

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA BY POST GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Undergraduate and Postgraduate education have become more marketable than ever before. This is because it provides candidates with specialized skills and competencies, paving way for promotion and widening career choices. Students seeking postgraduate studies apply to institutions of their choice. This paper is set to find out what makes a student to choose one university and not the other. A survey research design was used to collect data using questionnaires and a sample of 120 students. The questionnaire was a 4-point Likert-like rating scale constructed by the researchers. The instrument was validated by experts in Measurement & Evaluation and a reliability index of 0.63 was calculated using Pearson Product Moment Correlational analysis. Four research questions were raised to guide the study. Mean and Standard Deviation were used to analyze the data collected. SPSS 23 statistical package was used for data analysis. It was discovered that uniqueness and quality of programmes offered, predictability of duration of course, availability of Lecturers and supervisors, ICT enabled mode of studies and geographical location, were significant factors in the choice of NOUN for Post Graduate studies. The National Open University of Nigeria should therefore ensure that the programmes offered are relevant and productive so that more students may choose this institution for professional development.

Keywords: Factors, Choice, NOUN and Post Graduate students

Introduction

Distance and Lifelong education is a key concept in current thinking about education and training worldwide. Learning takes place throughout the life of an individual and may take place in the formal, informal and non-formal systems (Duke and Hinzen, 2020). Kydd, Crawford and Riches (2018) opines that higher education which leads to professional development is crucial, not only to the individual but also to the promotion of an effective organization. According to International Labour Organization, professionals of the future need to be creative, able to reason and capable of independent decisions, solving problems and finding information. They should possess characteristics such as capacity to work independently and with others, confidence to make decisions, willingness and ability to continue learning. Little wonder many people are resorting to post graduate studies in various institutions.

According to Eruat (2006), any framework for choice of institution for promoting and facilitating higher learning will have to take the following factors into account:

An appropriate combination of learning settings i.e. on the job, near the job, home, library etc., time for study, consultation and reflection, the availability of suitable learning resources; people who are prepared (i.e. both willing and able) to give appropriate support and; the learner's own capacity to learn and take advantage of the available opportunity.

Through choice of institution for higher education an individual is able to improve his/her, academic and professional qualification, which makes him/her fit in the global network of changes. Education has meaning only if it unites the unchangeable in man with the transitory to enable him to react to challenges of his/her day and age in a worthy way. In addition, education has the duty to prepare the citizens of today to live and work in the world of tomorrow that is continuously changing (Power, 2019).

In Nigeria there are many public and private universities from which graduate students seek continuing education, hence the need to ascertain some factors that influence their choice of an institution above others. Universities need to better understand how their target markets base their decisions for further education in order to attract and retain quality students (Lubbe and Petzer, 2013). This insight is necessary for universities in order to offer more value than the competitors in the same market arena (Chawinga and Zozie, 2016). More effective marketing efforts could be established in the light of understanding the prospective students decision-making process, with emphasis on the influences and sources of information which they utilize (Moogan, Baron & Bainbridge, 2001). It is significant to conceptualize what and who determines the choice of university by students.

From a university or business perspective, understanding the factors that affect a students' choice of universities is related to attracting more students. It is therefore essential that universities take cognizance of the factors that contribute to the choice of university in order to implement relevant policies at the specific university. This would benefit both students and universities alike. Pucciarelli and Kaplan (2016) states that the competition among universities to attract students has intensified. Not only are institutions concerned about the number of students they can enrol, but are interested in outstanding students for the contribution to the university's reputation.

Selecting a university involves an individual considering career alternatives, comparing and then selecting a best solution according to the individual's means. The choices of university and of career paths are thus closely related to each other (Kaplan, 2014). This decision is influenced by a number of factors. It is assumed that different motivating factors could exist which will then influence the decision-making process regarding university selection.

The decision-making process is also affected by various influential persons and/or institutions whose opinions could be of importance to the prospective student. The prospective student's consideration of these factors along with other limiting factors could then play a role in the student's choice of accepting or rejecting a certain university. The understanding of these influential factors, persons and or institutions could steer universities towards better marketing strategies to attract more of the university's specific target-market based on the qualifications offered as well as the type of student demanded.

