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## Factors Influencing The Choice Of Tertiary Education In A Subsaharan African University

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

One crucial exercise which we are usually involved in is decision making. Educational decision making in terms of selection of universities is one of such exercises that confronts the average candidate, and this is dictated by one consideration or another. These considerations can be quite complex, particularly, when there is a large number of Universities to choose from. In the more developed countries such as in the UK and US, such decisions are perhaps not difficult to make, although students in these countries are confronted with larger number of Universities than that in the less developed worlds such as Ghana. This may be because the larger number of Universities also means that there is literary not only a University next door to every prospective student, but also, these Universities are fully equipped to cater for individual student needs.

While there is virtually no empirical studies on Ghanaian University students' enrolment decisions and for that matter on students in the sub-saharan African Universities, some U.S. studies (e.g. Turner, 1998; and Soutar & Turner, 2002) suggest that future job prospects, course suitability, academic reputation, teaching among others were important determinants of University preference. A UK study by Hooley and Lynch (1981) also identified course suitability, university location, academic reputation, distance from home, type of university (modern/old), and advice from parents and teachers as important factors in students' decision to enrol in an institution or not.

The benefits or otherwise of selecting a particular institution of higher learning is not for the individual alone but also the whole of Ghana as a nation. It is in this light that the choice by the Ghanaian as to which university to attend should be of much interest to all stakeholders in the country.

## Statement of the Problem

Since 1996, with the admission of the first batch of Senior High School (SHS) graduates, university education in Ghana has been marked by shifting trends in enrolment which has resulted in stiff competition for students. In the recent past, students had only three public universities to choose from in Ghana and therefore did not have much choice in the matter. However three more public universities including the University of Education, Winneba (U.E.W.) have been added and several private universities have emerged, which have now given the Ghanaian student, to some extent, the luxury of deciding which university to go to. Although, while the older universities, such as the University of Ghana, can afford not to react to this new trend in enrolment, presumably because of their old reputation, it has become necessary for the newer Universities, such as U.E.W. to take action if they are to get their fair share of the market of SHS graduates.

In 2006, U.E.W. changed its admission policy from admitting more mature students (who are mostly trained teachers) than SHS graduates to 75% SHS graduate admission and 25% matured students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that U.E.W.'s policy of shifting to 75% SHS population as undergraduates is yet to be realized and therefore there is the need to take measures that would assist

in realizing this policy. It would appear that without knowledge of the factors that influenced the present students to enroll at U.E.W. (and for that matter other Universities like U.E.W.) in the first place, any interventions aimed at achieving its new admission policy would be futile.

### **Purpose of the study**

Given the above statement of the problem then, the purpose of the study is to explore the factors that influenced the students' decision to enroll at U.E.W

### Significance of the study

The findings of the study would provide an understanding of the factors that influence undergraduate students' choice of selecting U.E.W. as an institution of higher learning. The results are expected to contribute to the body of knowledge of the factors that influence the choice and selection of higher institutions by both traditional-aged and matured students, particularly, in Sub-Saharan Africa. This knowledge could provide the U.E.W. management the direction in which their efforts at increasing the SHS undergraduate population should take. The findings would also provide the U.E.W. management in particular, and other Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, knowledge on the direction in which their efforts at increasing the SHS student population should take.

### Literature Review

Literature search revealed that there was an apparent lack of empirical studies on factors influencing student's decision to enrol in sub-saharan African Universities. The present study was therefore informed by literature from elsewhere other than Su-Saharan Africa.

In a study using data collected from the American College Testing program, Krampf and Heinlein (1981) found that prospective students who had a positive attitude toward the university rated the attractiveness of the campus, informative campus visits, recommendation of family, good programs in their major, informative university catalogue, closeness to home and the friendliness of the campus atmosphere highly, suggesting that these factors may be important determinants in their preference for the university. Also Hooley and Lynch (1981) examined the choice processes of prospective students of UK, they identified course suitability, university location, academic reputation, distance from home, type of university (modern/old), and advice from parents and teachers, as a determining factor in their preference for a particular university. A conjoint analysis suggested that course suitability was the most important attribute in determining university choice, their results showed that prospective students appeared to be prepared to accept almost any level of the other attributes as long they entered a course that they really wanted. In a study to explore the college selection process of high school students, the Carnegie Foundation (1986) survey revealed that college publications, campus visits, high school counselors, comparative guides to colleges and meeting with college representatives were the most highly significant factors in the college selection process. In examining the degree of importance of other individuals in the college selection process, the Carnegie research found that parents (32%), friends (14%), counselors (9%), and teachers, (9%) came in that order. In another study examining college choice decision making among students in Dallas County Texas Community College district, Massey(1997) found that the principal decision making process was based on influences from parents (77%), friends (54%), high school teachers (31%), siblings (30.5%) and high school counselors (24%).

