

## The Role of Gender in Student's Selection of Higher Learning Institutions in Lesotho

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### Abstract

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The study aims to investigate factors influencing selection of a Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs), with the objective to determine the most important factor influencing student's decision to select a university in Lesotho. It also aimed to determine if any gender differences exist with regard to factors influencing the selection of HLI of study. The National University of Lesotho (NUL) was used as a study setting where a convenience sample of 400 for the population size of 1758 was settled for and a stratified probability sampling technique used to select respondents. A total of 270 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 60%. The most four significant factors influencing student's choice of a university were: Reference groups, Institutional Character, Accessibility & Affordability and Marketing, however, these factors differ in terms of degree of importance between males and females in choosing a university. Irrespective of gender, the two main influential factors for respondents were the Reference Groups and Institutional Characters. The findings showed that males and females differ according to the factors that influence them to make the decision. This suggests that HLIs can consider recruitment strategies for each gender groups. This will assist HLIs to improve on their marketing strategies and gain a competitive advantage.

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**Keywords:** Higher Learning Institutions, Recruitment Strategies, Gender difference, Student choice.

### 1. Introduction

Globally, as well as in Lesotho, the Higher Education Sector (HES) is experiencing transformational forces from different directions, as environment has become competitive and institutions increasingly have to compete for students in the recruitment market (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999). This might be due to the fact that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not exist in isolation, it exists in an environment which is unstable and turbulent. HEIs as a non-profit institution will only develop and grow if they have knowledge of their environment and have the ability to adjust to the economic, technological and social changes. The new transformation in the HES expects institutions to deliver the much needed graduates for social, technological and economic development, while simultaneously addressing equity and diversity (Wiese, Heerden & Jordaan, 2010). One way to achieve this is to better understand the student market in terms of the choice factors they consider when deciding on selecting a higher education institution. In recent years, Lesotho higher learning education landscape has gone through some changes. There has been some growth in the number of Lesotho higher learning institutions, in particular the universities. This has been prompted by the entrance of two private universities in the higher learning institution sector in Lesotho in 2008 and 2015 respectively (Thetsane, Mokhethi & Bukenya, 2019).

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The entrance of the two private universities in the HES in Lesotho introduced choice for learners while triggering competition between and amongst universities and learners. Universities compete for high performing students while learners fight for a place in a better performing university. In many countries, women remain effectively excluded from higher education level with very low rates of tertiary participation (Council on Higher Education (CHE), Report, 2011/12). However, Lesotho faces a different situation as more than half of the students enrolled at tertiary institutions were females (59.4%) as compared to males constituting 40.6% (CHE Statistical Bulletin, 2014/15). There was an exception in Lesotho where a college which offers technical programmes has more males than females (CHE, 2011/12). This could be attributed to the stereotype currently existing that technical programmes are meant for male students. Comparing enrolment by gender in Lesotho with other similar developing countries revealed a slightly different trend for Swaziland where both sexes were at par. Females accounted for 50.6% in 2012 while males constituted 49.4% (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, 2015).

This calls for the need to investigate factors influencing selection of a university with regard to gender differences. Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand factors that are important for Lesotho students to choose a university and identify if differences exist between males and females in choosing a university of study. In order for universities to be more successful in attracting students, institutions need to understand factors influencing student selection of an institution and tailor recruitment efforts and other organizational procedures to increase the chance of students selecting their institution as a university of choice. Research has also shown that students are more likely to be successful university students if they are happy with their choice of university. If the university environment is not satisfactory, it may be difficult for students to stay committed academically. Therefore, in order to increase the likelihood of success and happiness, students should make a well-informed, carefully thought-out decision to make choice of a university.