As Briggs (2006), and also Simões and Soares (2010) mention, the choice of university is a decision of high importance and can be influenced by cost, information, access, academic achievement, life and school experience to name but a few. This concurs with the findings of Moodley & Singh (2015) who also states that affordability (cost) is a main factor and could at a later stage lead to dropouts without completing studies. For this research a number of internal and external factors are taken as independent variables while the decision to take such a decision is taken as a dependent variable. Internal factors include family, friends, knowledge of the university, advertising and word-of-mouth sources. External factors include location, cost, courses offered, facilities and employment opportunities.

Statement of the problem

Over the years, the assessment of the factors influencing the choice of institution, have attracted the interest of teachers, counsellors, psychologist, researchers and school administrators. Competition in the tertiary education sector is increasing annually (Cloete, 2016). This is because of the public outcries concerning the low standard of education and the declining quality of education in the country as characterized by poor academic performance and the breeding of graduates with little technical know-how. This has resulted into serious set-backs in the industrial development of the nation. It is also a known fact that incessant industrial disputes and imbroglio between the Academic staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal government, leading to students spending extra years to finish a programme is making them seek for more reliable alternatives. And more recently, the spate of insecurity in the nation has necessitated individuals and parents wanting their children to school in institutions closer to their homes. The quality and duration of programmes offered by NOUN significantly influences it's choice by students for post graduate studies.

Management of the university need to fully comprehend the underlying factors that guide students in their choice of the university. This will help in the development of a consistent framework for students' academic success. Based on the limited understanding of students' decision-making processes and the influencing factors regarding their choice of university, this study is geared towards ascertaining these factors and making recommendations that will drastically improve the enrolment figures of the University.

Review of Related Literature

Certain factors motivate an individual to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies. These range from a desire for self- actualization to a need for personal growth, from desire for monetary rewards to mobility in the professional ladder and from competence enhancement to sharpening of skills to deal with emerging issues at the work place.

For one to choose one institution over another to achieve his goals, several factors are considered such as:

- a. Attractiveness and marketability of the post graduate programmes offered,
 - b. The quality of the degrees offered
 - c. The availability of the learning resources and support services
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- d. The affordability of tuition fees, and
- e. Convenience of the location of the institution in terms of accessibility.

When the above factors and more are in place, the student makes a choice for a given institution and pursues his/her choice programme. In the final analysis several effects are expected of the candidate. These include self-actualization, academic achievement, professional and career development, economic monetary reward, competence enhancement and acquisition of new skills and attitudes necessary in one's profession (Mckenzie and Wurzburg, 2019).

Choice of university is a choice influenced by various demographic, economic, social, political, and institutional factors (Moogan, 2011). Research by Bodycott and Lai (2012) suggest that the two primary drivers on the decision to choose a university are "influencers", or people who provide advice and assistance to students; and institutional features that attract students to a certain type of university. These factors include institutional rankings, cost, safety, and career prospects. Lubbe and Petzer (2013) state that students now have a wider range of choice of institutions, subjects and courses, posing competition to the "traditional" universities. According to Soutar and Turner (2002), academic reputation and the quality of faculties are often viewed as significant factors while other factors that prospective students usually consider are based on location of the university and distance from home as noted by Moogan and Baron (2003).

Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) identified that the choice of university is enforced by the educational environment (staff, facilities and resources), reputation (brand name, achievements and academic standard), career prospects (employment prospects, expected income and employers' opinions), geographic appearance (political stability, safety and hospitality) and cultural integration, including religious freedom and cultural diversity. Similarly, He and Banham (2011) found that the economic background of students influences where they choose to study since education and learning are more important to middle class students.

