

First-year Students' University and Programme Selection at a South African University: Choice or Compulsion?

Nomzamo Dube, Siphamandla Nyambo, Nkosiyazi K. Kanjiri and Vongai S. Ruzungunde

Abstract

Higher education is a tool for social and economic development as well as global competitiveness. It is thus crucial for students to make informed decisions when enrolling at university and, ultimately, deciding what career to pursue. This article offers insights on the factors that influence students' selection of a university and programme, focusing on students at a historically disadvantaged university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Data was gathered by means of qualitative focus groups and convenient sampling was employed to select the sample from a population of first-year students. The findings indicate that residential proximity to the university, the university's reputation, programme image, entry requirements, affordability and funding influence university selection. With regard to programme selection, the factors considered include background dynamics, the subjects involved, failure to meet the requirements, family, peer or the influence of others, failure to be selected for first choice programmes, a lack of career guidance and funding availability. It was thus found that university selection was principally influenced by the student's informed choice while programme selection was largely influenced by external factors.

Key words: University, programme, selection, students, higher education

L'enseignement supérieur est un outil de développement social et économique ainsi que de compétitivité mondiale. Il est donc crucial pour les étudiants de prendre des décisions éclairées lorsqu'ils s'inscrivent à l'université et, en fin de compte, lorsqu'ils décident de la carrière à poursuivre. Cet article

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: NOMZAMO DUBE, SIPHAMANDLA NYAMBO, NKOSIYAZI K. KANJIRI, and VONGAI S. RUZUNGUNDE, University of Fort Hare, South Africa. E-mail: nomzdube@gmail.com;

donne un aperçu des facteurs qui influencent le choix d'une université et d'un programme par les étudiants, en se concentrant sur les étudiants d'une université historiquement défavorisée du Cap-Oriental, en Afrique du Sud. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais de groupes de discussion qualitatifs et un échantillonnage pratique a été utilisé pour sélectionner l'échantillon parmi une population d'étudiants de première année. Les résultats indiquent que la proximité résidentielle de l'université, la réputation de l'université, l'image du programme, les conditions d'entrée, l'accessibilité financière et le financement influencent le choix de l'université. En ce qui concerne le choix du programme, les facteurs pris en compte comprennent la dynamique du milieu, les matières concernées, le fait de ne pas répondre aux exigences, les influences de la famille, des pairs ou autres, le fait de ne pas être sélectionné pour les programmes de premier choix, le manque d'orientation professionnelle et la disponibilité des fonds. Il a donc été constaté que le choix de l'université était principalement influencé par le choix éclairé de l'étudiant, tandis que le choix du programme était largement influencé par des facteurs externes.

Mots clés: Université, programme, sélection, étudiants, enseignement supérieur.

1. Introduction

Higher education is vital for economic and social development (Harry, Chinyamurindi and Mjoli, 2018). Students that obtain a higher education qualification not only enhance their earning potential; the knowledge acquired expands their worldview, prompting further intellectual and social growth (Organ, 2009). The decision to pursue a higher education qualification is thus one of the most significant commitments a student makes in his or her lifetime. For their part, universities confront the challenge of attracting quality students (Agrey and Lampadan, 2014). In order to do so, they need to take into consideration the factors that influence student choices and modify their recruitment strategies (Baileu, Ifenthaler, Gosper and Schmar, 2014). Their programmes also need to take such factors into account (Fosu and Poku, 2014). It is against this background that our study investigated whether choice or compulsion drive prospective students' selection of a university and programme at a South African university.

For the purpose of this article, choice refers to selection of a university or programme as a result of individual preference and weighing of available options without pressure from external forces or circumstances beyond one's control. Compulsion refers to any form of external pressure that a prospective student is subjected to in selecting their university or programme. In as much as students are universities' primary clients, other stakeholders such as parents/guardians, businesses and sponsors (Roga, Lapina and Muursepp, 2015) play a crucial role in influencing their choices. Indeed, some students are compelled by situations beyond their control to enrol for a particular programme.

