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INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING LEBANESE STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN CHOOSING A BUSINESS SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to understand the impact of different institutional characteristics on the decision-making process of grade 12 students deciding to enroll in a business school in Lebanon. Ten institutional characteristics are considered in this research, which surveyed 578 students across the country. The data was collected from both public and private schools, and is selective to grade 12 students interested in attending a business school after graduation. Our findings offer business school administrators and the marketing departments at universities important information with which to better focus their resources (people, money, time, etc.).

INTRODUCTION

Today's schools of business play a vital role in shaping globalization as they provide corporate managers and executives with a global vision (Marginson and Wende 2007). As such, the training these schools offer has grown dramatically in demand. Today, business schools are one of the areas of greatest growth in academia (Marginson and Wende 2007, 7), with over 8,000 such institutions worldwide (Trapnell 2007). The growing number of business schools means that these institutions compete for market share, seeking to maximize enrollment. As such, it is important for university administrators and marketing departments to understand what drives students to choose one option over the others. Research reveals that an educational institution gains a competitive advantage when it treats students as customers whom it seeks to "attract, retain, and serve" (Seeman and O'Hara 2006, 32). As such, a one-size-fits-all decision-making model is no longer effective in response to the behavior of today's students, who are steadily increasing their involvement and selectivity when determining which school they will attend (Felix 2006). Consequently, to design effective marketing strategies, it is critical to identify which factors are considered most important by students in their decision-making process.

This paper examines Lebanese secondary students' decision-making processes in selecting a business school to attend, looking at the following ten factors identified through the literature as being the most influential: tuition fees, international network, corporate image, admissions criteria, faculty reputation, facilities, career services, variety of programs, local government accreditation, and international accreditation. A quantitative experimental study surveying 578 grade 12 students across Lebanon was then conducted to identify which of these institutional characteristics students in fact consider in their decision-making process, and in what order these factors rank in importance. Our results offer critical insight into how students choose which business school to attend, information which may help business school administrators and marketing departments at universities to better focus their resources (people,

money, time, etc.).This article begins by presenting the current key models of the decision-making process. The second section tackles the specifications of this research and describes the factors affecting the process of choosing a college. This article hopes to not only reveal the factors that are involved in the decision-making process but also to present the importance and ranking of institutional characteristics in the eyes of the students in the Lebanese market. The third section of this paper reveals which factors are most important specifically to Lebanese high school students, and why. This discussion is followed by a description of the methodology of the study, and a presentation of the findings. The final section of this paper summarizes the findings and suggests directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When consumers decide to purchase a product or service, they are selecting it from a set of alternative options, including a non-purchase. To understand this decision process, various models have been created that include psychological, social, and cultural factors. Schiffman and Kanuk (2010) explain that a common approach is to break the process into three stages: The Input stage, which includes the company's marketing efforts and the social environment surrounding the customer; the Process stage, which includes the psychological field, the need recognition, the search, and the evaluation of alternatives of a certain product; and the Output stage, which includes the purchase and the post-purchase evaluation. Alternatively, as illustrated in Figure 1, the consumer decision-making process can be divided into five stages: (a) problem/opportunity recognition, (b) information search, (c) evaluation of alternatives, (d) purchase decision, and (e) postpurchase evaluation (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010).

Figure 1: A Model of Consumer Decision-Making (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010)
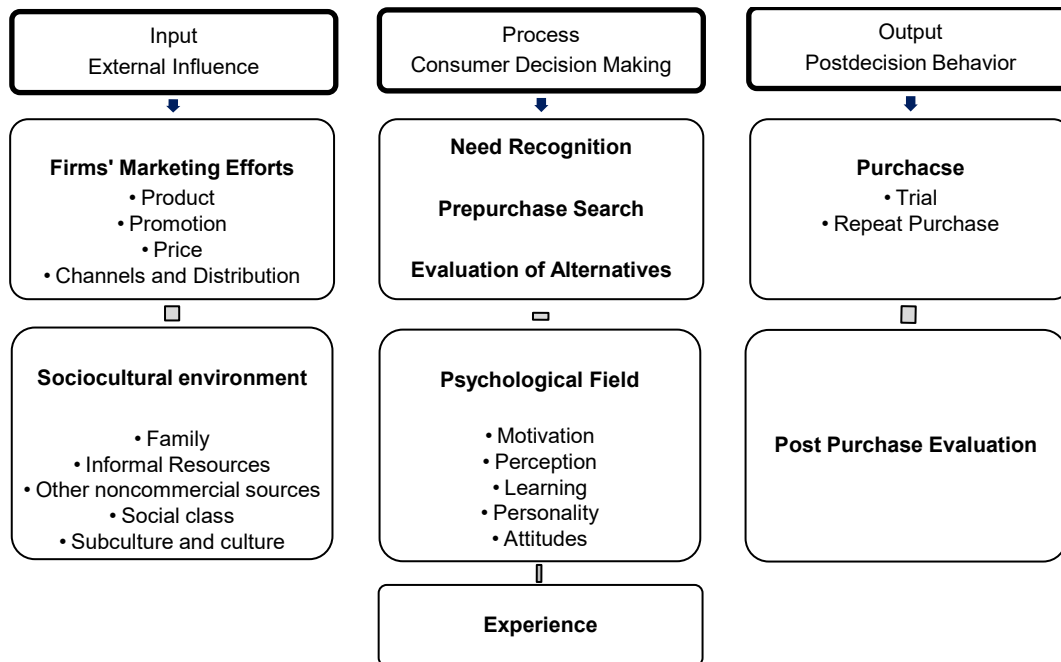
This figure depicts the common approach to understanding the decision-making process, which is to break the process into three stages: The Input stage (external influence), the Process stage (consumer decision making), and the Output stage (post-decision behavior) (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010).