## 2. Factors influencing the decision-making for higher education selection

The importance assigned to evaluative criteria can differ from student to student and knowledge of these differences can assist institutions to develop and manage their marketing mix in such a way as to ensure successful recruitment (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2004). A review of previous literature revealed a variety of potential choice factors considered by students when selecting a university as reflected in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1: Choice factors in selecting a university**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Evaluation criteria as part of the decision-making process</b>
Webb, (1993)	Academic reputation, accreditation, proximity, costs, and potential marketability of the degree.
Chapman (1993), Coccari&Javalgi (1995), Kallio (1995).	The quality of the faculty and its degrees, overall academic reputation, Institution size, and availability of financial aid.
Connor, Pearson, Court & Jagger, (1996).	Availability of the subject of interest, tuition fees and other costs.
Strasser, Ozgur, Schroeder (2002), Soutar& Turner (2002), Sidin, Hussin, & Soon, (2003).	Interest of study, influence of others, and career prospects.
Mazzarol&Soutar, (2002).	The university related factors are - type of course, academic reputation of the institution, campus, quality of the teaching staff, and type of university, and the personal factors are: distance from home, family opinion, and university choices of friends.
Belanger, Mount, & Wilson (2002).	Institution characteristics, knowledge and awareness of the host country, recommendations from friends and relatives, environment, cost, social links, and geographic proximity.
Donnellan, (2002)	Campus, staff, and networking.
Hoyt & Brown, (2003).	Personal contacts, parents, location, and social life.
	academic reputation, quality of faculty and instruction, location, cost, scholarship offers, financial aid, and student employment opportunities, the size of institution, surrounding community, friendly service, availability of graduate programs, variety of courses offered, extracurricular programs, admission requirements, admission to the graduate school, affiliation, attractiveness of campus facilities, class size, and quality of social life.

Donaldson & McNicholas, (2004).	Reputation, nature of courses, location and address, financial considerations, facilities, social climate of the department, program structure, accreditation factors and the course for postgraduate.
Veloutsou, Lewis & Paton (2004): Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, (2005)	The programs, academic prestige of departments, academic prestige of the university, dormitory and campus facilities, and job placement of graduates.
Yamamoto (2006), Lee & Chatfield (2011) Steele, (2002).	Advertisements and some communication tools.
Briggs, (2006).	Academic reputation, distance from home, personal perception, graduate employment, social life, entry requirements, teaching reputation, quality of the faculty, information supplied by university, and research reputation.
Sezgin & Binatlı, (2011).	Academic characteristics of the university and technological infrastructure in education.
Çokgezen, (2012.).	The characteristics of the prospective student (consumer) and those of the school (product). Student characteristics refer to students and their environment. School characteristics refer to services provided by universities that meet the expectations of students and the cost of these services.
Thetsane, Mokhethi & Bukenya, (2019).	Direct reference group (fathers, mothers friends, peers, teachers and siblings), Institutional (university posters, university websites, university internet, university radios, newspapers and local radios).

It can be seen from the previous research findings that there are different critical factors influencing selection of a university depending on different institutions and locations. These findings not only suggest a difference in the importance of choice factors, but also possible differences between groups of students, especially between males and females.

### 2.1 Gender differences in higher education selection

Gender is essential in decision-making, communication, choice and preferences for the uptake of interventions. It influences the way in which an implementation strategy works, for whom, under what circumstances and why (Cara, Lorraine & Ian, 2016). Males and females differ in terms of consumer traits, information processing, decision-making styles and buying patterns (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2001). As such the buying behavior and consumption situations of consumers are influenced by gender, as physiological differences between male and female may lead to specialized service product needs (Arnould, Price & Zinkhan, 2004). Wiese, Heerden and Jordaan, (2010) found that irrespective of gender and language, the most important choice factor for respondents was the quality of teaching at HLLIs. Females attribute a higher importance than males to the wide choice of subjects/courses, quality of teaching, on-campus housing and international links, while males attach a significantly higher importance to sport programme, social life on campus and reference groups attended the institution, than females (Wiese, Heerden & Jordan, 2010). On the other hand, Mansfield (2000) shows that student gender differs in terms of the importance of financial aid, security, academics, atmosphere and religious culture. These findings indicate that males and females may differ according to the importance they attach to different factors influencing selection of a university of study.

### 3. Methodology

The target population was composed of all first year students at NUL in the academic year 2017/2018. Sekaran and Bougies (2013) table of sample size was used and a sample of 400 for the population size of 1788 was adopted. Stratified probability sampling was used to select students from the seven NUL faculties and within each strata (faculty) simple probability sampling technique was used to select students from each faculty (Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2: Number of 1<sup>st</sup> year students admitted in 2018/19 per faculty**

<b>Faculties</b>	<b>No of first year students admitted per faculty in 2018/2019</b>	<b>Sample size in each faculty</b>
Faculty of Agriculture	146	32
Faculty of Education	187	40
Faculty of Health Science	216	47
Faculty of Science and Technology	212	45
Faculty of Humanities	220	47
Faculty of Law	133	29
Faculty of Social Sciences	744	160
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1788</b>	<b>400</b>

