

Factors Influencing Jordanian EFL Students' Choice of a University

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Abstract:

This study aimed at identifying the reasons behind choosing a university by Jordanian undergraduate EFL students. A random sample of (425) male and female students were invited to answer a web-survey question: "What are your reasons for choosing the university in which you are learning English now?" The participating students were all Jordanian first and second year level enrolled in undergraduate English Language and Literature programs during the academic year 2012-2013 in five major state universities in the country. The written responses were analyzed thematically and the major reasons for selecting a university for learning English were identified and ranked in order of importance. The results showed that choosing a university in Jordan for learning English is influenced by (12) factors. The basic factors that received most importance were reputation of the institution; cultural and social considerations; family role; location of institution; learning opportunities; academic staff; employability and future plans. Other marginal factors were found to be campus beauty, size and safety; availability of specialization; experience of other students; personal interest in the language; and type of institution.

Keywords: factors; English; university; Jordan; students; higher education; EFL

Introduction

There is now more demand on higher education than any time in the past, particularly in developing countries such as Jordan. In fact, in a country that is regarded as poor in natural resources, higher education becomes a straightforward way out to boost the ailing economy. Therefore, increasing pressure is being exerted on universities to accommodate more students and adjust to standards of quality assurance. The number of students attending universities in Jordan has increased from (77841) to (218900) within the period between 2001 and 2007. The average rate of students joining higher education institutions reached 40% which is more than the regional average. More public universities were opened and now Jordan has ten state universities. Also, the rate of students attending private universities has increased recently. Between the years 2000-2006 the rate of joining the twelve private universities reached (18 %) annually where the numbers jumped from (36642) to (55744). At the same time, the rate of students attending community colleges declined from (30.000) to (26215). This shows more demand on university education in the country. It is expected that the number of university students would reach 92000 annually with the year 2013 where it was (50469) students in 2005 at the undergraduate level. (Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2007, from Wikipedia).

The decision to select a particular institution of higher education is by no means a simple task. In fact, it could turn to be a complex process. This is because of the very wide range of options that may be available in varying degrees. We also observe that colleges and universities have become more competitive in their recruitment of potential students. Even in big public universities, students have to pay considerable fees for their education which led to changes in the way university education is largely viewed. Going to college has become now an enterprise and the students are seen as consumers. This may complicate the process of selecting a university or a particular specialization. Therefore, we can assume the decision to join a particular university or program as a problem facing students and their families. University education is not an end in itself. It is rather a means to achieve personal goals. Therefore, any university degree is bound to be judged by the relative degree of its marketability. This is important because policy makers need insights into the needs and expectations of students and their sponsors. Better program designs can result on the basis of such insights.

Research Problem

The selection criteria pertaining to university study deserves continuous research. This is because many variables may come in contact. The complexity of deciding to enter a certain university or program may arise from the many factors that one can think of. In fact, we may conceive the issue as academic, social, cultural, or even financial. This study aims to identify possible important factors that may guide or influence the choice a particular higher learning institution for learning English in Jordan. The idea for this research came as a response to a casual spontaneous statement made by one of my students in a writing course. The statement was: *"I really had a really hard time picking a university to study in"*. The statement provoked me to investigate the issue further by attempting to understand factors that guide EFL students in choosing a university for studying English.

There is a clear gap in the EFL literature, especially with reference to the Jordanian context, as too how or why students select institutions of higher education. Therefore, it is hoped that this research prompts other researchers to widen the scope of their research interests to include criteria and factors influencing language learners' choices of academic institutions in

pursuit of their aspirations. The question of the study was formulated as follows: What are the possible factors that may drive Jordanian EFL college students in their selection of a university?

Literature Review

The subject of higher education institutions choice criteria has received considerable research attention. Beswick (1989) surveyed (227) freshmen using a questionnaire in Alberta. The findings showed that parents were the most influential persons affecting the process. Important variables in the choice of a university among the students included the image of the university and the program in addition to the location of the institution and the kind of courses offered.