An investigation of freshmen enrollment at Washington State University using the admission offices 'prospective student system', an online recruitment device, found that employment opportunity after graduation, variety of courses, cost of attendance, faculty reputation, specific academic programs, career counseling, college reputation and housing opportunities were the main factors influencing their choice (Sanders, 1986) Another study also found that students' choice of a major was more influenced by a family tradition than by a desire to attend a specific institution (Dixon & Martin, 1991). Sevier's (1993) study on choice of college by African-Americans found that the choice of college was influenced by reputation of college, availability of financial aid, total cost of attending, job placement record, quality of faculty, geographic location and number of students.

According to McDonnell (1995), there are eight factors to consider when evaluating college choice. The factors are academic reputation, size of school, geographical location, selectivity of school, financial aid availability, academic program availability, student body population and social atmosphere. An examination of the factors that influenced international students' choice of study destination, in Australia by Mazzarol, Soutar, and Tien (1996) found that the most important selection factor was the recognition of their qualifications by future employer, institution's reputation for quality, its willingness to recognize previous qualifications and the staff's reputation for quality and expertise.

Lin's (1997) study on the reasons for students' choice of an educational institution in The Netherlands, using Self-completion questionnaires that were randomly distributed to students in the lobbies of seven universities revealed that the most significant reasons for a student's choice of institution were the quality of education offered, career opportunities, the school's reputation, opportunity for traineeships, faculty qualifications, academic standards, whether modern facilities were available, curriculum emphasis, student life among others were the factors that influenced their choice of the institution.

From the above cited studies (Sanders, 1986; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Sevier, 1993; McDonnell;1995, Mazzarol, Soutar, & Tien, 1996; & Lin, 1997) it can be deduced that cost of attendance, faculty reputation, institution's reputation, employment after graduation, specific academic programs, geographical location and quality of faculty were the overriding factors that affect undergraduates decision to enrol in a higher learning institution.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 300(males; n=136; females; n=164) first year undergraduate students recruited through convenience sampling techniques from the Home Economics, Social Science And Health, Physical Education, Recreation And Sports(HPERS) departments of U.E.W, Winneba campus. Participants' ages ranged between 18 and 50 years.

### Materials

The survey employed a self-report questionnaire that consisted of a list of 16 higher education choice factors under the themes such as Academic ( e.g. academic reputation, availability of desired program etc), Work(ability to study whiles working, ability to get a job upon graduation) and Social(school environment, matured student population), derived from the literature. Students were asked to rate each of these 16 items using a four-point scale ranging from 1 (least important) to 4 (most important) to

describe the extent to which each factor influenced their decision to enrol in UEW.

## Procedure

Permission was sought from the participants after their lecture to complete the two page questionnaire. They were asked not to put their names anywhere on the survey questionnaire. They were also told that participation was voluntary. Once the questionnaires were completed, they were debriefed and encouraged to ask questions. Participants were then thanked and allowed to leave.

## Data Analysis

SPSS, (version 16) was used to analyze data set. The 16 items were grouped under three factors namely, academic, work and social. Kendall's W test and post hoc comparisons using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test were used to analyze the data.

## RESULTS

The purpose of the present study was to explore the factors that influenced students to choose University of Education, Winneba as an institution of higher learning. Each of the four factors was analysed separately in an attempt to identify the most important reason underlying each of the factors.

### Academic Factor

In order to explore the relative importance of the reasons underlying the academic factor Kendall's W test was performed.