Data was collected with a closed-questions questionnaire structured in 3 sections. Self- Section A was designed to collect demographic data of the students. B concentrated on the values and goals of the students. Part C concentrated on the factors that influence the respondent's choice of university and utilizes 5 point Likert-scale where respondents were required to indicate their response between two extreme points, thus, high importance and not very important. The last part was centered on other significant factors influencing student's choice of university. The questionnaire was administered in the first semester of the university after the students had registered in the academic year 2018/19. 270 questionnaires were returned and authenticated representing a response rate of 60%. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program was used to analyze the data using factor analysis with principal component extraction and correlation analysis to determine the relationship between the factors that affect the student's university choice.

#### **4. Research results**

##### **4.1 Descriptive results**

As far as the students' gender is concerned, male students accounted for 39% of the total sample while female students was 61%. The results are consistent with NUL overall statistics enrolment (2018/19) by gender whereby females' students account for a larger percentage (63%) than males with (37%) (NUL Statistics enrolment by gender academic year 2018/19). Again, majority of the respondents in this study constituting 82% were between the ages 18-23, while 12% were above 23 and 6% were below 18 years. The results indicate that the average age of NUL first year student's fall between 18-23 years. Regarding parents' highest level of formal education, mothers that hold a Bachelor's degree account for (14%) while fathers that hold a Bachelor's degree account for 4% of the respondents.

##### **4.2 Factor Analysis**

Principal factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to assess the underlying structure for the thirty-three items on the influence of the selection of an institution of higher learning. Four factors were requested based on the scree diagram. After rotation, these four factors account for 55.2% of the variance. Factor 1 (Marketing) accounts for 33.2% of the variance, factor 2 (Institutional Character) accounts for 9.0 % of the variance, the third and fourth (Accessibility & Affordability and Reference groups) account for 6.8% and 6.2% respectively. Table 1.3 reflects the items and factor loadings for the rotated factors with loadings less than 0.45 omitted, since substantial loading is achieved when the score is above 0.45 (Tabachnic & Fidel, 2013).

**Table 1.3: Exploratory Factor analysis**

Items	Factors			
	Marketing	Institutional Characters	Accessibility & Affordability	Reference Groups
Personal letters from institutions	.785			
University ,websites	.772			
University radios	.766			
Telephone calls from institution	.761			
University Representatives	.746			
University Visits to my school	.738			
University posters	.674			
Local radios	.626			
Visits to University campus	.600			
Visits to career fair organized by CHE	.577			
Newspapers	.540			
Reputation of institution		.833		
Reputation of program		.713		
Variety of courses offered		.695		
Specialized program offered		.654		
Athletic opportunities		.460		
Religious atmosphere		.445		
Student / lecturer ratio		.439		
Location (Urban, Rural)			.763	
Closeness to home			.740	
Costs of living			.708	
Tuition costs			.601	
Size of student population			.463	
Influence of Pastor / Priest				.665
Influence of friends				.654
Influence by relatives / siblings				.616
Influence by teachers				.610
Influence by mother				.593
Recommendation of former students				.558
<b>Eigen values</b>	<b>9.296</b>	<b>2.508</b>	<b>1.901</b>	<b>1.737</b>
<b>% of Variance</b>	<b>33.199</b>	<b>8.957</b>	<b>6.790</b>	<b>6.205</b>
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.				
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.				
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.				

### 4.3 Reliability Analysis

To assess whether the items in the three factors formed a reliable scale, Cronbach's alpha was computed. Internal reliability was found to be sufficient for three factors. The Cronbach's alpha for coefficients were 0.92 for Marketing, 0.80 for Institutional Character and 0.75for Accessibility & Affordability field scale. However, Reference Groups had relatively low reliability, Cronbach's alpha = 0.69. (Table 1.4).