A number of international studies have been conducted on the factors that determine students' choice of universities (Roga et al., 2015; Vidhi, 2014; Agrey and Lampadan, 2014; Fosu and Poku, 2014). The factors identified in the literature include family, friends and relatives, scholarship or funding availability for a particular programme, programme costs, reputation, and marketing, career guidance and graduate employability. These factors vary across contexts, with economic conditions and the kind of programmes offered by particular universities differing in different countries. However, there is a paucity of research on programme choices, particularly among students from disadvantaged communities (Bitzer and de Jager, 2018). The study will thus assist universities in developing countries to understand the dynamics behind prospective students' choices and to address some of the consequences of poor choices such as high tertiary dropout rates.

Higher Education in South Africa

The post-apartheid period in South Africa (post 1994) has been characterised by significant changes in the higher education landscape (Wiese, van Heerden and Jordaan, 2010). The democratic government adopted new policy frameworks to enhance access to tertiary education. Together with the establishment of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) that supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these measures have resulted in South African universities' student population becoming more diverse. Entry standards have also been modified and, given the need to produce graduates with the skills and knowledge required by the labour market, programmes now focus more on outcomes (Fraser and Killer, 2003). However, the funding provided by NSFAS has led to

a significant increase in student enrolment in universities, which has resulted in an oversupply of graduates (Harry et al., 2018). Contrary to expectations, obtaining a higher education qualification is no longer a guarantee of employment. As a result of many factors, including poor quality education, and poor career choices, etc., many graduates end up becoming frustrated unsuccessful job applicants (Atediba, 2019).

South Africa has one of the worst primary education systems in the world. Research shows that 27% of South African learners in Grade 6 cannot read and write. Furthermore, only 37% of learners that enter the education system pass matric (Grade 12) and only 4% earn a degree (Kamga, 2019). The roots of this poor performance lie in the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which segregated the education system by race. The children of the minority white population received a far superior education to those of the majority black population. Black learners were taught skills that prepared them for the most menial jobs (Kamga, 2019). While South Africa's new Constitution declares that everyone has the right to education, overcoming apartheid's legacy of severe educational inequality is a monumental task. Disparities remain at all levels of education. For example, former white and model C schools with financial and other resources offer superior education compared to schools in townships and rural areas. University students from disadvantaged communities are expected to compete with students from privileged backgrounds.

Tjonneland (2017) notes that about a million students were registered at public universities in 2017, with 700 000 registered at Technical Vocational Educational Training (TVET) colleges, and 90 000 students at private institutions, the majority being black. This is an overwhelming increase compared to the approximately 500 000 students enrolled in all higher education institutions (HEIs) in 1994. However, the number of students registered at HEIs as a proportion of the total population is extremely low (Tjonneland, 2017).

The biggest problem confronting South African HEIs is the high student dropout rate. Tjonneland (2017) states that only 50% of undergraduate students in the country complete their programmes within five years of entry and two-thirds of NSFAS recipients drop out. Low throughput rates are largely caused by poor school education, entrants' lack of preparedness and extremely high teacher-student ratios, poor programme choices, and poor living and studying conditions (Tjonneland,

2017; Kamga, 2019). The high fees charged by tertiary institutions further disadvantage this group of students.

#Feesmustfall

The 2015 #Feesmustfall movement was a response to the government's longstanding unfulfilled promise of free education (Lange, 2017). In light of the fact that South African HEIs are still trapped in colonial approaches to education, it also called for the decolonisation of institutional spaces and the curriculum itself (ibid). In support of the #Feesmustfall movement, Kamga (2019, p. 93) asks:

How can a particular group of people who have wilfully and legally been dehumanised and subjected to a systematic and systemic process of mass illiteracy and pauperisation expect to suddenly reach or acquire the same level of instruction and qualification as that of their peers in other parts of the globe?

Fees were not increased in 2016, and an increase of not more than 8% was mandated for 2017. By the end of 2017, most students from disadvantaged backgrounds were subsidised by the government (Bitzer and de Jager, 2018). While fee increases disadvantage students from poor families, if education becomes free, its quality is likely to be compromised. Scholars such as James (2007) argue that free higher education is not likely to improve equity, but rather lead to the massification of higher education as there is a critical connection between access and quality education. Bitzer and de Jager (2018, p. 17) state that, "it is of little use when education is regarded as a right, but its quality is poor and failure is imminent". Although the student protests were highly criticised by many, Tjonneland (2017) asserts that they were simply a manifestation of the shortcomings of the higher education system.