Table 1: Summary of Mean Ranks and Kendall's Test statistics of the Academic factor

Academic factors	Mean Rank	N	Kendall's W	X	Df	Sig
1.Size of department	2.01	300				
2. Availability of desired program	3.65	300				
3.Quality of teaching	3.54	300	.352	422.795	4	.000
4. Academic reputation	3.64	300				
5.Cost of education	2.17	300				

As Table 1 shows, there appear to be some differences in the mean ranks of the reasons under the Academic factor, with Availability of desired program being ranked the highest (mean=3.65) suggesting that it had the most influence on the students' choices. As Table 1 shows Kendall's W test

reveals that there are significant differences among the mean ranks ( $W=.352$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

A pairwise post hoc comparison using the Wilcoxon Signed-rank test with a Bonferroni's correction of critical Exact significant value of .005 was then used to assess the relative importance of the reasons under the academic factor.

	1 VS 4	2 VS 4	3 VS 4	5 VS 4	2 VS 1	3 VS 1	5 VS 1
Z	-12.220 <sup>a</sup>	-.209 <sup>a</sup>	-1.077 <sup>a</sup>	-11.314 <sup>a</sup>	-11.915 <sup>b</sup>	-11.868 <sup>b</sup>	-1.330 <sup>b</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.834	.282	.000	.000	.000	.183
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.833	.283	.000	.000	.000	.184
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.416	.142	.000	.000	.000	.092
Point Probability	.000	.001	.001	.000	.000	.000	.000

(Refer to Table 1 for numerical interpretations of variables)

As table 2 shows, using the critical Exact Sig Value of .005 reveals that six pairwise comparisons of the reasons are highly significant. These are the comparisons between Size of department (1) and Academic reputation (4), ( $z=-12.220$ ;  $p<.005$ ) their mean ranks suggesting that academic reputation is more influential than size of department. The comparison between Availability of desired program (2) and Size of department (1) is also significant ( $Z=-11.915$ ;  $p<.005$ ), with Availability of desired program being more important than Size of department. Another significant ( $z=-11.868$ ,  $p<.005$ ) comparison is between Quality of teaching (3) and Size of department (1), their mean ranks indicating that Quality of teaching is more important than Size of department. The comparison between Cost of education (5) and Availability of desired program (2) is also significant ( $Z=-10.992$ ;  $p<.005$ ), their mean ranks also

suggesting that Availability of desired program has preference over Cost of education. Finally, the significance of the comparison between Cost of education (5) and Quality of teaching (3) ( $Z = -11.067; p < .005$ ) also suggests by their mean ranks that Quality of teaching takes precedence over cost of education. Table 2 also shows that the comparisons of Academic reputation(4) with Availability of desired program (2) and Quality of teaching (3) are not significant. Also, not significant, is the comparison between Cost of education (5) and Size of department (1) as well as that between Quality of teaching (3) and Availability of desired program(2). In summary, then, the results would suggest that while the students found Academic reputation, Availability of desired program and Quality of teaching as equally important in influencing their decisions, against these variables, Cost of education and Size of department were found to be unimportant in their decisions to enrol at U.E.W.

### Work Factor

As table 3 shows, kendall's W test indicates that there are significant differences ( $W = .362, df = 3, p < 0.001$ ) in the mean ranks of the reasons under the Work factor.

Table 3: Summary of Mean Ranks and Kendall's Test Statistics of the Work factor

Work factors	Mean Rank	N	Kendall's W	X	Df	Sig
1.Ability to study whiles working	1.84	300				
2.Study leave with pay	2.73	300				
3.Ability to get a job upon graduation	3.33	300	.362	325.853	3	.000
4.Proximity to workplace	2.10	300				

Pair wise post hoc comparison using the Wilcoxon Signed-rank test with a Bonferroni's correction of critical Exact significant value of .008 was then used to examine the relative importance of the reasons under the work factor that may be responsible for the significant effect.

Table 4: Wilcoxon's test of the Work Factors						
	2	3	4	3	4	4
	VS	VS	VS	VS	VS	VS
	1	1	1	2	2	3

Z	-9.350 <sup>a</sup>	-12.890 <sup>a</sup>	-2.935 <sup>a</sup>	-8.127 <sup>a</sup>	-6.700 <sup>b</sup>	-12.432 <sup>b</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.003	.000	.000	.000
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.003	.000	.000	.000
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.002	.000	.000	.000
Point Probability	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

(Refer to Table 3 for numerical interpretations of variables)