An earlier study by Hauser and Wernerfelt (1990) adopted the cost-benefit approach to understanding decision making where customers are assumed to "follow a rational and deliberate behavior based on maximum desirability," while approaching decision-making as a "deliberate heuristic" process that examines different brands and gains knowledge through the re-buying experience (Namin and Vahid,

2012). Although the major stages of decision-making are similar for different types of industries, the factors evaluated vary among customers and types of products or services being evaluated. In the case of higher education, today's students differ from those of preceding generations; consequently, the factors influencing their decisions are very different from those previously considered (Domino, Libraire, Lutwiller, Superczynski, and Tian, 2006). Current college decision-making models identify both institutional and student characteristics as being influencing factors; specifically, relevant student characteristics include: the personal (academic ability, gender, etc.) and family background of the students, the market conditions, economic incentives, and political factors (Lillis and Tian, 2008). This paper focuses on the impact of institutional characteristics on the college decision-making process with respect to the selection of business schools.

Influencing Institutional Characteristics

With the steady growth of institutions competing for market share, today's students are presented with many alternatives from which to choose. In their study of the search phase of the college choice process, Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, and Schmidt (2009) found that students have considerable access to information—about, for example, the university, its alumni, faculty, and competition—as it is easily disseminated by technology. Universities are therefore interested in investigating the expectations of prospective students and their families (Lillis and Tian, 2008). The key institutional characteristics contributing to the formation of students' final decision have been identified as the following: Tuition fees, international network, corporate image, admission criteria, faculty members, facilities and technology, career services, variety of programs, Lebanese government accreditation, and international accreditation. Each of these factors will now be discussed in turn.

To begin, economic factors involved in attending a university, in particular tuition fees, strongly influence a student's decision-making process. Total cost is closely evaluated when finalizing the decision about which institution to enroll in. In a study that assessed the factors affecting a student's college preference—both when their educational reputation was and wasn't being considered—the deciding factors were still the cost of tuition, room and board, etc. (Domino et. al, 2006). Indeed, Kumar and Sachan (2006) noted that fees are inversely correlated with the decision to enroll in one specific institution over another. Furthermore, when comparing the college decision-making process of students in New Zealand and the United States, Ford, Joseph, and Joseph (1999) found that, for both groups, "the cost of education is an important factor in the decision of which university to attend".

Value for money is also an important factor in the students' decision-making process, reflecting the aforementioned "consumerist behavior" (Felix, 2006) researchers are observing. Indeed, students are found to weigh both the costs (total investment of fees, time, and expenses) and the benefits (life time earnings and enhanced job satisfaction) of postsecondary education (Alves, 2011). Opportunity for international networking is the next factor to be considered. International networks, in this context, include international alliances, agreements, and collaborations between a university and other international educational institutions and organizations for the exchange and transfer of students, faculty, and resources. Students perceive international networks positively, and some consider strong networks to be an assurance for their mobility and recognition of their degree by the labor markets (Sabra, 2013). Fourteen out of 24 higher-education experts participating in a qualitative study expressed that students are aware of international networks, they know that these networks are useful to them, and are influenced by the opportunities the presence of such networks offer when deciding to join a university (Sabra, 2013). Another study, by Kumar and Sachan (2006), listed international collaboration as the fifth most important factor affecting college choice for business schools.

The next factor to be considered is corporate image. When evaluating institutions, a college's reputation is very important (Lillis and Tian 2008) and there is a definite correlation between its reputation and the

likelihood of it being favored by applicants (Sia Kee Ming 2010). Indeed, Reddy (2011) found that, for prospective students, "brand image" is important when choosing a business school, especially with the increased perceived risk of investment of both time and money. The preconceived image of the "ideal" institution guides students through their decision-making process. This notion is formed by the students' local and familiar sources and experiences—mainly schools close to home or attended by family members (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, and Cummings, 2004). Students create their perception of an institution based on different factors, such as the satisfaction of people they know who attended or have graduated from those institutions (Felix, 2006). As such, institutions cannot only rely on ads and publicity, and need to provide the public with tangible evidence to support their claim of good quality.

