fees are listed as the fourth of their important factors to study at university [65], Wagner and Fard [55] in Malaysia found that cost of education has significant relationships with a students' intention to study at a university. However, Domino's et al. [56] study in the US context, asserted that price is the most important factor from parents' point of view rather than a student's perception. In the US setting, Quigley et al. [78] discovered that there was a significant difference in response patterns of respondents between high discount and low discount treatment. High discounts were viewed more favourably than low discounts.

The impact of financial aid or financial packages that include scholarships and grants was examined thoroughly by Kim [63] in a survey of 5,136 undergraduates who began their post-secondary education in 1994 at University of California at Los Angeles. The results showed that financial aid has different effects on attending a first-choice college across racial groups, namely White and Asian American students. Govan et al. [79] and Hoyt and Brown [30] found in United States that financial aid was a considerable factor that influenced student choice of a university, while Beneke and Human [65] found that financial aid offered is only listed as the fifth important factor to study at university in South Africa.

Although previous studies unearthed numerous important factors considered by students when selecting a university, these factors have different level of importance for each country. Therefore, this current study uncovers the influential factors considered by Indonesian students when selecting an Indonesian public university.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of research questions, a qualitative study was chosen to provide further understanding of the factors influencing student choice of a higher education institution and extend the limited knowledge of students' decision making for choosing a public university in Indonesia. As the current research problem has not been studied in the Indonesian context, an exploratory approach to the research seems logical and justifiable [80].

The purposive sampling technique is used to choose the sample as participants of the semi-structured interviews. The participants chosen are those who would be able to provide the necessary information to answer the interview questions [81] regarding their choice factor when selecting a university. First-year undergraduate students at public university in Indonesia were chosen as participants of this study, with the justification that first-year students will still remember the process they underwent in deciding to continue to university. Much research on student college choice has been conducted on high school age students [82][76][6]. However, researchers have recently revealed that evaluation of student's choice process after they enter the university is more appropriate than previously suspected. For example, Brennan [83] suggested that students were surveyed during the early weeks of their first semester in order to limit the potential for cognitive dissonance influencing the type of information the student had access to and to attempt to limit the types of issues they felt were important in their decision.

This study involved 48 participants from Economics and Business study program in five public universities IN Indonesia. Its coverage is limited to autonomous and non-autonomous universities in Java and Sumatera, as these regions have more public universities than other regions.

Of 48 participants, 37 were female and the remaining were male students. Half of the participants represented Sumatra region and the other half represented Java region. Among the total participants, 22 students represented two autonomous universities, one each from Java and Sumatra, and the remaining 26 students represented two non-autonomous universities in Java and one non-autonomous university in Sumatra. Overall, participants age were 18 years and over.

The data collection instrument was designed in English, translated into Indonesian, and translated back into English language. The style of interview followed the Zikmund and Babin's [84] suggestion who revealed that semi-structured interviews usually come in written form and ask respondents for short essay responses to specific open-ended question. In this case, the researcher allowed respondents to write as much as they want. The advantages to this approach include an ability to address more specific issues.

The instrument was pre-tested with experts. Subsequently, some questions were deleted or combined with other questions in order to avoid participant fatigue and repetition. Reliability were checked during or after the first interview by modifying current questions and/or to generate new questions [83].

Data was analysed using thematic analysis [85][86] and followed the guidelines provided by Creswell [87]. Results were coded by the researcher and initially recorded as specific themes and indicators that are related. Initial open coding of the data gave way to axial coding, wherein codes were organised and sorted into categories based on their properties and similarities. Constant comparison was used throughout the coding process between participant responses and the coding, coding and categories, and categories and participant responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The exploratory study revealed emergent themes as factors considered by students when selecting an Indonesian public university. An initial set of 37 reasons for choosing a public university was subsequently recoded into 25 themes to avoid any overlapping. For example, 'university reputation', 'university achievement', 'university status' or 'university type' were placed under 'reputation' categories; 'relatives' to 'family'; 'tuition fee', 'cost of study', 'cost of living' to 'cost'.

Indonesian students revealed that they made decisions based on a combination of several factors. On average, participants mentioned at least three factors that affected their decision to choose a university rather than relying on only one factor. The result indicated that total expenses (cost) (40), reputation (36), proximity (33), job prospect (20), parents (18) are the five most importance choice criteria for Indonesian students. The next five factors that respondents mentioned most frequently to be, in order of decreasing frequency, are academic quality (17), friends (15), psychological (pre-selected motive) (13), facilities (11) and campus environment (11). Each of the top five factors is discussed below.