Theoretical Lens

Several student choice models have been used to explain the choices made by students at HEIs (Fosu and Poku, 2014). Although most address students' choice of institution, they can also explain the choice of programme. The four major types of models are econometric, sociological or status attained, information processing and combined models (Fosu and Poku, 2014). "These models view students' educational decisions as a sequence of binary choices between options that entail long-term utility

and options that reduce short term risk of failure" (Gabay-Egozi, Shavit and Yaish, 2010, p. 447). They are discussed below and were used to explain the findings of this study.

Econometric Model

This model is rooted in the assumption that students make decisions based on the cost benefit of the product, that is, the end result of the investment (Fosu and Poku, 2014; Mustafa, Sellami, Elmaghraby and Al-Qassass, 2018). "This means that the model follows a cost-benefit framework that assumes that students of higher education are rational and are completely informed about the potential costs and benefits of both education and non-education to arrive at a decision regarding choice of higher education" (Fosu and Poku, 2014, p. 2). To make the calculation, a prospective student weighs the costs and benefits (Vrontis, Thrasai, and Melanthial, 2007). It is thus assumed that prospective students are capable of evaluating factors such as fees in making their choices (Czajkowski et al., 2019).

Sociological or Socially Attained Model

The sociological models focus on students' background dynamics and socio-economic aspects that affect their choices (Fosu and Poku, 2014). These may include subject content, academic ability, gender and the opinions of significant others (Mustafa et al., 2018).

Information Processing Model

This model explains the information gathering process that students undertake prior to enrolment to determine their choices. It is assumed that enrolment decisions are largely dependent on the amount of information gathered or research conducted (Fosu and Poku, 2014). In this model, the student has the agency to both gather and process information (ibid) to determine the best choice. Agrey and Lampadan (2014) state that familial groups such as parents and relatives and other influential people like high school teachers, role models and friends also influence selection.

Combined Model

According to Vrontis et al. (2007), combined models may be more effective than a single model. These models borrow features from the econometric, sociological and information processing models and thus offer more

depth in explaining student choices (Fosu and Poku, 2014). Krezel and Krezel (2017) state that within these models, the following social factors influence students' choices:

1. **Student characteristics** (race, gender, and parents' education level, occupation and income)
2. **Institutional factors** (a programme's image and reputation at an institution)
3. **Social environment** (family and peers)

Although the student choice model is a universal one which employs various factors to make choices, the context in which it is applied is crucial. For example, South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world and the choices made by students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be determined by the econometric model than the information processing model.

2. Methodology

The university that was the focus of the study is a historically disadvantaged institution (HDI) with three campuses, with its main campus in the rural Eastern Cape. It largely attracts students from surrounding villages who attended rural high schools and come from low-income families. The institution was selected as it was assumed that its students would have limited choices in decision-making regarding their university and programme selection, and ultimately their career paths. A qualitative research approach was employed (Walia, 2015), and focus group interviews were used to gather data from first-year registered students who were conveniently selected to ensure that the sample covered various disciplines. Dilshad and Latif (2013) state that focus group interviews are a valuable tool to collect qualitative data as they yield rich, in-depth data and unveil different perspectives on a topic. Each focus group had +/-10 participants. The study took place during the Covid-19 lockdown when students were learning online, mainly from home. However, the participants were residing on campus at the time of the study. The focus group questions centred on the reasons for selecting the university and the programme enrolled in. The data was analysed using thematic data analysis until saturation was reached.

Ethical Considerations

An ethical clearance certificate (reference number is REC-270710-028-RA Level 1) was issued by the University Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview, asking the participants for permission to record the interview and specifying that pseudonyms would be used and that confidentiality would be maintained.

3. Results

Although the main focus of the study was the students' choice of programmes, it was deemed crucial to first understand their choice of institution. Therefore, the focus group questions centred on the reasons for selecting the university and ultimately the programme enrolled in.

Factors Influencing University Selection

Students enrol to study at certain universities for various reasons. Polat (2012, p. 2140) states that, "Although universities are not institutions which have the obligation to be vocationally oriented, students view universities as vocational institutions which lead to employment. Therefore, students choose among a variety of universities in order to reach the jobs in their vision". The participants indicated that they enrolled at the university for various reasons including personal factors (proximity to the university, relations with others already enrolled there), institutional factors (the university's reputation, programme's image, entry requirements) and economic factors (affordability, scholarships and funding availability). These are discussed below.