As shown in Table 4 using the critical Exact Sig Value of .008 suggested that all six of the comparisons were highly significant. These were the comparisons between Study leave with pay(2) and Ability to study whiles working (1) ( $Z=-9.350$ ;  $p<.008$ ), their mean ranks indicating that Study leave with pay is more important to the present students than Ability to study whiles working. The comparison between Ability to get a job upon graduation (3) and Ability to study whiles working (1) was also significant( $Z=-12.890$ ;  $p<.008$ ), with their means ranks suggesting that Ability to get a job upon graduation had more influence on these students' decision to enrol at U.E.W than Ability to study whiles working. The comparison between Proximity to work place (4) and Ability to study whiles working (1) was also significant ( $z=-2.9335$ ;  $p<.008$ ) with their mean ranks suggesting that Proximity to work place had more influence on these students' decision than the Ability to study whiles working. As Table 4 shows another significant comparison is that between Ability to get a job upon graduation(3) and Study leave with pay (2) ( $Z=-8.127$ ;  $p<.008$ ), their mean ranks suggesting that Ability to get a job upon graduation has more influence than Study leave with pay. The comparison between Proximity to work place (4) and Study leave with pay (2) is also significant ( $Z=-6.700$ ;  $p<.008$ ), with their mean ranks indicating that Study leave with pay has more influence on the students' decision to enrol at U.E.W than Proximity to work place. Another significant comparison is that between Proximity to work place (4) and Ability to get a job upon graduation (2), ( $Z=-12.432$ ;  $p<.008$ ), their mean ranks suggesting that Ability to get a job upon graduation is a more important reason for the present students than Proximity to work place. In summary the 'Ability to get a job upon graduation was more influential in the students' enrollment decisions than 'Study leave with pay, Proximity to work place and Ability to study whilst working, whilst Ability to study whilst working had the least influence compared with the other reasons. Study leave with pay was seen by the students as a more important reason than Proximity to work place in their decision to enrol at U.E.W.

#### Social Factor

As Table 5 shows, there appear to be some differences in the mean ranks of the reasons under the Social factor, with recommendation by relatives ranked the highest (mean=2.65). To test whether there

are significant differences among the mean ranks, Kendall's W test was performed. As Table 5 shows the test reveals that there are significant differences among the mean ranks ( $W=.019$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Pairwise post hoc comparison using the Wilcoxon Signed-rank test with a Bonferroni's correction of critical Exact significant value of .008 was then used to ascertain the relative importance of reasons es) under the Social factor that may be responsible for the significant effect.

Table 5: Summary of Mean Ranks and Kendall's Test statistics of the Social factors

Social factors	Mean Rank	N	Kendall's W	X	Df	Sig
1.School environment	2.40	300	.019	17.117	3	.001
2. Matured student population	2.60	300				
3. Extracurricular programs	2.35	300				
4. Recommendation by relatives	2.65					

As can be seen in Table 6, using the critical Exact Sig Value of .008 revealed that four out of six of the comparisons were significant. These were the comparisons between Matured student population (2) and School environment (1), ( $Z=-2.442$ ;  $p<.008$ ), their mean ranks indicating that Matured student population was more preferred than School environment. The comparison between Recommendation by relatives (4) and School environment(1) was also significant( $Z=-2.785$ ;  $p<.008$ ), their mean ranks suggesting that Recommendation by relatives had more influence on the students' decision to enrol in U.E.W than that of School environment. The comparison between Extra curricular programs (3) and Matured student population (2) was also significant ( $Z=-3.572$ ;  $p<.008$ ), their mean ranks indicating that Matured student population was considered more important in their decision to enrol than Extra curricular programs. Another significant comparison was between Recommendation by relatives (4) and Extra curricular programs (3) ( $Z=-3.721$ ;  $p<.008$ ), with their mean ranks suggesting that Recommendation by relatives was more preferred than Extra curricular programs. However Table 6 also shows that the comparison between recommendation by relatives (4) and Matured student population (2) was not significant, so is the comparison between Extracurricular programs(3) and School environment (1).

To sum up, the comparisons under the social factor, suggest that both Matured student population and Recommendation by relative are more influential in the students's decision to enrol than school environment and Extracurricular programs. However, the students could not decide between Mature student population and Recommendation by relatives with regard to their relative importance in their decision to enrol, neither could they decide between School environment and extracurricular programs.