Location

Niu and Tienda (2008) found that geographical placement does constrain university choice, thus closeness to family home does play a role in the choice of university. Simões and Soares (2010) also attribute family home vicinity as one of the most important elements in choice of university. Van, Meyer and Pelser. (2021) suggests that geographical reasons, such as extensive travelling distances may discourage many prospective students from selecting a university. Closeness to home is associated with cost and therefore could have a negative association with university choice (Soutar and Turner 2002; Briggs and Wilson 2007). Accommodation and transportation costs could be saved by attending a university close to home.

Financial implications

Family income is a key factor in determining access to university, as a range of costs, both upfront and hidden, need to be taken care of (Hunt 2008). Ebrahim (2009) alludes that the initial costs associated with applying to a university might stress a family budget and cause prevention of applying to a university by a prospective student. In contrast, Soo and Elliot (2008) indicate that the fees do not influence the choice of university. Briggs and Wilson (2007) also states that cost are ranked low on a scale of factors that influence choice of university. Universities often engage in offering a range of scholarships and discounts in marketing and attracting prospective students. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) support this notion, and state that low socio-economic status applicants are more likely to apply to an institution where financial assistance is offered. With bursaries a university secures equal opportunities for students to learn.. Bursaries also enhance the university's popularity as it is available for all.

Facilities

According to Urbanski (2000) variables such as college reputation, campus location, campus atmosphere, campus safety, size, cultural uniqueness and costs influence students in the choice of university. Sidin, Hussin and Soon (2003) found similarly that students' selection of universities is influenced by academic quality, facilities, campus surroundings, and cultural characteristics, among others. Their results also support that income affects the choice of students. Facilities, especially accommodation, are one of the aspects a university can offer in attracting prospective students. Accommodation provides a huge advantage in attracting prospective students.

Information sources

Decisions are usually made based on various forms of information available, word of mouth, perceptions and reputation of institutions. To gather information, prospective students consult university prospectuses (O'Connor & Lundstrom, 2011), careers officers (Moogan & Baron, 2003) and refer to complex social networks such as family, friends and various media types for advice and support. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) revealed that beliefs and social status of the parents and prospective students both seek recognition from their own peer groups for the decisions made. A combined effect of university communications and social group values may create positive reinforcement while disagreement of the two may generate significant tensions for prospective students.

Research has revealed that a major source of information influencing choice is an institution's own stagg, via direct or through phone enquiries (Lubbe & Petzer, 2013). Foskett (2009) found friends' advice as well as the significance of the role of career advisers in information assimilation to be a major source of information. Pimpa (2005, proposes that students prefer family as a source of information. According to Bodycott and Lai (2012), parents are more interested in safety, job prospects, and opportunities to pursue graduate studies. He also found that students are more interested in what the campus has to offer while on campus. Bohman (2010) found similar evidence to Bodycott and Lai (2012) in that

students learned about a particular university through either family or friends who had previously attended or who lived in the community where the university was situated. Family and peer relationships are influential to students as noted by Bohman (2010). In contrast, Pillay (2010) conducted a study for Rhodes University, finding that only 10% of the respondents were influenced by their parents while the majority of respondents made the choice of university themselves.

Objectives of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to assess the factors influencing the choice of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) by post graduate students. The specific objectives are:

- i. To determine the factors influencing graduate students' choice of Institution.
- ii. Assess the perceptions of students of National Open University of Nigeria on the quality of educational programmes in the University
- iii. Determine respondents' choice of institution for higher education in view of academic support services.
- iv. Determine respondents' choice of institution for higher education in view of Finances

Research Questions

- i. What are the factors influencing graduate students' choice of Institutions?
- ii. What is the perception of PG students of National Open University of Nigeria on the quality of educational programmes in NOUN?
- iii. Does academic support services play any role in choosing a University for higher education
- iv. Does finance play any significant role in the choice of institution for higher learning?

Methodology

A survey research design was adopted for this study Questionnaires were used to obtain information directly from students of NOUN. The population of the study is all Post Graduate students of NOUN totalling over 2000. The postgraduate students took part in this study because they gave valuable information on the factors that influence them to pursue distance education, what they considered when choosing NOUN for postgraduate education, their perceptions on the quality of educational programmes offered at NOUN as well as their marketability, relevance and impact on their respective careers and professions.