Most students mentioned cost as the most important factor. Students identified financial factors as tuition fee, cost of study, cost of living and other related expenses. Those students noted that financial support from parents or family limited their choice of university, as their financial sponsors may support or constrain them to study in certain destinations or study programs. One respondent mentioned that by choosing a university in the city where the living cost was relatively cheap, it made it more affordable for his/her family. Another respondent revealed that since she is not the only one who studied at the university and she still has two other siblings who also studied at school level, she therefore chose a public university because it was cheaper. Many respondents commented that since they aware that the cost for studying in a university was very high, they chose to enrol in public universities whose cost was more affordable and suitable for parents' economic status. Other respondents chose a public university by comparing the tuition fees at private universities and found them to be more expensive than public universities. One respondent stated that even though the cost of study was not a major consideration for his parent, he still preferred to study in public university rather than the private ones, with the intention that he can help to save the family's money. Two respondents also explained that influence from cost can be slotted into another category: "proximity". These are evidenced by the following two participants' comments.

Since I reside in the same city as this university, I would choose the university where I live in to save the cost and other travel expenses.

In this university, the costs are more affordable and also I live fairly close to this university, so it can save the costs to travel here.

Reputation

A university's reputation influenced attitudes toward choosing an institution in several ways, such as university status (whether public or private), university ranking, and university achievement. When selecting a university, students were influenced not only by their own perceptions and attitudes, but also by what other people thought. Commonly, university reputation related to the general prominence of an institution in the

public eye. For example, students and their parents believed that the local regional public university provided an excellent undergraduate education rather than private institutions.

In my opinion, this university has a good image in the community, producing the best graduates.

Others differentiated between public and private universities. Most of them mentioned that their public university was accredited rather than a private university; therefore, the quality is highly superior. University rankings affected students' and parents' perceptions of institutional quality directly. On these perceptions, two respondents said, *"The rankings reflected the quality of universities"*.

Many parents and students placed great emphasis on attending top-ranked universities, because these universities helped students to obtain the best jobs. They also related the top-ranked universities with the accreditation. For example, two respondents commented:

For me this university has a good credibility and quality. Accreditation and ranking are useful guidelines for obtaining a good job.

After getting information that this university ranked number four in Indonesia, I considered this as an important factor when making my decision.

The other perceptions about a university's reputation affected student's perceptions of the probability that they will be accepted by the university of their choice. Students assumed that reputation is related to the level of competition, as they perceived that the higher level of competition, the higher reputation of the university. In discussing that situation, respondent said:

To enrol at the public university, it is very competitive and many students are interested to study at the public university

Some students perceived that university reputation rely upon university achievement as a signal when making a decision to pursue a university. A couple of students commented that university achievement can be seen from the grade requirement for entry, lecturer capability and learning methods used..

Proximity

The location of the campus near home was the most important criteria for 70 percent of the respondents. Not surprisingly, this factor was of highest importance to those students who lived in or close to a public university. In this vein, the importance of residential location in determining educational institution was apparent. Going to a nearby university allows students to more easily maintain family ties. The common reason was they want to stay near their family so that they could make contact and visit their family frequently. Respondents commented:

The distance is not too far from the region where I came from, so it allows me to go home on weekends.

Fortunately, I came from the district near the university, so I just keep close to my hometown and still able to contact my parents.

If the university near to my house, I will rarely be late to attend lectures.

Some students also felt more secure while not too far away from their family residence. This thought related to the issue "close to my family". Below is an example of the comments:

It's only a short distance to my house; I could go home if something unexpected happens to my family.

No "out-of town" campuses were represented in the respondents' responses. In these responses they followed parental advice and opinion to choose a local university which close to their home. Two students mentioned:

My parents did not give permission for me to continue studying out of the province where I live.

My parents did not allow me to study far away from them.

The students considered accommodation and food expenses as a significant factor in the choice process of the location of university. The location of universities is likely to be especially significant for disadvantaged students, since there are many financial benefit associated with living at home during study, such as saving on rent, food, utilities and travel and taking advantage of cheaper tuition at a local public university. The important issue was "they were able to live at home" and "save the money for rent and food". It encouraged students to consider choosing a university close to home. One student illustrated this thought as follows:

I do not need to spend extra money for rent or pay for food because I stay with my parents.