Another factor in students' decision-making process is the admission criteria; that is, how difficult it is for students to join an institution. Domino et. al (2006) found that if an applicant perceives that any average student can easily be accepted, then s/he will lose some interest in that institution. The criterion for accepting students is crucial, as it sets a higher bar and reflects positively on the institution's reputation (Domino et. al, 2006). Demanding entrance requirements give the student the feeling that s/he will be joining classmates of a higher academic ability. Having pre-enrollment requirements reflects that there is a higher demand for that institution and that it can be selective when accepting students of a certain caliber. Faculty reputation also influences students' decision-making. In the study mentioned earlier, faculty strength was found to be the third most important factor affecting college choice for business school enrollment (Kumar and Sachan, 2006). Faculty members' reputation is incorporated in the quality of the university where they teach. Reputable faculty members have a positive influence on students' perception of a university, attracting more students to enroll. To promote a successful higher education degree, the faculty members—who, ultimately, deliver the product (education) to the students—need to be credible (Sabra, 2013). The quality of facilities and available technology on campus also influence students' decision making. In a study by Johnston (2010), student interviews revealed that visiting a campus has a strong influence on their decision-making process. Similarly, Domino et. al (2006) demonstrated that both the location of the campus and its surroundings are influential in the students' decision-making process. For many, being located next to leisure areas (such as restaurants, theatres etc.) is important; "students want to attend a college that provides entertainment and an atmosphere that will accommodate their needs as well as their wants" (Domino et. al, 2006).

According to Kinzie et. al (2004), joining an institution closer to home is also an important factor in the decision-making process, since living with parents may decrease the students' cost of living. This is particularly true in Arab culture, where it is customary for parents to continue assuming the responsibility for such expenses. Accordingly, most students consider closeness to home to be an important factor when choosing an institution (Kinzie et. al, 2004). Many students seek higher education to increase their odds of getting a better-paid job, and not as a "place to pursue the love for scholarship" (Felix, 2006). As such, strong career services are found to be yet another important factor that students consider. Domino et. al (2006) found that, while economic factors are usually very important, students are willing to sacrifice certain commodities or luxuries in hopes of better pay down the road. They perceive a postsecondary education as a source for knowledge and an opportunity for a better job after graduation (Domino et. al, 2006). Even students who were reluctant at first to join a university came to realize that such a degree would provide them with a competitive advantage when seeking a career (Foskett, Roberts, and Maringe, 2006). Students also seek schools with a wide variety of available programs of study. A quantitative study by Joseph and Joseph (2000) examined a sample of potential students from Indonesia and found that they took into consideration the range of academic programs, courses, and specialty programs available when selecting an academic institution. Another study, comparing New Zealand and American students, concluded that in both regions "program issues" ranked very high in importance when evaluating a college (Ford, Joseph, and Joseph, 1999). A more recent study identified that it is essential to students that a school offers their desired program (Sia Kee Ming, 2010). Indeed, Domino et al. (2006) found that "if their major is not available, they will not go to that college".

Students examine the diversity of the programs offered by the institution and will not attend a college if their desired program of study is not available at that institution. The next factor to be considered is government accreditation. This factor is a significant component in the students' process, especially for students in Lebanon, for two main reasons. First, Lebanese parents—who are highly involved in the selection of the institution—consider government accreditation an assurance of the quality of the degree offered (if the student chooses a private university). Second, in order to secure a job in the public sector, a student's degree must be certified by the government. A qualitative research targeting specialists in the higher education sector confirmed that government accreditation is an important factor in the decision-making process (Sabra, 2013). In most countries in the Middle East / North Africa (MENA) region, government agencies do not recognize degrees from local institutions that do not hold a license and accreditation from their respective education ministries, regardless of the type of international seals the institution may have acquired. As such, graduates of such institutions (i.e. those that might have international accreditation, but no government accreditation) can only target private employers (Thomas, 2011). The lack of government accreditation might put the unaware students at a major disadvantage when seeking a job in their own countries.

Finally, international accreditation plays a strong role in students' choice of school. Challa, Kasper, and Richard (2005) reported that international accreditation serves as a positive marketing tool as the granting agency promotes successful universities. Furthermore, quality labeling has recently become more popular as a means with which to assert an institution's quality claims (Verbeke and Roosen, 2009). In the academic world, international accreditation is a very good example of a quality label that reflects a high level of education offered by an institution and its commitment to its mission statement (Sabra, 2013).