Personal Factors

- **Proximity to the university**

Polat's (2012) study on university selection at Kocaeli University in Turkey found that students chose the university largely because of their residential proximity to it. Several participants in our study concurred. One said: *The institution is in the same province that I reside in, so it is cost effective to travel between home and the university*, while another commented: *I decided to apply at this university because of proximity as I did my high school in East London*. Thus, physical distance matters as it includes issues like transportation to and from campus.

- **Relations with others already enrolled in the university**

Some students prefer to enrol at an institution where they have a contact or a student they know. A participant stated:

I came to this university because there are a lot of people from where I come from that are here. So I came here so that they would help me to easily adapt to university life. Another shared: *My elder brother was studying here from 2005 to 2007, so I was inspired by him to enrol at the university that he once attended. I didn't consider any other university besides this one. I just wanted to follow my brother's steps even though he was in a different faculty.* A third noted: *Many people from our community are here, so I came here too so that I won't struggle as I would get assistance from people I know.*

Personal factors that influence students to select certain universities are explained by the sociological or socially attained student choice model. In this case, decision-making largely centres on sociological factors such as background dynamics and the opinions of significant others (Mustafa et al., 2018). It is apparent that familiarity and fear of adapting to unfamiliar environments influence selection.

Institutional Factors

Jafari and Aliesmaili (2013) note that institutional factors include the university's reputation and the programme's image within the university.

- **Reputation of the university**

Saif, Nipa and Siddique's (2016) study in Bangladesh found that a university's reputation strongly influenced decision-making. Similarly, most of the participants indicated that the university's reputation influenced their choice. One said: *I applied at this university because of its history since many African leaders learnt here, I wanted to be part of its history.* A second commented: *I was inspired by the rich history of the institution; it is one of the universities that produced many well-respected African leaders.*

Reputation means different things for different individuals. The institution has a political reputation and is associated with black identity in Africa, as it produced several African leaders who went on to become statespersons in their countries. It is clear that the participants identify with this reputation rather than the university's status as it is an HDI that largely survives on a government subsidy.

- **Programme's image**

Other than institutional reputation or image, most participants indicated that they chose the university because of the image of some of its programmes. One said: *I applied here because this university has a good reputation when it comes to agricultural programmes.* A fellow student concurred: *I came here because I heard that this institution is good in agriculture. As someone who comes from a farming family, I felt that enrolling here would be the best way to help my family.*

Although the programme's image emerged as a strong factor influencing choice, beyond that were underlying factors such as a family tradition in farming or that a good programme image is associated with employability.

- **Entry requirements**

Universities have different entry requirements for different qualifications and different universities serve different students. Several participants indicated that they chose the university because it had lower entry requirements for certain programmes than other universities. One remarked: *I applied here because I was rejected at other universities. When I came here, the requirements that they wanted were lower, so it was easy for me to qualify for the programme I'm doing. I failed Maths at high school, hence I was rejected by other institutions.* This raises questions around the quality of education as well as the quality of students attracted by the university. It also begs the question of what the university is doing to ensure that the quality of its graduates matches that of universities with higher entry requirements.

Institutional factors largely fall under the information processing student choice model that entails gathering information about the institution prior to application. It was found that most participants conducted research to establish the university's reputation, its programmes' image and its entry requirements.

Economic Factors

- **Affordability and terms of payment**

Saif et al. (2016) state that tuition fees influence the choice of university. Jafari and Aliesmaeli's (2013) study on the factors influencing selection of a university in Iran concluded that economic factors play a significant

role. These include the relationship between the university and the labour market, tuition fees and employment opportunities. In the current study, affordability was a major economic factor. One participant said: *I came to this university because other universities wanted me to pay money which I did not have. This university is the only institution that I could come to, given my financial circumstances. So I came here because of convenience, affordability and also that it is not very far from where I come from, so it was a matter of cutting costs.* Another commented: *I applied at this university because of my background. Firstly, I applied at Nelson Mandela University but they required a registration fee upfront, so I had to come here where I did not have to pay fees upfront.* Therefore, students were not only attracted by affordable fees, but the flexible payment methods offered by the university.