Similarly, Kallio (1995) reported that graduate students' decisions to select a university were influenced by criteria such as "residency status, quality and other academic environment characteristics, work-related concerns, spouse considerations, financial aid, and the campus social environment". On the other hand, (Price et al. 2003) pointed out that the choice of a university is influenced by factors such as facilities provided.

Catley (2004) found that the reputation of the course was so important in deciding where to apply in the case of law students. Other considerations in the choice of a course were entry requirements and quality of teaching. In addition, the study indicated that "the position of the university in league tables, the attractiveness of the university campus and the quality of the sports, library and computing facilities" were significant variables. Interestingly, the students showed interest in factors such as the university location, city attractiveness, and the quality of nightlife. Moreover, the study showed that the proximity of the university to the student's home was an important factor. In addition, there was an effect coming from recommendations by friends, family, school or the career office.

Pimpa (2004) investigated career choices among Thai students in relation to family effects. The family was shown to have influences in relation to variables such as "finance, information, expectation, persuasion, and competition". On the other hand, Anderson et al. (2006) considered the effect of role model practitioners and career counseling on pharmacy students' choice of pharmacy. A sample of (463) students participated in a survey and the results showed that most of the students said they received encouragement to pursue pharmacy. It was found that most often a family member or friend provided the encouragement. The students were also frequently encouraged by pharmacists or pharmacy students to study pharmacy. Potential earning power was found to be a factor for a majority of students. However, career-day events appeared to have a minimal effect on student choices.

Maringe (2006) analyzed factors affecting students' choice of university in the Southampton University Partnership Scheme. The survey involved (387) students and the results indicated that the students were adopting a rather 'consumerist approach' in their selection of a university. It may be interesting to note that factors such as employment and career prospects were significantly preferred over interest in the subject.

Further insights may be found in Kankey and Quarterman (2007) who examined choice factors among softball players. They collected data through a questionnaire covering (196) students in the state of Ohio. The results showed that softball players' choice of a college or university were affected by availability of "academic program, head coach, career opportunities after graduation, social atmosphere of the team, and the amount of financial aid". Less important factors included "friends, affiliation of the university, media coverage, Web site, sponsorships, high school coach, and ethnic or gender ratio of the university".

Keshishian et al. (2007) assessed the choice of major in pharmacy vs. non-pharmacy college undergraduate students enrolled in St. John's University (Jamaica, NY). Variables analyzed included gender and cultural background. However, the results section in the abstract did not actually include any outcomes as most of it was detailing methodology. The Canadian context may be seen through the study of Wang (2009) who surveyed (600) international students in Canadian universities. The study concluded that factors influencing students' choice of university varied according to different regions. Furthermore, Trend (2009) studied influences on future UK higher education students' perceptions and educational choices across Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences. Factors relating to family and social class were reported to exert a dominant influence on students' choices.

Afful-Broni, and Noi-Okwei, (2010) reported on undergraduate students of selecting university education in a Sub-Saharan African University and argued that the selecting a particular institution of higher learning is not for the individual alone but also the whole of Ghana as a nation. Another African study is Semela (2010) who investigated the choice of Physics among university students in Ethiopia. It was found that "enrolment in physics was the lowest and applicants who were assigned to the physics undergraduate programs were those whose mean score in Ethiopian National Higher Education Entrance Examination was the lowest compared to any other group".

Hua-Li et al. (2010) found that discipline of study had only little impact on Taiwanese and Norwegian students' preferences. Moreover, the results showed that personal advice was most preferred factor among Taiwanese students when choosing university. On the other hand, Ming (2010) explored students' college choice decision in Malaysia. Factors affecting choice of a university included "location, academic program, college reputation, educational facilities, cost, and availability of financial aid, employment opportunities, advertising, higher education institutions' representatives and campus visits."

Also, Blackburn (2011) identified five factors influencing college choice and these were: "repute, syllabus, quality, facilities and career". Similarly, Tin et al. (2011) examined households' criteria in selecting higher education institutions in Malaysia. Factors significant in choice decision were identified as: "financial aid, safety of the campus, academic reputation, university image and accommodation". Further, the study emphasized three dimensions in explaining the decision criteria of Malaysian households. These were: personal factors, socialization and campus, program and cost."