The result suggests that students who live in close proximity to a university would apply to that one rather than a more prestigious university farther away.

In contrast, one respondent who choose to study in another region wanted to develop their self confidence to be able to live independently while away from their parents:

The more far away from home more challenging for me, so I can practice to be independent, have sense of responsibility and to become mature.

Job prospects

One of the important reasons for participating in higher education was the desire to acquire a higher qualification for a specific job or career. Other motives, such as "to increase earnings" or "to get a prestige job"

were considered important by some of respondents. There was a strong believe among students that they expected to “better themselves” by going into higher education. They mentioned that it would not just lead to a better job, but a better paid occupation and better choice of job. Students mentioned:

The main purpose for studying at a university is to get a job in the future.

This university graduates successful graduates who get prestige job.

Even though many students were still vague about their career or job plan after graduation, many appeared to be realistic about how “good” a job they might get in the short term. There was an overwhelming view that higher education was a necessary vehicle to a better paid and more secure job was through obtaining more qualifications. In commenting this evident, a student mention that:

By studying in this qualified university, the future is guaranteed.

One respondent perceived that by going to this university, it was related to their interest in studying a particular subject and their desire to acquire a higher qualification for a specific career.

The job prospects of this course are good. I am very interested in my programs.

Some of the students explored the issue of the opportunity to get a job between public and private university. They perceived that by studying at the public university, the chance to get a better job was higher than attending a private university, as evident from respondents’ comments:

Typically companies will consider graduates from a public university compared to private universities.

Usually, graduates from public universities find it easier to get a job. This is what society assumed.

Parents

Parents seemed to be the main influential stimulating students’ choice of a university. At this stage, there is not sufficient evidence to pinpoint the most influential person within the parents, whether father or mother. Interestingly, most of respondents mentioning parental influence meant both their father and mother were equally influential in the family, in terms of the decisions to study at a university.

Some respondents mentioned that their parents convinced them, since their childhood, that they should choose a university near their hometown rather than in other regions. As some students were first child in the family or they were the only one daughter in their family going to a local university was important.

Since I am the only child in the family, therefore my parents asked me not to study far away from our city

In this sense, their parents required them to study close to their home to make it easier to monitor and to help them if necessary. This thought made the students reluctant to choose another university outside their hometown or their city, as they perceived that their parents would have not supported their decision.

All of respondents were financially dependent on their parents. Financial support was the most frequently mentioned parental influence and was directly related to the decision to study at a university, choice of city, and choice of academic course. Some students expressed this view by saying that they followed their parents’ suggestions because their parents were the only one financial sponsors of their study. The data showed that expectations from parents had a stronger impact on choice of university when students are financially dependent on their parents. One student commented:

On any condition, the source of funding for my education comes from my parents.

Parental influence extended far beyond financial matters. This type influence related to the parents encouragement, which relied upon their previous experiences. Parents’ ability to relate to their own personal experiences was powerful way for parents to influence their children’s educational aspirations. Parents used their own personal experiences as a way of suggesting a better life. Sometimes parents used their poor condition to encourage their children to see beyond their own reality, namely, to view school as a vehicle to create a more positive future.

I chose this university in order to continue the obsession of my parents who did not have chance to enrol at a public university.

For many students, their parents experience became stories of empowerment and motivation. They stated that because of their parents they now can reach up to this point. The power of parents’ experiences as an influential tool in the development of educational aspirations was illustrated in the responses of two following participants.

My parents’ suggestion was quite important, since it motivated me to succeed in my studies.

With the support from my parents, it will simplify my journey during my studies.

In the above examples, participants interpreted parents’ experience and stories as sources of motivation. For Indonesian students, these messages of encouragement and support were important in motivating them to achieve and continue their education beyond high school.

Many respondents reported that they were pressured by the parents’ expectation prior to their final decision to study at a university. Most of the students commented that parents’ expectation had a great impact on their decision to study at a particular university. However, in doing so, they have considered their parents’ wishes in order to satisfy their expectation.

By studying at the university which my parents wanted, it made them happy and gave them pride

While the above results matched categories previously found in the literature, respondents mentioned other important factors that influenced them to select their existing university. The factors, in descending order are: accreditation (10), course suitability (9), competition (7), family (7), high school teacher influence (6), alumni networking (5), interaction (4), scholarship (3), variety of course offered (3), safety (2), promotion (2), easy to postgraduate in overseas (1), community perceptions (1), God (1) and luck (1).