- **Availability of scholarships or funding**

Many HEIs attract students, particularly in science programmes by making funding available. Chevalier (2014) noted that this is also used to attract foreign students. One participant said: *Myself, I didn't apply directly. I am an international student. I applied for a scholarship since I [couldn't] ... afford money for university. So when I applied for a scholarship, I was told that I was going to South Africa to study at this university. So that's how I came here. I did not have a choice.*

Economic factors fall under the econometric student choice model that posits that students make decisions based on costs or financial issues. In the current study, some participants indicated that they chose the university because it was more affordable than others while others chose it due to funding being offered.

Factors Influencing Programme Selection/Non-selection

Similar to the factors that influence institutional selection, students choose programmes for a variety of reasons. These include personal factors (background dynamics, subjects involved, failure to meet first choice requirements, family, peer or others' influence, failing first choice programmes, a lack of career guidance), economic factors (funding availability) and institutional factors (first choice programme full). In order to understand the gap between the participants' current programmes and their dream career paths, they were also asked why they did not pursue their intended career paths.

Personal Factors

- **Background dynamics**

Background dynamics include how one was raised or factors such as gender and family dynamics. One participant said: *I am doing social work. I chose to do social work because of my background where at some point I experienced abuse at home. When I went to seek ... assistance from social workers, I didn't get proper help, so ... I felt like I needed to stand up and be a social worker.* A fellow student shared a similar story: *I also chose social work because of my background. Let me say I was a victim of abuse. I spoke to people and nobody helped; even the person who was close me could not help me so I thought that this is the situation that most children are facing. I decided to be a social worker to help children in similar situations.*

- **Subjects taken in a programme**

The subjects involved in a particular programme also influence programme selection. The participants shared the following:

I am registered for a Bachelor of Administration degree. I chose the programme because it does not have mathematics and science which were difficult for me in high school. So, I wanted to do a degree that has nothing to do with maths and physical science.

I wanted to be a gynaecologist. I was inspired by the salary gynaecologists earn, but I couldn't ... follow that dream because I struggled with maths and physical science.

I wanted to be an agricultural scientist but then I struggled with maths and science; hence I chose to be a librarian.

You know growing up we want to be all these big things and so growing up I wanted to be an astronaut but looking at maths and physics I realised that that was too far-fetched for me. I was not good at all at maths.

In South Africa, the lowest Grade 12 (matric) results are obtained in science subjects and mathematics. Failure or low marks in these subjects causes students to abandon dream careers that require them.

- **Failure to meet the requirements of the first choice programme**

A number of participants indicated that they were not enrolled in their programme of choice as they failed to meet the requirements for their first choice:

I wanted to do economics but my points were low so when I arrived here, I

had to settle for Human Resource Management.

My first choice was Bachelor of Education. I didn't meet the requirements for BEd., so I ended up registering for Bachelor of Library and Information Systems.

I'm doing a Bachelor of Commerce in Industrial Psychology (IPS). Initially, I applied for Law but was not admitted so I just decided to do IPS. I will start Law after I finish my postgraduate studies in IPS.

In contrast to many other participants who decided to settle for whatever programme they ended up registering for, the third participant quoted above showed determination to eventually pursue his/her intended career path (Law). This suggests that his/her interests are not only driven by factors such as employability or gaining a qualification.

Another participant said:

I wanted to do accounting without realising what it meant. I did not do well in mathematics, accounting and economics so I did not get accepted at university. That is when I realised that I had limited myself by choosing those subjects in Grade 9. I took a gap year which was very depressing. The following year, I applied for anything and it happened to be social work. I was accepted and I did not enjoy the programme, I did not want to do social work. But in the process of doing social work, I would pray and ask God to show me if I am called to do social work because I am finding myself in this depressing position.

This participant was not content with the programme he/she is in, negatively affecting his/her mental health. It is thus likely that, should he/she continue in this career, he/she might not be a committed employee/professional or be satisfied with this career path.

- **Family, peer or others' involvement**

A number of participants indicated that their choice of programmes was largely inspired by other people such as family and peers:

I am doing Library and Information Systems. I had an aunt who studied the programme here, she is the one who assisted in gathering information on the ... programme.

I am enrolled for BCom. IPS [industrial psychology]. I did not know what to apply for when I came here for applications but the university officer who was serving me recommended three commercial programmes that I can apply for; hence I ended up doing BCom. IPS.