On the other hand, Lee and Chatfield (2011) analyzed factors affecting choice of college by hotel management students in the USA. The results indicated factors such as school characteristics, financial aid, degree benefit, environment, facilities, family support, aspirations, cost, career preparation, and media. Within the UK context, Rodrigues et al. (2011) reported on factors that influence student pursuit of science careers and in particular variables such as the gender, ethnicity, family and friends. The study examined (536) Scottish pupils' perceptions regarding intention to choose careers in science in relation to factors such as family, friends, gender and ethnicity. The results revealed that the most significant factor influencing pupils' career choices in Scotland was perception of whether parents wanted them to select a career in science.

Moreover, Law and Yuen (2012) examined choice of accounting among students in Hong Kong. The results showed that parental influence was the most significant factor in selecting accounting as major. Intrinsic interest was found to be the second most important influencing factor in choosing accounting. Furthermore, Shahid et al. (2012) used a qualitative

approach through in-depth interviews. The study found that word of mouth was very influential. The least important factor in the process of selecting a university seemed to be the factor of marketing and advertisement.

Recently, Oon and Subramaniam (2013) examined school students' in Singapore in terms of their intentions to study physics. The study involved (1076) physics students selected from (16) secondary schools and junior colleges. The results revealed that physics was perceived as a difficult subject. The students viewed school physics as relevant. Also, the students viewed their physics teachers as a strong factor in fostering interest in physics. The students valued highly the role of lab work, 'enrichment' activities, and textbooks in encouraging them to develop a liking for physics. It was also reported that the students perceived parents and peers at school as having negative attitudes towards physics.

Finally, Jafari and Aliemaili (2013) researched factors influencing the selection of a university by high school students in Iran. Findings showed that economic factors, university related factors, personal factors, and social factors influence student's choice of university respectively.

Having reviewed previous research in this field, it comes as a surprise that the EFL context, particularly in the Arab and Jordanian contexts, has actually received no attention by researchers as to the question: What affects EFL university students' choice of a university for learning English? It appears to be a case of neglect that requires immediate response.

Method

(500) male and female first and second year university students in Jordanian state universities who were enrolled in undergraduate bachelor English language and literature programs were asked via a web survey (using face-book and emails) to answer the question: What are your reasons for choosing the university in which you are learning English now? The sample was randomly selected to represent five major public universities in the country. The students' responses were collected by email. Students were told about the purpose of the research and were told that their answers would be treated confidentially. The responses rate was (85 %). The number of students who responded was (425). The students' answers came in writing as short answers to the research question. The written statements were analyzed manually and were categorized thematically. Frequencies and percentages were counted for each factor influencing students' decisions to select a university for learning English. The factors were ranked in order of importance measured by percentage of students identifying them. Interesting and significant quotations were selected as illustrative examples. Names of individual universities were kept anonymous so that no comparisons can be made.

Results

The data in this study revealed the types of factors that guided the target EFL students in selecting a university of their higher education. In what follows, the major criteria or factors behind choosing a university for studying English are listed in accordance to relative importance. This ranking is measured by the number and percentage of students who mentioned the particular factor in their reports.

Table 1 Ranked factors influencing EFL students' choice of a university

Percentage	Number of Students (out of 425)	Factor	Ranking Order

94.11	400	Reputation of Institution	1
88.94	378	Cultural / Social Interaction	2
86.11	366	Family & Relatives	3
82.82	352	Location	4
78.58	334	Learning Opportunities	5
72.94	310	Academic Staff	6
69.41	295	Employability and Future Plans	7
54.82	233	Campus (size, beauty, safety)	8
49.41	210	Availability of Specialization	9
35.29	150	Experience of Other Students	10
31.76	135	Personal Interest in English	11
22.35	95	Type of University (public vs. private)	12