When respondents were asked on their perceptions of influential people in the decision to select a university, they mentioned six types of influential people with seven different roles. The six types of influential people that respondents mentioned are parents and family (47), friends (including peers, boyfriend and community) (35), teacher (26), themselves (10), promotion (4) and others (including senior in high school, current students at the university and alumni) (3). The roles that those influential people played are funding, motivator (encourager), advisor, role model, decision maker, siblings/friends studying in the same university, information source. Further, participants mentioned that even though the decision was influenced by others, the final decision to select a university was theirs.

DISCUSSION

One of the important factors that influenced Indonesian students' perceptions of their university choice process was total expenses (cost). Students took into consideration cost and affordability. Students made a rational decision by considering their social economic factor before making a choice, which is consistent with economic models of choice proposed by Becker [88] who argued that students are rational and make careful cost-benefit decisions by maximising their utility and minimise their risks in order to obtain the best choice for them [52]. In addition, this finding supports most of previous research which assumes that a student makes their actual application decisions by comparing the benefits and costs of all possible alternatives [89][90][91]. The result also supports earlier findings in most of developing countries such as in Thailand [57], in Malaysia [55], in South Africa [65], and in Turkey [77].

Indonesian students were also influenced by the academic reputation of the university. The need to study at the prestigious university is related with interest in studying at the public university rather than to the private university. This finding is consistent with expectations in that if one's desire is to study at a reputable university, there is an opportunity to find a job easily after graduation or guarantees a well-paid job in the student's area of study after graduation. This remains true as indicated by earlier studies [92][93][94][95][96][97][98][99]. This finding concurs with Conard and Conard' [90] study who found that ability to get a good job after graduation was the most important factor as part of the academic reputation.

The location of the campus was significantly important for respondents. Respondents felt secure when they could study at a university near home. This line of thought parallels Archer's et al [100], Pugsley's [101], Reay's [102] who underscored that students considered their emotional security while participating in the 'risky' and unfamiliar world of higher education by choosing a nearby university, especially for those who are first-generation educated and from working-class families. Choosing a nearby university also allowed students to keep close to their family members, friends, and significant others, as supported by earlier studies [23][103][104][105][106]. A survey in Iowa high school seniors from rural communities in 1994 by Johnson, Elder and Stern [107] who found that almost 75 percent of respondents thought it was somewhat to very important to live near parents or relatives also supports this current research findings. On the contrary, one respondent chose to study far away from their family as part of learning to be independent. In parallel to the views of Christie [108] "the geographical mobility marks a significant stage in the transition that young people make to adulthood and independence, bringing with it the opportunity to access a new city and a new lifestyle". In this sense, leaving home is an accepted and valued part of the university experience.

Career preparation was also an important factor. Perceived future success can be important factor related to the potential future earnings. In this vein, students perceived that financial considerations, including future earnings, have become a much stronger motivation for attending college. Interestingly, the intention to succeed and to "make more money" was more likely to be cited as an important reason for enrolling in tertiary study. This result also confirms findings in several studies [76][30][29]

As expected, the influence of parents was an important factor in deciding a university. This result corroborates previous finding from Hu and Hossler [109] who found that students were most influenced by family input and finance-related factors. The findings also concur with Ceja [61][110] that parents were key in encouraging their children to pursue higher education.

Students believed that parents' major roles related to the source of funding, besides encouragement in their choice of a university. The cost of undertaking study at a university is an important issue for undergraduate students. This is consistent with prior findings that for undergraduate study, the burden of fees and living expenses falls on the parents. Results from the qualitative study by Pimpa (103) support this, and he identified

that beside finance, the influence from family could be categorised into four others different role include information, expectation, persuasion, and competition. This finding also inline with previous research [31][111][112] which revealed that parental encouragement as the strongest factor predicting students' planning for university.

As predicted, the role of friends in the decision making process as the same entrant affected college enrolment [113], but the mechanism in unclear. This findings parallel with prior research [113][114] which revealed that students more likely to attend college if they found that their classmates in high school also attend to the college. This research also found evidence that the preferences of classmates influence individual college choices in terms of encouragement, source of information, even as competitor in the enrolment market. It seems to suggest that the information provided by family and friends through word of mouth communication are more believable since they are perceived as reliable and not motivated by profit.