The College Decision-Making Process in Lebanon

Lebanon's higher education sector began in the nineteenth century with the founding of the American University of Beirut in 1866, Saint Joseph University in 1875, and the Lebanese University (public) in 1953. Today, Lebanon's higher education sector includes a total of 43 institutions including: one public university, thirty-two private universities and institutions, seven private university colleges and institutions, and three private university institutes for religious studies (Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education n.d.). When comparing the factors that affect the selection of a postsecondary institution by students from two different countries (New Zealand and the United States), Ford, Joseph, and Joseph (1999) noted a discrepancy between the results of the two countries. Socio-cultural factors, they concluded, play a significant role in the decision-making process. As such, the results from one country reflect the specification of that nation and cannot be generalized to other countries. Thus, they argue, "trying to develop a single model of important factors to apply cross-culturally might be a mistake" (Ford, Joseph and Joseph 1999, 182).

Recognizing cultural and geographic differences is especially important when trying to draw conclusions from studies conducted in vastly different contexts. As such, relying on research conducted in western countries might lead to the wrong deductions about the Lebanese market. Local studies of student decision-making factors surrounding business school choices are therefore likely to be more relevant than extrapolated insights from abroad. Abou Nassif (2011) conducted a study in Lebanon that sought to identify which variables guide high school students when choosing a college, without specifying the type of college. The most influential factors, in descending order of importance, were found to be: (1) the influence of the parents in the decision-making process, (2) the family income, (3) the cost of the college, (4) the influence of friends and friends' institutional choices, (5) the location of residence, (6) the student's religion, and (7) the student's gender (Abou Nassif 2011).

Of note, parents, family income, and cost of college were found to be interrelated variables. For example, parents were more likely to encourage students to attend an institution with tuition fees they could afford (Abou Nassif, 2011). The impacts of these three variables on the decision-making process are intensified in the Lebanese context by the fact that, in Lebanon, parents are the main providers of college fees (Chenoweth and Galliher 2004). Furthermore, it was observed that after narrowing down the choices based on affordability, the friends' effect on the choice process became more important (Abou Nassif 2011). The location of the university followed in level of importance, as enrolling in an institution distant from home would lead to the extra costs of lodging, transportation, food, etc. Finally, contrary to research conducted outside Lebanon, this national study concluded that "there is not a one-size-fits-all ranking for the factors that affect choice of college bound students in Lebanon" (Abou Nassif 2011). For this reason, this study aims to detect a more detailed and nuanced list of decision-making factors that are specific to the Lebanese higher education market and that can be applied to countries in the same region who share similar environmental factors (culture, demographics, and economic).

The results of this research will provide further support to the literature on business school enrollment in Lebanon as it evaluates the ten factors, discussed above, involved the decision-making process of local high school students wanting to attend a business school for their postsecondary education. For a student seeking to study business, the choice of which institution to join represents the foundation of their future. It is no surprise, therefore, that Reddy (2011) found that students exert considerable effort assessing the different programs available. Marketing must therefore be effective as students are investing in an "infrequent buying" process, where differentiation is highly important (Reddy, 2011). Research exploring the decision-making factors relevant to the Lebanese market, however, is scarce, a gap that this study attempts to narrow.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research is important for investigating the institutional characteristics that affect students' decisions as there is a paucity of resources that explain students' business school attendance decision-making process in Lebanon. Furthermore, preliminary research found that many Lebanese institutions are investing time, effort, and money in pursuing international accreditation without a clear understanding of stakeholders' level of awareness of it, desire for it, or its impact on their decisions. Consequently, and to clarify the ambiguity surrounding a very vital topic for the development of the educational sector in Lebanon, this quantitative experimental research study has been conducted. Most research to date has been conducted among university students, after their college decision has been made. In contrast, using a quantitative survey, this study explores the decision-making process from the perspective of high school students, before they have finalized their decision-making process.

In this research, the object's understudy is high school students and their decision to enroll in an institution of higher education. According to Creswell (2009), true experiments are those where subjects are randomly assigned to different treatment conditions. As such, the students receiving the survey with information on international accreditation were randomly chosen in each classroom. With the focus of the research being on business schools, only students who considered pursuing a business degree were invited to participate. Participants from each high school were given a scenario describing a fabricated "ABC University" in Lebanon. This university incorporates all the factors that students might be attracted to, including: average tuition fees, international networking, positive corporate image, a credit-based educational system, knowledgeable faculty members, up-to-date technologies and facilities and various campuses, and career services, a variety of programs, and government accreditation. Participating students were asked to read the scenario and then answer questions regarding the importance they placed on each characteristic of ABC University. The students were told that the purpose of the questionnaire was to determine how likely they were to enroll at ABC University.

A 31-question survey (see Supplemental Attachment 1) was distributed to students in their classrooms with the presence of a school staff member to ensure a higher level of response, and to increase the sample size without prohibitively increasing the cost of research. This method offered reliable and efficient coverage of students from all six provinces in Lebanon.