A simple random sampling technique was used to draw 120 students from 12 study centres in the six geo-political zones of the country. All the faculties that offer postgraduate studies were represented. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire constructed by the researchers titled "Factors influencing the Choice of NOUN". The questionnaire has two sections. Section A sought for demographic data of the respondents while section B contains 12 items representing the information the researchers wanted to elicit. The questionnaire utilized the four-point rating scale (Likert-likescale), starting from Strongly Agree (SA),

Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The items were designed in such a way that every question was related to the research questions and hypotheses of the study.

Two experts in the field of Measurement and Evaluation were consulted to validate the instrument and their input were reflected in the final draft of the questionnaire. The reliability of the instrument was established using a pilot study where the questionnaires were administered to 20 students who were trying to register their new semester courses in NOUN. A Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient of 0.63 was gotten and it's high enough to consider the instrument reliable. Questionnaires were administered to the respondents which were duly completed and returned. The analysis of the data for research questions and hypothesis that guided this study was accomplished using frequencies, percentages means, and standard deviation.

Result and Discussion

Demographic Information of the Respondents

Table 1: Sex of the Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Female	65	54.2
Male	55	45.8
Total	120	100

Source: Fieldwork (2021)

It can be observed that 65 (54.2%) of the respondent were females while 55 (45.8%) were males.

Table 2: Faculty of the Respondents

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Agricultural Science	3	2.5%
Arts	8	6.7%
Education	57	47.5%
Health Science	10	8.3%
Management Science	22	18.4%
Science	13	10.8%
Social Sciences	7	5.8%
Total	120	100%

Source: Fieldwork (2021)

It can be observed that The faculties of the respondents are as follows: Faculty of Agricultural Sciences 3 (2.5%), Faculty of Arts 8 (6.7%), Faculty of Education 57 (47.5%), Faculty of Health Sciences 10 (8.3%), Faculty of Management Science 22 (18.4%), Faculty of Science 13 (10.8%)and Faculty of Social Sciences, 7 (5.8%).

Table 3: Programme of Study

Programme	Frequency	Percentage
Post Graduate Diploma	30	25%
Master's	75	62.5%
Ph.D.	15	12.5%
Total	120	100%

Source: Fieldwork (2021)

From the table it could be seen that 30(25 %) of the respondents were pursuing PGD programmes while 75(62.5%) were pursuing master's degrees in various faculties and 15(12.5%) were PhD students.

Research Questions

Table 4: Factors Affecting Choice of NOUN

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	X	SD	Total
1	Programmes are unique and attractive	73 60.8%	38 31.7%	5 4.2%	4 3.3%	3.50	.73	120
2	Recommendation from family and friends	20 16.7%	15 12.5%	21 17.5%	64 53.3%	1.93	1.15	120
3	Advertising available information	55 45.8%	40 33.3%	15 12.5%	10 8.3%	3.17	.95	120
4	Noun graduates are marketable and upwardly mobile	51 42.5%	57 47.5%	5 4.2%	7 5.8%	3.24	.79	120
5	Predictability of course duration	87 72.5%	26 21.7%	4 3.3%	3 2.5%	3.64	.67	120
6	Quality and relevance of degrees offered	72 60.0%	38 31.7%	6 5.0%	4 3.3%	3.48	.74	120
7	Availability of Lecturers and supervisors	70 58.3%	38 31.7%	7 5.8%	5 4.2%	3.44	.79	120
8	Affordable Tuition fees	22 18.3%	26 21.7%	30 25%	42 35%	2.23	1.12	120
9	Adequate Support Services	40 33.3	37 30.8%	22 18.3%	21 17.5%	2.81	1.08	120
10	Mode of study	54 45%	46 38.3%	10 8.3%	10 8.3%	3.20	.91	120
11	Availability of Resources and facilities	47 39.2%	46 38.3%	12 10%	15 12.5%	3.04	.99	120

12	Location	and	44	33	29	14		120
	Accessibility	of	36.7%	27.5%	24.2%	11.7%	2.89	1.04
	Institution							

Source: Fieldwork (2021)

Table 4 above, presents the result of the factors that significantly affect students' choice of NOUN for their post graduate studies.