Prior research shows that three variables are consistently rated as important to prospective students [26][39][66][6][56]: course, location and reputation. While reputation and proximity (location) were considered by students of Indonesian Public Universities in this current research, their priorities were different. In addition, cost emerged as the most important factor. The course suitability in this current research was only placed in position 12 out of the 25 factors that influenced the decision to choose a university. This result is contrast with earlier findings by Price et al. [66], Maringe [1] and Whitehead et al. [75] who revealed that the course is often cited as the most important reason for choosing a university.

Several factors that influenced students' choice of university with different level of priority have been found from previous studies. For example, Briggs [51] identified academic reputation, distance from home, location, own perception, graduate employment, social life nearby, entry requirements, teaching reputation, quality of faculty, information supplied by university, and research reputation as the top ten of the most crucial factors. Pimpa and Suwannapirom [57] found the five key influencing factors were personal attitude, curriculum, potential employment, attractiveness of campus, and tuition fees. Raposo and Alves [52] found that proximity to home, cost, parents and school teacher's recommendation are the four most essential factors. Yamamoto [59] found that personal preference, parents, university entrance exam scores, university ranking, advisors, and friends as the six most influential factors. Veloutsou et al. [6] found university reputation, course and campus as the three most critical factors. Soutar and Turner [76] found that course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects and teaching quality as the four most important factors. Even though some of those above findings matched attributes found in the current research, respondents in this current research mentioned an extra factor that influenced them to choose a university. This extra factor was that by studying in the public universities, it would make easier to students to do postgraduate study overseas.

Findings of this research signify that expectations held by undergraduate students that choice criteria are influential in the choice stage of selecting an institute of higher education. According to the result, present and future students expect good quality products and have specific views on what characteristics are important to them. In brief, this exploratory study used an appropriate methodology to establish a basis for later quantitative research.

Implication of findings

This aim of this research was to investigate the perceptions of Indonesian students when selection a public university in regard with their choice criteria. Respondents in this study exhibited many responses similar to those identified in the review of literature when choosing a university. These included cost, reputation, and proximity which were key drivers when selecting an institute of higher education. The other common criteria are job prospect, parents and quality.

These results suggest that the criteria to studying at a public university for potential undergraduates are vary and complex. The implication is that universities may addresses those important attributes more effectively so that can influence the choice process among potential students. The results, however, do not imply that all Indonesian university reveal the similar of their student choice criteria.

The results, which confirmed choice criteria found in the literature, also discovered other attributes not evident in the extant literature. Among those choice factors, the opportunity to continue at postgraduate level is one of the important criteria with least mentioned by Indonesian students although it is note that this requires further investigation. The findings imply that the factor mentioned by Indonesian students might be unique to Indonesia higher education context. The result suggests that universities should take into account of this factor for attracting prospective students.

Although, this current study has revealed several important factors considered by Indonesian students when selecting a university that both support and contradict previous research, these factors have different level of importance as these criteria may be unique to Indonesia. In addition to determining what is important to Indonesian students when they choose universities, it would help universities to promote their institutions and to have a greater knowledge about the underlying motivations of students for furthering study in higher education. However, this result should be interpreted with caution given the smaller sample size and qualitative methodology.

Limitations and future researchs

This research has limitations that restrict the generalisation of its findings and open up directions for future research. Firstly, only public universities in two of the most populated regions in Indonesia were investigated. This means that the information gathered and the conclusions reached may require further testing in less populated regions. Secondly, the study only conducted at public universities and did not cover institutes and other higher education institutions because they are different type of higher education institution.

This study was exploratory in nature, therefore deeper analysis of qualitative interviews followed by quantitative study are planned in addition to addressing a number of related research questions such as to determine factors that have the greatest influence on Indonesian students' choice in the selection of an Indonesian Public University. The determinants discussed above also warrant further investigation in a quantitative manner. It is also important to determine if there is a difference in the student choice criteria of selecting an Indonesian Public University between an autonomous and non-autonomous university. This attribute is specific to the both type of universities. Future research in this area is recommended to determine if there is a distinctive factor occur.

Overall, the findings, although limited in scope and depth, may provide some light to service marketing arms of higher education institutions in developing their marketing agenda. Consideration should be given to the important attributes not only for those factors that most significant, but also other important factors which impacting on prospective students' decision making process.

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