I'm registered for BCom. IPs. When my friend applied for me, she informed

me that on the commercial courses, I could choose BCom. Management and Economics or Management and Industrial Psychology. I had no idea what Industrial Psychology was, but I definitely knew I did not want anything linked with economics so I just decided to take industrial psychology as my first choice.

Family or parental perceptions play a significant role in children's education and career choices (Nawabi, Javed, Shujauulla and Ulfat, 2019). This can be beneficial or detrimental. Most participants whose choices were influenced by family members enrolled in programmes they were not passionate about:

When I was growing up, I always looked up to my father and I wanted to be a soldier. I watched him go through the promotions and changing ranks. However, my family did not allow me to become a soldier.

I always knew I wanted to be a designer. I knew I loved arts and my family did not allow me to do it because they did not understand it. I applied for Information Technology (IT), I did that but I do not like it.

Khamadi, Bowen and Oladipo's (2011) research on student career choices at a university in Kenya concluded that the majority of students selected the courses and careers preferred by their parents/guardians and friends rather than opting for their own preferences. This shows low level of decisiveness on programmes to enrol for and ultimately career paths, resulting in low levels of motivation (Leach and Patall, 2013).

- **Failing the first choice programme**

A participant indicated that failing the first choice programme resulted in her enrolment in another one: *Before I studied social work, growing up I wanted to become a lawyer because I used to watch a lot of Sokhulu and partners, A South African show on TV. I studied law at the University of Western Cape (UWC) before coming here. ... I ... failed twice; hence I came here to study social work.*

- **Lack of career guidance and knowledge**

Choosing a career path has become increasingly difficult in South Africa's unsettling economic times. It is not easy to determine which direction to take and minimal information is readily available on career choices (Nong, 2016). Van Blerch (2012) states that many young South Africans have very limited access to reliable information on education and training options, careers and career pathways and employment opportunities. A

number of participants indicated that they received no career guidance to inform their choice of programme:

My aunt applied for me. When she consulted me about my programme of choice, I did not know what to say. So she decided on social work but I did not get accepted. She had placed library and information systems as my second choice so I did it.

Unfortunately, I was not exposed to many career choices when I grew up. All I dreamt of was to be successful and be an inspiration to others and to ... society.

I didn't have a dream; I just went with the flow. I was never exposed to any information. I was just ready to do anything that would match my matric results.

At our high school we did not have career exhibitions and knowledge on how to choose a career, which subjects were important and which were not. I had no idea... where I should go to get information on ... different career paths or which university to choose.

Kunnen (2013) states that students' lack of readiness to make career choices is due to ineffective career guidance. This often results in frequent course and programme changes, and low retention and high dropout rates.

Economic Factors

- **Funding availability**

Tertiary education is costly in South Africa and is beyond the reach of many students. They thus enrol for programmes that offer funding. Science programmes often offer funding to attract students and fill the skills gap. Several participants indicated that they chose the programmes they are enrolled in due to the availability of funding:

I am doing agriculture (soil science), but it's not my choice; a push factor was involved. I really had no choice because if I am to change there are chances that I may lose my bursary. So I am doing what I am doing just to finish. If I could afford school fees, I would change.

Given a chance to change, I would. My situation is more like what my other colleagues here said because the sponsor chose the programme for us. I was given economics but I wanted to do agricultural economics because I like farming.

Institutional Factors

- **First choice programme full**

The educational opportunities offered by the South African government post 1994, especially in terms of NSFAS, have enabled financially disadvantaged students to study and compete in the labour market. However, this has resulted in a situation where demand for higher education far exceeds supply. A number of participants indicated that the programmes they were enrolled in were not their first choice; they opted for them as a last resort when other programmes were full;

I am doing agricultural economics. I had no choice; it is not something that I applied for. I had applied for horticulture, but because the programme was full I was then offered agricultural economics.

- **Non-acceptance in the programme of choice**

Several participants indicated that they were not accepted in their programme of choice although they met the requirements:

I wanted to be an economist but I couldn't manage to study economics. I was not accepted into the programme even though I met the requirements.

I wanted to be a lawyer to ensure that justice is served in the nation but I was not accepted by the law faculty. I do not know why, but as far as I am concerned, I met the requirements.