Uniqueness of programmes offered:

111 (92.5%) of the respondents with ($X = 3.50$, $SD = .73$) agreed that their choice of NOUN was mainly because most of the programmes offered in NOUN are very unique while 9 (7.5%) disagreed.

Recommendation from family and friends

Few respondents 35 (29.2%) chose NOUN for post graduate studies based on the recommendations of their family members and friends. Majority of the respondents 85 (70.8%) with ($X = 1.93$, $SD = 1.15$) were not influenced by this factor

Advertising and available information

95 (78.3%) respondents with ($X = 3.17$, $SD = .95$) agreed that the mode of advertisement and advocacy of the University contributed significantly to their choice of NOUN for their post graduate studies while 25 (21.7%) said that advertisement was not a factor for their choice.

Marketability of NOUN graduates

108 (90%) respondents with ($X = 3.24$, $SD = .79$) said that marketability and upward mobility of NOUN graduates attracted them to the institution while only 12 (10%) disagreed with the factor.

Predictability of course duration

113 (94.2%) respondents with ($X = 3.64$, $SD = .67$) agreed that the predictability of the duration of NOUN programmes significantly influenced their choice of the institution while only 7 (5.8%) respondents disagreed with the point.

Quality and relevance of degrees offered

110 (91.7%) respondents with ($X = 3.48$, $SD = .74$) agreed that the relevance and quality of the degrees offered in NOUN significantly affected their choice of the institution for their studies while 10 (8.3%) disagreed with the point.

Availability of Lecturers and supervisors

108 (90%) respondents with ($X = 3.44$, $SD = .79$) agreed that their choice of NOUN for post graduate studies was significantly influenced by the availability of lecturers and supervisors in the institution. 12 (10%) of the respondents disagreed with the assertion.

Affordable Tuition fees

48 (40%) respondents said that finance was a factor they considered before choosing NOUN for post graduate studies but 72 (60%) with ($X = 2.23$, $SD = 1.12$) said that finance was not a factor in their choice of NOUN.

Adequate support services

77 (64.1%) respondents with ($X = 2.81$, $SD = 1.08$) agreed that the quality of support services available in NOUN significantly affected their choice of the institution while 43 (35.9) disagreed with the view.

Mode of studies

100 (83.3%) respondents with ($X = 3.20$, $SD = .91$) agreed that the open and distance mode of delivery adopted by NOUN significantly affected their choice of the institution while only 20 (16.7) respondents disagreed with the point.

Availability of Resources and facilities

93 (77.5%) respondents with ($X = 3.04$, $SD = .99$) agreed that the amount of resource materials and the adequate facilities in NOUN influenced them to choose the institution for higher studies. Only 27 (22.5%) were of contrary opinion.

Location and accessibility of the Institution

77 (64.2%) respondents with ($X = 2.89$, $SD = 1.04$) agreed that the availability of NOUN study centres all over the Nation significantly influenced their choice of the University for post graduate studies while only 43 (35.8%) respondents expressed a contrary view.

Discussion

Research question one wanted to find out the respondents' reason for choosing NOUN for post graduate studies. From Table 4, the students agreed to a number of factors being instrumental to their choice of NOUN.

Most of the respondents considered the kind of programmes offered in NOUN before choosing it as an institution for their post graduate studies. This shows that the institution offers courses that are relevant for those who would like to build their career paths. This is in line with the findings of Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) who opines that the choice of

university is enforced by the reputation (brand name, achievements and academic standard) and career prospects (employment prospects, expected income and employers' opinions).

NOUN provides adequate information through various media for public consumption. Through study centres all over the Federation, the University engages in aggressive advocacy that sells the university to prospective candidates even in very remote areas of the country. The result is the massive influx of students to the University. This is in agreement with O'Connor and Lundstrom (2011) who discovered that prospective students consult university prospectuses, careers officers and refer to complex social networks such as family, friends and various media types to gather information.