Table 6: Wilcoxon's test of the Social Factors

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	2 VS 1	3 VS 1	4 VS 1	3 VS 2	4 VS 2	4 VS 3
Z	-2.442 <sup>a</sup>	-1.184 <sup>b</sup>	-2.785 <sup>a</sup>	-3.572 <sup>b</sup>	-.387 <sup>a</sup>	-3.721 <sup>a</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.236	.005	.000	.699	.000
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	.239	.005	.000	.701	.000
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	.007	.119	.003	.000	.350	.000
Point Probability	.000	.001	.000	.000	.001	.000

Refer to Table 5 for numerical interpretations of variables

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study suggested that under the academic factors, Availability of desired program, Academic reputation and Quality of teaching were the main reasons influencing the students to enrol at U.E.W. These results are consistent with findings from previous studies (Krampf & Heinlein, 1981; Hooley & Lynch, 1981; Sanders, 1986; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Sevier, 1993; McDonnell, 1995; Mazzarol, Soutar & Tien, 1996; & Lin's (1997). However, it is not surprising that the students in the present study could not choose one of these three reasons as the most important reason for enrolling at U.E.W. In other words, they considered these three reasons as equally important in their enrolment decisions. The importance of Availability of desired program and Academic reputation as reasons for choosing U.E.W. reflects the fact that 75% of the students in the present study had a qualified teachers and perhaps believe that furthering their professional education requires that they choose institutions that have programs of that would enable them to do so. This is coupled with the fact that UEW is the main Teacher Education University in Ghana and therefore offers more education-related courses than the other Ghanaian public universities.

Academic reputation also ties in with the status of UEW being the main Teacher Education University in Ghana and the fact that Ghanaian public Universities seem to have better academic reputation than the private ones. However whilst Availability of desired program and Academic reputation could be considered as reasons relating more specifically to the nature of U.E.W, and therefore University-specific, the present findings would also suggest that some of the reasons why students choose a particular University, may be general in nature. In this sense, Quality of teaching could be considered as a more general reason that could be considered as more general reason that could relate to all

students irrespective of whether they are in Africa, Europe or America. In contrast to Sevier's (1993) findings that African-American students were influenced in their choice of college by cost of education among others, this is not so in the present study. This might be due to the fact that students in the present study were mostly mature students and unlike their non-mature counterparts in Sevier's study, they were able to source funding through Study leave with pay.

The significance of the reasons under the work factor such as the Ability to get a job upon graduation and Study leave with pay is not surprising. This is because a large percentage of the participants in the present study are teachers who have taken a study leave to upgrade their knowledge and skills, and as such expect to land a teaching job or get a promotion immediately after graduation. Also not surprising is the fact that the students in the present study consider Ability to study whilst working as least attractive compared with the other reasons under the Work factor in their decisions to enroll at U.E.W. The present findings are consistent with empirical studies on graduate non-completion that have consistently identified 'work commitments' as a major reason why students fail to complete their studies in the minimum specified time period (Perry, Borman, Care, Edwards & Park 2008; Tinto, 1993). Although, most higher education institutions provide work study programs such as modular sandwich and part-time courses as measures taken to deal with this problem, as Ofori, (2000) observed in a study predicting the academic performance of mature U.K. university students, such programs lacked not only flexibility in their content and delivery but also in the time frames in which students are expected to complete such programs.

In terms of the social factors, 'Matured student population', and 'Recommendation by relatives' were found to be more influential in the students' decision to enroll than the other social reasons. This finding would appear to be consistent with the demographic characteristics of the present sample which revealed that 75% of the participants were matured students whereas 25% directly came from the SHS. This would suggest that the University's policy of shifting to 75% SHS population as undergraduates is yet to be realized and might be difficult for the University to get rid of its label as a University for mature students, it is therefore recommended that U.E.W. and other Higher Education Institutions like U.E.W. should embark on awareness raising campaign targeted at SHS students in their attempts at getting rid of the label.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Since the findings of this study are based on a sample of undergraduate students admitted to a teacher education university, the implications can be drawn from the results applicable primarily to students and administrators at similar institutions. It would appear from this study that general recruitment strategies should take into account the quality of the available programs and if possible add more programs to attract more non-mature students to the university. This might help the University to achieve its 75% SHS graduates.

Finally, it is further recommended that future studies be based on postgraduate students as well as Senior High School Students who are yet to enroll in UEW and perhaps other institutions of higher learning in the country.

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