Questionnaire Design and Administration

The objective of this quantitative study was to evaluate the institutional factors included in high school students' decision-making process around business school choice. Simple wording was used in the questionnaires to ensure the questions were clear and straightforward. They were first written in English and then translated into Arabic by a professional translator. Another translator then reviewed both versions to ascertain simplicity and precision in the wording. Moreover, to minimize the effect of language difference—between the literature on international accreditation and the native tongue of interviewees—on the research results, the questionnaires included both the English and the Arabic verbiage. A Likert Scale was employed to pinpoint the factors considered by Lebanese students when deciding which university to attend. The Likert Scale ranged from "not important at all" to "very important", and from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

An institutional characteristics scale was introduced into the questionnaire to calculate the overall evaluation of the ten institutional characteristics that are considered in the research. These characteristics were chosen after combining the results of both the literature review and previous qualitative research. The institutional characteristic is a formative scale as it is an explanatory combination of its factors, where each factor represents an independent dimension in its own right (Bucic and Gudergan, 2004). The scale includes the mean value of the students' evaluation of the (a) tuition fees, (b) international network, (c) corporate image, (d) admission criteria, (e) faculty members, (f) facilities and technology, (g) career services, (h) variety of programs, (i) Lebanese government accreditation, and (j) international accreditation. The scale is reliable as Cronbach's alpha = 0.813 > 0.70.

Table 1: Scale Used in the Model

Scale	Origin	Questions Included
Institutional Characteristics	Combination of the literature review and the qualitative research of this study	Question 1 a. Tuition Fees b. International Network c. Corporate Image d. Admission Criteria e. Faculty Members f. Facilities and Technology g. Career Services h. Variety of Programs i. Lebanese Government Accreditation j. International Accreditation

This table depicts the institutional characteristics scale that was used in the questionnaire to calculate the overall evaluation of the ten institutional characteristics considered in this research. These characteristics were chosen after combining the results of both the literature review and previous qualitative research. The institutional characteristic is a formative scale as it is an explanatory combination of its factors.

The aim for the sample was to survey students with different social and economic backgrounds. Accordingly, sampling was diversified to include students from different geographic areas (Table 2), from different types of high schools, and with varied aspirations for higher education. As such, both private and public schools were randomly selected from each of the six major provinces in Lebanon: Beirut, Mount Lebanon, South (Saida and Nabatieh), North, and Bekaa. A total of six public schools and nine private schools took part in the study. Grade 12 students from each school received the questionnaire in their classroom. As mentioned earlier, only students considering pursuing a business degree were included in

the study.In total 700 students answered the questionnaire. Only 626 were included in the analysis, however; the remaining had missing fields. After testing for outliers, 578 cases were used in the research.

Initially, a pilot test was conducted on 46 students to ensure the effectiveness of the questionnaire. The students were from the Beirut and Mount Lebanon areas, and the objective of this sample data collection was to assess the understanding of the wording used in the questionnaires. All students participating demonstrated full comprehension of the questions, both in Arabic and in English. Data collection for the full cohort started in February, 2011. An introductory letter regarding this research and the objective of the questionnaire was sent to school directors before the visit. Students were informed that the data collected would be completely anonymous. They were instructed to carefully read the scenario presented in the first page of the survey (See Appendix 1) before proceeding to the questions. Questionnaires were completed in classrooms in the presence of a school staff member—most of the time the class teacher. The estimated time taken to administer the survey—from the start of the distribution of the questionnaires to the students through the collection of their feedback—ranged from 30–45 minutes. The information gathered was subsequently analyzed using an advanced statistical software package.

Table 2: Distribution of Students Participating in the Study

Distribution of Students Participating in the Study	
Area	# of Students
Beirut	216
Mount Lebanon	94
South	177
North	32
Bekaa	59
Total	578

This table illustrates the distribution of the students participating in the study. The sampling was diversified to include students from different geographic areas. Both private and public schools were randomly selected from each of the six major provinces in Lebanon. In total 700 students answered the questionnaire. Only 626 were included in the analysis, however; the remaining had missing fields. After testing for outliers, 578 cases were used in the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The total number of students answering the questionnaire was 700, but only 626 were included in the analysis since the remaining had missing fields. After testing for outliers, 578 cases were used in the research. As detailed above, the influence that the ten university-related factors that constitute "Institutional Characteristics" had on students' decision-making process when choosing a business school was evaluated (Table 3). The factor found to be most important was the price of tuition (mean value = 4.54). Lebanon's higher education sector is characterized by considerable diversity in its offers and prices, as different types of educational services are presented to students with varying costs. With the lack of scholarships and loans, many students are concerned with whether they can afford the fees of their desired institution, especially since their parents are their main source of funding (as discussed earlier). The second most important factor students considered when choosing their future business school was corporate image (mean value = 4.44). A higher education degree is an important element in shaping the social image of any person in the Lebanese community, as people consider it an indicator of success and social standing. In addition, this community is greatly influenced by word of mouth, and many perceive it to be crucial to join a university that is highly regarded.