Factor 1: Reputation of the Institution

The great majority of the students (n= 400; 94.11%) focused on the reputation of the academic institution as the number one factor that impacts choice of a university for learning English. The students written statements stressed the image of the university. This is shown in the name and history of the institution. All statements on this factor were grouped for a thematic and key word analysis. The results show clearly a strong inclination to choose a university with a name in the society. A number of key words were frequently used by the students highlighting this factor. The following key words are illustrative examples:

"reputation; great; mother university; respectful; number one; ancient; oldest; international; nice; best; famous; strongest; hard to enter; perfect; good; most important; well known; excellent; precious". The following are but some illustrative quotations:

"And known as the strongest in teaching English specially"

"The certifiuate from the University of ... is different from other Universete"

"University of is a unique educational university"

"People from the hole world join it to study in this precious university"

"It contains on a great crow of professors that give the university richness like no other"

"I attended University of for what it had graduated of an excellent students. Doctors, engeneers and many other specialisest"

"Because I am in the oldest and ancient university"

"It is one of the respectful universities"

"I attended University of for what it had graduated of an excellent students. Doctors, engeneers and many other specializest"

Factor 2: Cultural and Social Interaction

The second factor in ranking (n=378; 88.94%) was cultural and social interaction opportunities that the campus provides. The EFL students see the university as a venue for socializing and interacting with other people. The key words / phrases that were used in reference to this factor were as follows:

Meet; share; cultures; see; friends; be together; hangout; people; foreign students;

Illustrating this factors were expressions and statements like this:

"Learn about other cultures"

"To meet my friends"

"Share daily gossip with them"

"See a lot of people"

"A lot of my friends from the school choosed this university so we can be together"

"To meet my friends and hangout with them"

"To know different thing about other cultures"

"always in the faculty many foreign students that we can stand with them and improve our languages ...benefities from their experience in their culture."

"also have a very cultural stuff of workers that we can get knowledge and benefiets from them"

Factor 3: Family

Coming third was the factor of family involvement in the selection process of a university for learning English. This factor received (n=366; 86.11%) of the total number of students. The key words or phrases that were identified in connection with this factor were: *mother; family; relatives; parents; and father*. The following quotations may serve as good examples of this factor:

"My mother worked here for 20 years"

"My relatives told me about how beautiful it is"

"My family attend me to the ...(name of University)"

"My parents want from me to go the university to be a girl who has a good education"

"My family hope to me to attend this university"

"Since I was a kid, I kept coming to the University with my mother, she studied English Literature. That's why I am here now studying what I love and where I always dreamed of."

"My mom used always to tell me about her experience in (...) The friends she made...The adventures she been through...How she worked hard to get a good average"

"My mother and my father entered it.... I saw their education is very strong so I started thinking to enter it"

"My all family learned in this university."

"My father told me you should to study in university of...."

Factor 4: Location

The fourth factor in ranking was the location of the university, particularly with reference to the place of living of the student's family. The number of students who mentioned this factor in their statements was (n=352; 82.82%). Many key words indicated this factor such as: *close; my houses; place; home; Amman; located; far; near; away from; place*. In what follows, some statements are quoted to illustrate the location factor:

"Close to my house"

"It placed in Amman"

"It located close to my home"

"Not far from my home"

"The nearest to my home"

"Near my home"

"because I wanted to study away from my family"

"near to my home"

"It is very near from my place of living"

Factor 5: Learning Opportunities

Interest in knowledge and education at the university level came as factor number 5. This factor received (n=334; 78.58%) of the total sample. This was reflected in a number of key words which were frequently used by the students to indicate this variable in their choice of a university. Examples of these key words / phrases are: *learn; information; expand; get knowledge; increase; study; new things; good education; enhance; know more*. The following are illustrative quotations:

"Teaching me lessons like how to manage things in my life and solve problems"

"Expand my information"

"Learn new things"

"I have always wanted to know more"

"Have knowledge"

I can get knowledge"

"To learn"

"Increase my knowledge in everything"

"study and learn new things"

"I want good education that can enhance my knowledge"

Factor 6: Academic Staff

Coming in sixth place was the reputation of the academic staff of the university. This factor was mentioned by (n=310; 72.94%) of the participating students. The key words / phrases that indicated this factor were: *teachers; doctors; people; efficient; professors; and best*. The following are some illustrative examples:

"Has strong teachers.."