Another important factor that attracts students to NOUN is the marketability of their graduates. This suggests that the marketability of the graduates of an institution is taken into account when choosing an institution for professional development. Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) also pointed out that prospective students consider the reputation (brand name, achievements and academic standard) and career prospects (employment prospects, expected income and employers' opinions) of graduates of an institution before making their choice.

The data obtained here implies that course duration is one of the major factors that the respondents considered when choosing NOUN. As a result of Industrial actions by staff of Nigerian tertiary institutions, students end up spending double or more, the expected duration of their various programmes in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. This makes NOUN a very viable option for those who want to finish their programmes in record time, as NOUN staff do not engage in industrial actions. Students move at their pace.

Many of the respondents said that the quality of degrees offered in NOUN affected their choice. It is a known fact that in NOUN, students' work hard and own their work. The institution is never associated with malpractices of any kind, students' riots or sorting anybody for marks as NOUN engages in conference marking at various centres. Students' are guaranteed of their actual results as they do not know where their scripts are marked or who does the marking. These features endear NOUN to serious minded and hardworking students as they are sure to get their actual results in record time.

The findings are in line with Gray, Fam and Llanes' (2003) opinion that the choice of university is enforced by the educational environment (staff, facilities and resources), reputation (brand name, achievements and academic standard), and geographic appearance (political stability, safety and hospitality). Soutar and Turner (2002), also found academic reputation and the quality of faculties as significant factors in choosing a university. Sidin, Hussin and Soon (2003) also found that students' selection of universities is influenced by academic quality.

Many of the respondents chose NOUN because the lecturers/supervisors are available to assist and guide students in their work and studies. NOUN has many academic and non-academic staff to guide post graduate students in their work. The institution also engages the services of experts from other Universities to facilitate and supervise students' works. NOUN is a mega University and is adequately equipped to cater for its numerous students and

timely too. Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) supports this finding when they identified that the choice of university is enforced by the educational environment (staff, facilities and resources), and, geographic appearance (political stability, safety and hospitality).

77 (64.1%) respondents agree that they were attracted to NOUN by the superb support services it offers. NOUN has study centres in all the states of Nigeria with well trained and supportive staff. They offer services to students and give information to prospective students. The Counsellors are there to guide prospective students on choice of programmes, admission criteria and method of application. Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) confirm that educational environment (staff, facilities and resources), geographic appearance (political stability, safety and hospitality) are important factors in choosing a University for studies.

Many of the respondents agree that one of their major attractions to NOUN is the mode of studies. NOUN is a distance learning institution that allows students opportunities to study at their pace and time. The institution is not confined to a particular location and the online facilitation allows students to study from the comfort of their homes and offices.

The data suggests that many of the respondents chose NOUN because of the resources and facilities available at the institution. NOUN has adequate infrastructure and facilities that attract prospective students. There are expertly prepared course materials for every course, well equipped libraries, computer and Science laboratories. These help to enhance students' learning and endears NOUN to intending students. Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) identified that the educational environment (staff, facilities and resources), geographic appearance (political stability, safety and hospitality) and cultural integration are all significant factors in the choice of an institution for higher studies.

According to Urbanski (2000) variables such as campus atmosphere, campus safety, size and cultural uniqueness influence students in the choice of university. Sidin, Hussin and Soon (2003) also opines that students' selection of universities is influenced by facilities, campus surroundings, and cultural characteristics, among others.

The findings suggest that location of the university is relevant in choosing NOUN as the institution for pursuing postgraduate studies. The National Open University of Nigeria is a ready-made choice of Institution for higher Education, especially for full time workers who cannot afford to be fully away from their workplace. The fact that NOUN has study centres all over the country helps solve the issue of travelling to a particular location away from home. This saves time and resources for students.