The third most important factor was found to be government accreditation (mean value = 4.43). In the early 1990s, the Lebanese market witnessed the rise of various new educational institutions that were not accredited by the Lebanese government; the result was a high number of unemployed graduates since

they held non-accredited degrees. This outcome sensitized students and their parents towards the importance of government accreditation. Similarly, students appreciated the admission criteria (mean value = 4.39) required to enroll in a postsecondary educational institution. Knowing that they must work hard to enroll and that they will be joined by equally skilled colleagues enhances the image of an institution, although some experts in the higher education industry have noted that high admission criteria might scare off some students (Sabra, 2013). The institutional attributes found to be the least important to students included international network (mean value = 4.08), reputation of faculty members (mean value = 4.22), and quality of facilities and technology (mean value = 4.25). One explanation for the lack of attention students give to these factors is that they may be unaware of their importance. None of these factors was considered unimportant or neutral; their ranking was simply lower in comparison to the other factors.

Table 3: Ranking of the Institutional Characteristics' Importance

Ranking of Institutional Characteristics' Importance

Institutional Factor	Mean	Std. Deviation
Importance of Tuition Fees	4.54	0.70
Importance of Corporate Image	4.44	0.97
Importance of Government Accreditation	4.43	0.76
Importance of Admission Criteria	4.39	0.74
Importance of Variety of Programs	4.37	0.81
Importance of Career Services	4.35	0.76
Importance of International Accreditation	4.32	0.70
Importance of Facilities and Technology	4.25	0.81
Importance of Faculty Members	4.22	0.65
Importance of International Network	4.08	0.83

This table lists the university-related factors that constitute "Institutional Characteristics" evaluated by the sample students, and the ranking of each factor's importance in the decision-making process. The factors understudy are, in order of perceived importance: the price of tuition, corporate image, government accreditation, admission criteria, variety of programs, career services, international accreditation, quality of facilities and technology, reputation of faculty members, and international network.

Students' Evaluation of ABC University's Institutional Characteristics

When asked to evaluate the attributes of ABC University (Table 4), the students ranked them in almost the exact same order as the factors they considered when choosing an institution in general. This outcome suggests that the ABC University's characteristics are included in students' decision-making process when choosing a business school, as students collectively liked all the attributes presented. The most appreciated characteristics of ABC were tuition fee prices (mean value = 4.45), followed by corporate image (mean value = 4.41), and government accreditation (mean value = 4.40). Since the suggested tuition fee was highly valued, it represents an affordable price for the majority of the students.

The fee presented was an average cost compared to the available services in Lebanon, ranging between $200 and $400 per credit. Highly priced private business schools charge an average of $13,000 per year while the public Lebanese University charges approximately $170 per year. Although students gave a fair evaluation to ABC's international networking and faculty members (mean value = 3.86 and 3.95, respectively), these factors were at the bottom of the list, as expected from the previous analysis.

Table 4: Evaluation of ABC's Institutional Characteristics

Evaluation of ABC's Institutional Characteristics		
Variable	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
ABC Fees	4.45	0.80
ABC Corporate Image	4.41	1.00
ABC Government Accreditation	4.4	0.79
ABC Admission Criteria	4.35	0.77
ABC Variety of Programs	4.35	0.79
ABC Career Service	4.32	0.79
ABC Facilities	4.22	0.82
ABC International Accreditation	4.09	0.88
ABC Faculty	3.95	0.77
ABC International Network	3.86	0.90

This table includes the results of student's evaluation of the ABC University introduced in the experiment. The ABC University scenario included all the main characteristics that students are expected to seek in an institution of higher education, as students collectively liked all the attributes presented.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study aimed to shed light on the impact of different institutional characteristics on the decision-making process of grade 12 students deciding to enroll in a business school in Lebanon. Ten institutional characteristics were considered and assessed by surveying 578 students across the country. The data was collected from both public and private schools, and is selective to grade 12 students interested in attending a business school after graduation. The ten institutional characteristics determined to be influential in the student decision-making process, in order of perceived importance as found in this study, are: tuition fees, corporate image, local government accreditation, admissions criteria, variety of programs, career services, international accreditation, facilities, faculty reputation, and international network. Of the ten factors examined, the cost of tuition was found to be the most important to students when evaluating an institution. The example of ABC University, presented in the experiment, has average tuition fees that combine both affordability and a high perception of quality.