"The teachers make the student strong and full of knowledge."

"Amazing people to deal with"

"Efficient doctors"

"The doctors...At (...) are well known"

"Most people know it contains the best doctors as well."

"Has good professors."

"They have good method to teach students"

"It has a great professors and management"

Factor 7: Employability and Future Plans

The seventh factor affecting choice of university was the degree to which the institution is marketable in the labor market. Students wrote about their plans for the future and mentioned how their university education is influenced by this criterion. This factor was mentioned by (n=295; 69.41%) of the sample. Many key words / phrases realized this factor: These were: *finish; successful; weapon; plan; achieve; goals; graduation; career; future; want to be; aims; interview; employment; job; and companies*. The following are some quotations that show how the students were thinking while selecting a university.

"Finish the master degree successfully"

"To be a doctor in this university"

"I want to be a successful girl"

"I think the certificate with the girl or lady as a weapon in her hand"

"After graduation, I can start my life as what I planned"

"To help me achieve my goals"

"And for my carrier in future"
"Then get a good job in futre"
"I have an aims which I want to acheave it in my life"
"I want to be a journalist on the future"
"When I graduate I will work fast because I am in (name of University)"
"At the interview the viewers going to ask me about from where I graduated because half the percentage of employment depend on that."
"To help me to find a job"
"And all companies accept you to work with them if you are graduated from it"

Marginal Factors

Receiving less attention by the students were other factors such as campus (size, beauty, safety) (n=233; 54.82%); availability of specialization (n=210; 49.41); experiences of other students (n=%), interest in the English language (n=%), and type of university (public vs. private) (n=%). The students used expressions such as the following:

Campus (size, beauty, safety): (n=233; 54.82%)

"Beautiful from inside"
"The green trees"
"My relatives told me about how beautiful it is"
"attractive views and trees...we can set under them, relax after the stress of the lectures and exams"
"there is no strikes and fights in it"
"they will be safe in this university"
"big university"
"The largest one in Amman"

Availability of Specialization: (n=210; 49.41)

"I was accepted in the specialization which I want"
"The major that I wan to study exists exclusively at (Name of university)"
"It has many majors"
"It has the specialty that I wanted to study"
"It teaches several courses such as scientific and literature branches"

Experiences of Other Students: (n=150; 35.29%)

"I asked a lot of universities students about this, most of them advised me to apply to the University of....."

Personal Interest in English: (n=135; 31.76%)

"I like to learn foreign language and English language"
"I wanted to learn English more and more"
"The English language is very important for me"
"now studying what I love"
"I love my forighn languages"

Type of University (public vs. private): (n=95; 22.35%)

"I don't want to enter a private university.."
"public university is lower fees.."
"Government university is more respectful.."

Discussion

The literature review indeed revealed many insights with reference to particular countries or subject specializations. It is surprising that none of the previous studies reviewed pertains to English as a major. It is also strange that neither in Jordan nor in other Arab contexts this kind of research has been attempted. This study seems to be the first of its kind in Jordan in relation to the EFL situation. The factors governing students' choice of a university are reported in this study in a ranking order. The methodology adopted here is qualitative utilizing students' perceptions of factors as expressed in written short reports. As the pressure is increasing for quality higher education in the country, it becomes essential to know how decisions are made regarding university choice. There are certainly a complex host of variables that come in mind when a student or family considers the path for further learning. In this research, the criteria behind choosing a university for learning English are explored by directly asking the students enrolled in EFL programs to report on their own reasons to join a particular institution of higher education. Many students said in their reports that the selection of a place to learn for higher education is not an easy process. They see the choice of a university in connection with their future.