Simões and Soares (2010) mention, that the choice of university can be influenced by access, academic achievement, .life and school experience. As opined by Moogan and Baron (2003), factors that prospective students usually consider are location of the university and distance from home. Urbanski (2000) also found variables such as campus location, campus atmosphere, campus safety, size, cultural and uniqueness as important factors that influence students in the choice of university.

However, Recommendation from family and friends, as well as Affordability of tuition fees were not seen as important factors affecting the choice of institution by post graduate students of the National Open University of Nigeria with $X = 1.93$, $SD = 1.15$ and $X = 2.23$, $SD = 1.12$ respectively

In a study conducted by Pillay (2010) he found that only 10% of the respondents were influenced by their parents while the majority of respondents made the choice of university themselves. This finding is not in consonance with that of Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) who revealed that beliefs and social status of the parents and prospective students and recognition from their own peer groups influence the decisions they make.

Research Question Two is on the perception of PG students of National Open University of Nigeria on the quality of educational programmes in the institution.

From Table 4, item No, 6, most of the respondents agree that NOUN offers quality programmes that are relevant to their career development. NOUN offer many innovative and flagship programmes that are not common in the conventional Universities. This attracts a lot of students to the institution. Again, in NOUN, students' work hard and own their work. The institution is never associated with examination malpractices, students' riots or sorting for marks. The findings are in line with Gray, Fam and Llanes' (2003) opinion that the choice of university is enforced by the educational environment (staff, facilities and resources) and reputation (brand name, achievements and academic standard). Soutar and Turner (2002), also found academic reputation and the quality of faculties as significant factors in choosing a university. Sidin, Hussin and Soon (2003) also found that students' selection of universities is influenced by academic quality.

Research Question Three sought to find out if academic support services play any role in choosing a University for higher education. It was discovered from Table 4, Item No. 9, that the high quality support services of NOUN is a major factor in the choice of the institution. NOUN has study centres in all the states of Nigeria with well trained and supportive staff, who offer professional services to students and give information to prospective students. This finding is in line with the opinion of Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) who found educational environment (staff, facilities and resources) as important factors in choosing a University for studies.

Research Question Four sought to discover if finance plays any significant role in the choice of institution for higher learning. From Table 4, Item No. 8, 60% (72) respondents did not consider costs as very important in their choice of NOUN. This could be because most of the post graduate students are gainfully employed and could afford the tuition to any institution of their choice. This in line with the finding of Soo and Elliot (2008) that fees do not influence the choice of university. Briggs and Wilson (2007, 57) also states that cost are ranked low on a scale of factors that influence choice of university. To the contrary, Moodley & Singh (2015) found that affordability (cost) is a main factor in the choice of a university. He and Banham (2011) also found that the economic background of students influences where they choose to study.

Conclusion

This paper has presented and discussed the various factors that influence the search for and choice of preferred institution, by the post graduate students of the National Open University of Nigeria. The findings concur with the postulates of the theoretical framework, conceptual framework and the literature review in regard to the factors that influence the choice of institution for postgraduate education. These factors include convenience of its location, attractiveness of academic programmes offered, marketability of the programmes, predictability of course duration, high quality of degrees offered and availability of facilitation/lecturers and supervisors. Other factors are favourable mode of learning (online facilitation), availability of good learning resources and facilities. Manageability of tuition fee and influence of significant others were found not to be prime factors in making the choice by the students.

Recommendations

In view of the factors that students consider to choose the institution where they pursue postgraduate studies, the following recommendations were made:

1. The National Open University of Nigeria should ensure that the programmes offered are relevant and attractive so that more students may choose this institution for professional development. This can be done by involving all the stakeholders including employers in the planning and designing of the curriculum.
2. NOUN should maintain the good practice of not embarking on Industrial actions and ensure that students complete their courses within the duration stipulated.
3. Lecturers and supervisors are encouraged to be committed to their work ensuring that students finish their work in record time.
4. The university should ensure that the high quality of the academic programmes is maintained by reviewing the programmes constantly in line with global best practices.
5. The University should make their study centres more conducive for learning since location and facilities play significant roles in the choice of a University.

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