Second is corporate image. As mentioned earlier, education is becoming like any other product or service, where people assess the quality based on perceived image. This image is believed to affect the students' decision, possibly because employers will also value the degrees more from well-recognized institutions and offer better opportunities for graduates. Third, the Lebanese government is the main accreditor of institutions in Lebanon. Degrees not accredited by the government are not validated, and graduates are denied career opportunities in the public sector. As a result, government accreditation is a principal element in the students' decision-making process. Fourth, an institution is better able to attract students by providing moderate admission requirements that reflect the institution's selectivity without intimidating average students or portraying a forbidding competitive entry requirement.

Fifth, the workplace in Lebanon is becoming increasingly diverse, and careers are more comprehensive. Added to that, the advancement in technology has created new jobs that require more specified education. Students were found to value institutions that offer a variety of programs, and placed a strong emphasis on this factor in their decision-making process. Sixth, the literature emphasized that students are expecting a return on their investment in the form of better paying jobs and successful careers upon graduation. Providing superior career services that assist students in landing jobs upon graduation, and providing guidance and counseling on internships and different aspects of their career development, is

fundamental to students in their attitude towards an institution. Seventh, while not near the top of the list, the data revealed that international accreditation was still an important factor in students' decision-making

Eight, with the rapid development and changes in technology, it is vital for higher education to provide students with the latest technologies, the best lab facilities, and the most updated libraries. While not at the top of their list, these factors assure students that the knowledge they are receiving is up-to-date and that their chosen institution is providing them with cutting edge resources with which to acquire the skills needed to compete in the work force. Ninth, students perceive faculty members as an important factor in the model, although it is not ranked as highest in the list of factor. The reputation of the faculty members mirrors the image of the institution that they belong to; as such, students still consider it as a factor in developing their attitude towards the institution. Tenth, international networks can offer better quality education and the ability to connect with international foreign institutions. These networks, therefore, are still valued by students even if not ranked highly in this study. Finally, this research study found that these factors are all interlinked, as each one leads to or affects the other. This interconnection may explain why students included all of them in their decision-making process, even if there was a variance in the level of importance of each factor. As such, although there is a variance in the level of influence, all ten institutional factors examined in the survey—listed in order of importance in Table 3—must be considered in the marketing strategies of Lebanese business schools wishing to be competitive.

Limitations and Future Research

The timing of the study may have caused limitations as choosing a college is a process that begins with the decision to attend college and ends with enrollment. This study was conducted six months prior to students enrolling in their chosen school and major. Some may have changed their decisions after the survey was conducted. In short, this research was limited to high school students who had not finalized their decision-making process. Future research could replicate the experiment with students who had already chosen an institution in which to enroll, but before they started classes; for example, early in the month of September. This would ensure that all answers given are the final perceptions of the students, and based on actual choices. Another limitation is the number of institutional characteristics included. A number of additional institutional characteristics (such as location, size, campuses, language, religious and political affiliation, for profit and non-profit, etc.) were not included in the model. Limiting the research to the ten institutional characteristics identified in the literature as most important made it more focused. Including additional factors would have complicated the model. Future research, however, could include characteristics not introduced here. Doing so would contribute to covering all the variables that might be contributing to students' final decision regarding which school to attend.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Quantitative Research

Quantitative Research

The following paragraphs provide the description of a hypothetical university in Lebanon that you are considering joining next year called ABC University. Read the section below carefully, and then answer the questions that follow The ABC University was established in 1990, and is accredited by the Lebanese Ministry of Higher Education. Now, in 2011, ABC has developed five campuses in different areas of Lebanon. It has over 9,000 students enrolled and more than 500 highly qualified faculty members on staff. ABC offers undergraduate degrees in five faculties with more than 40 different majors. Entrance exams and the Lebanese Official Baccalaureate are essential for the admission process. Tuition fees vary between $200 and $400 per credit. Up-to-date laboratories with cutting-edge technology, in addition to other student activities facilities, are offered at all campuses. ABC University, as an institution for higher

learning, is a career-oriented institution helping students obtain internships during their studying period and linking them with different job opportunities at prestigious companies after graduation. The ABC University has a growing network and set of partnerships with quality higher education institutions around the world. The ABC University has acquired triple international accreditation, including the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (USA), the European Quality Improvement System, and the Association of MBA.

International Accreditation is similar to an external audit (assessment) applied to the higher education institution. It certifies (confirms) that an institution or program meets certain internationally prescribed (approved) minimum standards of excellence. Accreditation is an important value proposition, and is used in measuring the success of schools. Certifications offered by these agencies are highly valued, and used as effective marketing tools. Most prestigious business schools aim at gaining the "triple crown", which is represented by the accreditation from the three above-mentioned agencies. As of 2010, 607 member institutions hold AACSB Accreditation, 126 institutions have been awarded EQUIS, and 171 schools earned the AMBA accreditation.