The top factor in choosing a university by Jordanian EFL students was clearly the reputation of the institution. The great majority of the students (n= 400; 94.11%) focused on the reputation of the academic institution as the number one factor that impacts choice of a university for learning English. The Jordanian EFL students stressed the image of the university as a guiding factor. The name of the university as perceived by members of the community members seems to be based on notions like history of the institution. Being a relatively old university seems to be favored by a great number of students. In addition, students seem to appreciate the university standing as an international place of learning measured by the percentage of students from other nations.

The second factor in the ranking was cultural and social interaction opportunities that the campus provides (n=378; 88.94%). These results show the importance students attach to their relationships. At this relatively young age, students want to make sure that campus life provides the best opportunities for developing friendships and cultural growth. The family involvement in the selection process comes as no surprise. In a closely tied conservative society like Jordan, family members and close relatives do interfere in the choice of a particular university. This factor received (n=366; 86.11%) of the total number of students. Moreover, the role of the mother was particularly highlighted by the students of this study.

The fourth factor in ranking was the location of the university, particularly with reference to the place of living of the student's family. The number of students who mentioned this factor in their statements was (n=352; 82.82%). Interest in knowledge and education at the university level came as factor number 5. This factor received (n=334; 78.58%) of the total sample. This is a purely intrinsic orientation among the students of this study. Students think of the extent to which a university may satisfy their desire to learn and gain knowledge. It may be interesting to find that the students in this study showed some degree of maturity as they clearly valued education in intrinsic terms. They think of a university in terms of personal development where knowledge and learning are vital considerations. Students and their families do pay for their higher education and this may justify their concern for quality of campus learning.

Coming in sixth place was the reputation of the academic staff of the university. This factor was mentioned by (n=310; 72.94%) of the participating students. Academic staff members

are also part of the reputation factor stressed in a number of studies. This goes with program or syllabus quality where the methods used by the staff members make a difference.

The seventh factor affecting choice of university was the degree to which the institution is marketable in the labor market. This factor was mentioned by (n=295; 69.41%) of the sample. Employability and future plans do affect students' choices of a particular academic institution. Other less significant factors have been also identified in this study. Each of these factors received 55% of the sample, but they remain important variable that provide insights as to the selection process. Campus considerations came on eighth place with (n=233, 54.82%). Students in this study reported variables such as campus size, attractiveness, and safety. Therefore, such considerations do seem to have some impact on students' thinking about which university to take as far as learning English is concerned.

Less than half of the sample (n=210; 49.41) reported concern about availability of specialization as a factor in their university choice. They seem to prefer institutions with diverse specializations in relation to language study. At the bottom of the factors list came considerations like views of other students who may have experienced campus life (n=150; 35.29%). Surprisingly, the personal interest in the language came very low in the ranking in relation to other factors. Only (n=135; 31.76%) of the students mentioned interest in English as an important factor. This can be explained by the fact that nearly all universities in Jordan offer undergraduate programs in English and Literature with a large degree of similarity. In fact, many universities tend to have the same study plans for EFL degrees. This however, remains to be verified by future research. The type of university, i.e. public or private came at the very bottom of factors as it was mentioned by (n=95; 22.35%). There seems to be a clear preference to public universities in Jordan. Students apply to public universities first and only if not accepted there, they tend to seek education at private universities where the fees for private universities are higher.

Conclusion

This study hopes to provide some insights on factors that influence Jordanian students' choice of university for learning English. However, there still remains to be many aspects of this issue to be clarified in further studies. The results of this study corroborated findings reported in the previous literature and therefore provided confirmed evidence of the presence of certain factors that guide students and their families in their choice of universities. Local universities in Jordan may take insights from this study as well as from other literature reported here when considering ways of recruiting potential students. Further research is needed to explore this issue in more detail, especially with reference to the expectations and needs of EFL students.

Limitations

This study was limited in that it did not aspire to include students of private universities in Jordan. Also, no attempt was made to highlight any significant differences between groups of students according to sex, level of study or social backgrounds.

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