While these participants did not know why they were not accepted, programmes in demand in the labour market are usually students' first preference; hence, a huge number apply for them.

4. Discussion and Summary

Agrey and Lampadan's (2014) research on the factors contributing to student choice of a university in Thailand concluded that prospective students seek support systems, sporting facilities, a vibrant student life and extra-mural activities, and a safe and friendly environment. This aligns with the propositions of the combined model which takes institutional factors into account. The current study's results are not in line with those of Agrey and Lampadan (2014). Indeed, the participants do not seem to have considered extra-mural activities such as sports, student life and other activities. Even safety and security was not a factor. With regard to choosing the university, most participants appear to have made informed choices based on factors such as its location, relations with significant

others already enrolled, the university's reputation and the programme's image. This is in line with the information processing and econometric models' propositions on student decisions. However, some participants were compelled to study at the university due to factors such as entry requirements, affordability and funding availability. Therefore, with regard to university selection, student choice outweighed compulsion.

Roga et al.'s (2015) study on factors influencing foreign students' choice of institution revealed the information model as the guiding frame as they relied on information available online. Notable in the differences between the studies, are the settings in which they are based. Agrey and Lampadan (2014)'s study was conducted on a different continent and the institutional settings may not be the same as those in South Africa.

Vidhi (2014) concluded that the quality of teaching, academic reputation and a flexible mode of teaching were the primary factors considered by students in choosing a university. This is in line with the information processing student choice model. These findings are also contrary to those of the current study. Again, the different context could account for these differences as, among South African students from disadvantaged backgrounds, costs and proximity, which fall under the econometric model are primary determinants of student choice.

Gabay-Egozi et al. (2010) tested the student choice models and found that students from privileged backgrounds progress and excel in the educational system, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds generally do not perform as well. These inequalities are attributed to the educational choices made by individuals. Our study was conducted at an HDI in the Eastern Cape in South Africa which has a large population of students residing in rural areas. The findings revealed that most participants were not enrolled in programmes of their own choice. Instead, they were compelled by various circumstances beyond their control to enrol in certain programmes. These included background dynamics such as abuse, the subjects involved in certain programmes, failure to meet the requirements of first choice programmes, family or peer involvement in programme selection, failure in first choice programmes, a lack of career guidance and the availability of funding in certain programmes. Based on the available student choice models, it is evident that the combined model best supports the findings of this study. These findings can assist institutions in formulating appropriate recruitment strategies and

enhancing quality. Considering the operational definition of 'choice' and 'compulsion' in this article, it is concluded that compulsion outweighs choice in programme selection amongst many students in the university under study. Whilst interest and choice may be strong motivators, strategic goals may be just as motivating in the quest to move out of poverty and improve one's employment prospects.

The factors that influence prospective students' choices are likely to impact their contribution to social and economic development after graduation. For instance, a participant registered for social work did not connect with the profession and the thought of pursuing it was depressing. Such a student is likely to have no passion for the job itself, which will negatively affect vulnerable people who need passionate social workers.

5. Conclusion

Career choice and development is a lifelong process that depends on various factors. The study revealed that students choose to enrol at a university taking personal, institutional and economic factors into account. These include proximity to the university, its reputation, the programme's image, entry requirements, affordability and funding availability. To a large extent, the study showed that university enrolment is influenced by student choice, mainly using the information processing model. Regarding programme selection or non-selection, participants identified background dynamics, the subjects involved, failure to meet the requirements, family, peer or others' influence, failing first choice programmes, a lack of career guidance and funding availability as factors that informed their selection. Compared to the university selection factors which fell largely under the participants' personal choices, programme selection was determined by factors beyond their control, pointing to compulsion rather than choice.

Based on these findings, there is a need to ensure that prospective students are empowered to become self-interested consumers that are able to make independent choices that align with their interests. While this study reflects similar patterns to several international studies, the South African context of inequality affects choices. Although a combination of factors (the combined model) influenced choices in this study, it is apparent that students from disadvantaged backgrounds' choices are largely influenced by economic factors such as the availability of funding or affordable fees and the prospects of employment after graduation to

support their families. The inequality that characterises South African society extends to HEIs as some have higher fees than others and some attract more students who are high achievers. Therefore, the South African context plays a significant role in the choices made by students.

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