Table 5: Appendix 1 Ranking Institutional Characteristics Questionnaire

For each question below, circle the answer that best fits your judgment

Ranking Institutional Characteristics

1. If you are to join the ABC University next year, how much did you like or dislike each of its following attributes

Factor	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
a. Tuition Fees	1	2	3	4	5
b. International Network	1	2	3	4	5
c. Corporate Image	1	2	3	4	5
d. Admission Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
e. Faculty Members	1	2	3	4	5
f. Facilities and Technology	1	2	3	4	5
g. Career Services	1	2	3	4	5
h. Variety of Program	1	2	3	4	5
i. Lebanese Government Accreditation	1	2	3	4	5
j. International Accreditation	1	2	3	4	5

2. I like the ABC University

a. Strongly disagree	b. Somewhat disagree	c. Neither agree nor disagree	d. Somewhat agree	e. Strongly agree

3. I think that the ABC University is a good Higher Education Institution

a. Strongly disagree	b. Somewhat disagree	c. Neither agree nor disagree	d. Somewhat agree	e. Strongly agree

4. I think that the ABC University is a nice Higher Education Institution

a. Strongly disagree	b. Somewhat disagree	c. Neither agree nor disagree	d. Somewhat agree	e. Strongly agree

5. I want to enroll in the ABC University next year

a. Strongly disagree	b. Somewhat disagree	c. Neither agree nor disagree	d. Somewhat agree	e. Strongly agree

6. Rank the importance of each of the following factors when evaluating ABC University (Circle the most suitable answer)

Factor	Not Important at all	Somewhat Unimportant	Neither unimportant nor important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
a. Tuition Fees	1	2	3	4	5
b. International Network	1	2	3	4	5
c. Corporate Image	1	2	3	4	5
d. Admission Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
e. Faculty Members	1	2	3	4	5
f. Facilities and Technology	1	2	3	4	5

g. Career Services	1	2	3	4	5
h. Variety of Program	1	2	3	4	5
i. Lebanese Government Accreditation	1	2	3	4	5
j. International Accreditation	1	2	3	4	5

7. To me, ABC University is an attractive university

a. Strongly disagree   b. Somewhat disagree   Neither agree nor disagree   d. Somewhat agree   e. Strongly agree

Participants' Demographics

8. What is your age?

a. 16   b. 17   c. 18   d. 19   e. 20 and more

9. What is your gender?

a. Female   b. Male

10. In which area do you live?

a. Beirut   b. Mount Lebanon   c. South   d. Bekaa   e. North

11. What is your family's annual level of income?

a. < $12,000   b. $12,001 to $24,000   c. $24,001 to $48,000   d. > $48,001   e. I don't know

12. Who will pay for your higher education fees? (Circle all applicable options)

a. Parents   b. Family Member   c. Scholarship   d. Yourself   e. Others

13. What is your mother's level of education?

a. None - Some High school   b. Some College / Technical Education   c. University Graduate   d. Post graduate studies

14. What is your father's level of education?

a. None - Some High school   b. Some College / Technical Education   c. University Graduate   d. Post graduate studies

15. What is the type of high school you are enrolled in at grade 12 level?

a. Public High school   b. Gratis High school   c. Private High school

16. What is the annual tuition fee of your high school?

a. Public High school   b. Gratis High school   c. Private High school $1000 - $2000/yr.   d. Private High school $2,001 - $3,500/yr.   e. Private High school >$3,500/yr.

17. Does your high school provide higher education counseling?

a. Yes   b. Maybe   c. No

18. What is your academic achievement through this year?

a. Below Average (<10/20)   b. Average (10-12/20)   c. Good (12.1-14/20)   d. Very Good (14.1 – 16/20)   e. Excellent (16.1-20/20)

19. How important is it for you to enroll in higher education institution after graduation?

a. Not Important at all   b. Somewhat Unimportant   c. Neither unimportant or important   d. Somewhat Important   e. Very Important

20. Are you planning to join higher education directly after graduation from high school?

a. Yes   b. Not decided   c. No

21. Did you start looking for university?

a. Yes   b. Not decided   c. No

22. How much do your parents encourage you to join higher education institution?

a. Strongly disagree   b. Somewhat disagree   c. Neither agree nor disagree   d. Somewhat agree   e. Strongly agree

23. Do your parents join in your decision on which university to enroll at?

a. Strongly disagree   b. Somewhat disagree   c. Neither agree nor disagree   d. Somewhat agree   e. Strongly agree

24. Do your parents join in your decision on which major to join?

a. Strongly disagree   b. Somewhat disagree   c. Neither agree nor disagree   d. Somewhat agree   e. Strongly agree

25. I know pretty much about International Accreditation

a. Strongly disagree   b. Somewhat disagree   c. Neither agree nor disagree   d. Somewhat agree   e. Strongly agree

26. I do not feel very knowledgeable about International Accreditation

a. Strongly disagree   b. Somewhat disagree   c. Neither agree nor disagree   d. Somewhat agree   e. Strongly agree

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