**Table1.4: Reliability Analysis for Four Factors Influencing Choice of HLIs**

Factors	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha
Marketing	11	0.919
Reputation	7	0.801
Accessibility & affordability	5	0.759
Reference Groups	6	0.692

#### 4.4 Correlation results

Table 1.6 provides correlation coefficients for the four factors. Marketing is positively correlated with Institutional Character ( $r=0.476$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Hence, we can gain confidence that there is a genuine relationship between Marketing and Institutional Character. Marketing is again positively related to Accessibility & Affordability and Reference Groups with ( $r=0.381$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and ( $p=0.531$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) respectively. Reputation is positively related to both Accessibility & Affordability and Reference Groups with ( $r=0.440$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and ( $r=0.409$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) respectively. Finally, Accessibility & Affordability also appears to be positively correlated with Reference Groups ( $r=0.274$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

**Table1.6: Bivariate Correlation of the Four Factors Influencing Choice of HEI**

Factors	Marketing	Institutional Character	Accessibility & Affordability	Reference Groups
Marketing	1	-	-	-
Institutional Character	0.476**	1	-	-
Accessibility & Affordability	0.381**	0.440**	1	-
Reference Groups	0.531**	0.409**	0.274**	1

**\*\*.** Correlations is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

#### 4.5 Correlations of the four factors controlled for Male and Female respondents

We ran bivariate correlation analysis for males and females independently to look at gender differences or similarities in the pattern of correlations among the four factors. Correlations among the factors for both male and female participants were different, indicating that males and females saw the relationships among factors in different ways (Table1.7). The correlation for males also revealed significant positive relationships among the factors with the exception of the correlation between of Accessibility & Affordability and Reference Groups, which was not significant. The correlational analysis further revealed significant positive relationships among all the four factors for female respondents (Table 1.8).

**Table1.7: Bivariate Correlations among four factors and Males**

Factors	Marketing	Institutional Character	Accessibility & Affordability	Reference Groups
<b>Marketing</b>	1	-	-	-
<b>Institutional character</b>	0.544**	1	-	-
<b>Accessibility &amp; Affordability</b>	0.445**	0.401**	1	-
<b>Reference Groups</b>	0.501**	0.411**	0.165	1

**\*\*.** Correlations significant at the 0 .01 level (2-tailed).

**Table1.8: Bivariate Correlations among four factors and Females**

	Marketing	Institutional Character	Accessibility & Affordability	Reference Groups
<b>Marketing</b>	1	-	-	-
<b>Reputation</b>	0.397**	1	-	-
<b>Accessibility &amp; Affordability</b>	0.310**	0.421**	1	-
<b>Reference Groups</b>	0.533**	0.358**	0.306**	1

**\*\*.**Correlations significant at the 0 .01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4.6 Gender group differences

To examine gender differences in factors that affect student's selection of HEIs, the study compared male and female students' scores on the four factors identified. The results of the t-tests are presented in Table1.9. The most influential factors were Reference Groups ( $M=3.62$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ) and Institutional character ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=0.93$ ). Much lower means were reported regarding Marketing ( $M=2.92$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) and Accessibility & Affordability ( $M=2.97$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ). The results further showed interesting findings when controlled for gender. The most influential factors for males were Reference Groups ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=0.96$ ) and Institutional Characters ( $M=3.34$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) while

much lower means were in Marketing ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) and Accessibility & Affordability ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ). For females, all the four factors were influential with Reputation ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ) being the most influential followed by Reference Groups ( $M=3.74$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ), Accessibility & Affordability ( $M=3.15$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) and Marketing ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ). As revealed in Table 1.9 female respondents reported statistically significant differences when compared to their male counterparts with regard to the four factors.

**Table 1.9: Factors Influencing University Choice- General and Controlled for gender**

Factors	General		Male		Female		t-statistic	p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Marketing	2.92	1.22	2.71	1.19	3.05	1.27	-2.015*	0.045
Institutional Characters	3.60	0.93	3.34	1.02	3.77	0.82	-3.331*	0.001
Accessibility & Affordability	2.97	1.15	2.71	1.14	3.15	1.13	-2.784*	0.006
Reference Groups	3.62	0.94	3.43	0.96	3.74	0.91	-2.350*	0.020

Note: Tests marked with an asterisk (\*) were significant at the 0.05 level.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed four significant factors influencing student's choice of university, however, such factors differ in terms of their degree of importance between males and females in choosing a university to attend.

The four factors influencing student's choice of university were; Reference groups, Institutional Character, Accessibility & Affordability and Marketing. All of these factors were significantly more important for female students than male students.

When controlled by gender, the study revealed very stirring results. The most influential factors influencing males to select an institution of study were Reference groups and Institutional Characters. This result is consistent with Otto (1989) results that Reference groups, in particular parents and siblings are the major influence in the lives of their children, including choosing a university of study. Also, Soutar, & Turner (2002) found that university students cited parents as having mainly important influenced their career choice and choice of HLIs. It is very interesting to note that females were strongly influenced by Institutional Character, (reputation of an institution, reputation of program and variety of courses offered), which were the second influential factor for males. This result was supported by Canale and John (1996) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) who affirm that university female's students are attracted to institutions that can provide a wide variety of programmes to choose from while Soner, (2012) argues that the institution's reputation have a direct effect on the decision to attend, but the reputation is usually rely on the advice the students received from Reference Groups. Females attached a significantly higher importance than males in all the four factors. A notable difference in the ranking order was evident in the importance that male's students attached to Reference groups (First), followed by Institutional characters, and Marketing and Accessibility & Affordability having similar importance while with females the first was the Institutional Characters. It can also be observed that the largest difference in mean values (and p-values) was evident in Institutional Characters with females while the least cited factor was the influence of marketing activities. It is remarkable to note that females are mainly influenced by the university facilities than males.

Marketing activities that include advertising, school tours by university staff, career fairs and campus visits by prospective students have an influence on the decisions of students to select a university to study at. Surprising, marketing activities seem not to have major influence in university selection amongst both the females and males, and yet Keling, Krishnan and Nurtjahja, (2007) found that marketing activities were influential while a study by Keling (2006) found that institutional characteristics, and academic programmes had a high explanatory power on how students decide on which university to study. Irrespective of gender, the two main influential factor for respondents were the Reference groups and Institutional characters. It is evident that Reference groups, have a major influence on the university choice for both males and females. This may be attributed to the fact that NUL, since its inception in 1975 (NUL calendar, 1987-1988) to 2008, has been enjoying the monopoly of being the only university in the country. Therefore, most of the parents, sibling and peers attended NUL and as a result they may easily influence students to choose NUL as their university of study. It is clear that NUL students were not influenced by marketing activities instead they relied more on Reference groups, being parents, peers and siblings who attended the university before them. When deciding on an institution to attend, parents and students want to ensure their success by attending a university with good academic reputation.

This is consistent with Pope and Fermin, (2003) who also found that Reference Groups are the greatest influence on overall university choice amongst both females and males. A research conducted by Pearson and Dellman-Jenkins (1997) and Thetsane, Mokhethi and Bukenya (2019) revealed that parents and teachers were the most significant factor influencing students' choice of a university of study. These findings clearly indicate that males and females differ according to the importance they attach to different factors influencing selection of a university of study.

## 6. Implications for HLIs

The findings showed that males and females differ in some factors that influence the selection of a HLIs. This suggests that HEIs may consider recruitment strategies for each gender group. For instance, females are mainly influenced by Institutional Characters, such as, variety of courses offered, specialized program offered, reputation of program and athletic opportunities. This means that in addition to the core product (education) HLIs should consider differentiating their product from the competitors. As a result, marketing activities aimed at females will have to emphasize the value added that the HLIs can offer to complement the core product. Therefore, HEIs must remain conscious of how they present and communicate their educational services; differentiate themselves from other institutions, and how these factors influence the outward reputation and perception of their institution (Carmeli & Tishler, 2005). Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) also argued that university characteristics is a very critical factor that cannot be ignored as it influences the loyalty levels of students and parents.

It also has a huge influence on the attitudes of potential students and the image that will impact on the student's willingness to apply to that institution for enrolment (De Jager & Du Plooy, 2006). This result will assist HLIs recruiters develop appropriate marketing activities to differentiate their institutions in a meaningful way to potential and existing students worldwide.

## 7. Conclusions

The findings of this study provide HLIs with the attributes that are important for students to choose a university of study and identifies differences between males and females in choosing a university. This will assist HLIs to attract the right caliber of students and improve on their marketing strategies and gain a competitive advantage. Universities with insight into their market will be able to differentiate both their core product (education) and marketing strategies. An understanding of the relative importance of choice factors as a decision in students' selection processes, can also add to the improvement of targeted marketing strategies. In conclusion, therefore, the findings show the important role played by gender difference in selecting an institution of study. However, since this is a case study research, one should be careful in generalizing the findings from this study to other universities. Future research replicating this case study would be very important in endorsing this results and contributing new ideas to the university recruitment process in HLIs.

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