



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Factors influencing Moroccan University students' choice of academic majors: Mohammed V University, FLHS in Rabat as a case study

Mohamed ACHAMRAH *

Moulay Ismail University, FLHS, Meknes, Morocco.

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Abstract

Opting for an academic major at the university can be a student's most conclusive decision. This study aims at identifying factors that impact first-year university students' choice of academic majors at the university. It mainly examines the impact of personal characteristics and future job factors on first-year university students choosing a specific academic major or field of study. A survey was administered to 180 first-year university students to assess factors influencing their choice of these academic majors at the university, the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Meknes, as a case study. Using a survey, participants in this study were asked to rank a list of determining factors that may have influenced their decision of university academic major. The study reached that career aspiration, the reputation of academic major, students' personal development, educational goals, parents' influence and teachers' impact all come into play to affect first-year university students' selection of their academic majors.

Keywords: Choice of academic majors; Motivating factors; Cultural capital; Higher Education

1. Introduction

The prospect of attending higher education institutions is seen as a new and exciting experience for most first-year university students who graduated from high school. For some students, conversely, the process can be enormously stressful. There are so many things to consider. One, of course, is which academic major to opt for? The method of choosing an academic major at a university can be complicated. It is a reason for great anxiety because it will likely be one of the most important life decisions they make for most. This paper looked at different factors that influence first-year university students' choice of academic majors and identified the most influential that drive their choices at Mohammed V University, FLHS in Rabat, Morocco, as a case study.

Selecting an academic major is a crucial decision in the students' lives because of its effect on the study's attainment or failure and determining the job opportunity and social rank. In this respect, [1] define a "good" academic major choice as the major best capable of helping students achieve their educational and post-education goals. Investigators have developed a widespread body of literature on the predictors of university academic major choice, but it has been separated into numerous, almost mutually exclusive areas. Many have emphasised students' academic ability, self-concept, and demographic characteristics and how these features affect first-year university students' choice of their educational major. Others have focused on the impact of social issues and family on students' major choice decisions. Still, others have examined the effect of first-year university students' personalities and political orientation on major choices. Researchers have failed to integrate the theories to analyse major university choices comprehensively. The big question here is: What factors influence students to opt for specific academic majors at Mohammed V University, FLHS in Rabat? This study considered the factors that affected university students' choice of academic majors and aimed to identify the most influential ones.

* Corresponding author: Mohamed ACHAMRAH
Moulay Ismail University, FLHS, Meknes, Morocco.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Opting for an academic major may be a big challenge among first-year university students. Many of them do not do adequate research on their own choice, nor do they receive sufficient directions from their teachers, friends and parents. Hence, tertiary education is arguably a high-involvement product. Accordingly, we might safely deduce that prospective students and their sponsors would look carefully into the options available in terms of tertiary institutions. Therefore, this leaves these students with a tough choice, mainly which academic major they would apply for. The current study seeks to comprehensively identify factors that highly influence first-year university students' choice of academic majors.

Furthermore, by classifying these influences, this paper's findings can help universities understand the intricacies of what first-year university students consider when they select their academic choices. Given this purpose, this study tries to answer the following research question: How influential are specific factors when selecting certain academic majors for university students to carry on their studies? The researcher wished to understand what factors motivate first-year university students to choose an academic major. Several sub-questions were asked to determine where first-year university students receive specific information vis-à-vis their academic major selection and what role academic advisors play in this process.

2. Review of Literature

Choosing an academic major at the university is arguably one of the first-year university students' most crucial life decisions. The drive of the present study was to identify the most influential factors involved in that decision. Specific factors may hold different weight in potential job opportunities and influence from parents and teachers [10]. A study of 449 students in Turkey showed that students were the most influential individuals in selecting an academic major. That was followed carefully by parents and other family members, school teachers, and friends. The influences identified by previous research are those in which the current study used to expand upon the influences affecting university students' choice of academic majors. For this study, elements were broken down into only three categories: *practical reasons*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *personal reasons*.

Studies also suggest that family and parental relationships are still broadly influential factors for first-year university students [7]. Additionally, parents influence their children when they demonstrate preferences for certain occupations or view some fields of study as more valuable than others. Their favouritism can determine their child's expectations and career aspirations over time and may eventually shape their decision of an academic major [11]. Students may choose a major because they consider the needs of their family before theirs, selecting an academic major that would lead to the best employment prospect rather than their satisfaction.

In short, with all the possible factors influencing university students' decisions of academic majors having been reviewed, there is still uncertainty about what makes a difference. Choosing an academic major that best fits first-year university students has always been at the top. Whether you label it their interest, desire, passion, or need to contribute to the world, it all falls under the scope of personal reasons. The theories of these influences being internal and originating within the individual [6] are valid except on one point. Individuals are constantly evolving, and new experiences reshape them. New world views and values are continuously developed, so personal reasons that influence first-year university students may change over time at the start of their university [6].

3. Methodology

A survey consisting of 24 questions was developed based on the instrument deployed by [16]. Questions about demographics and parents' education were added to the instrument. A combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions was used. First-year university students were also asked about their willingness to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews to develop the survey instrument further and better understand certain types of responses to questions. These students were enrolled in their first year at Mohammed V University, FLHS in Rabat, Morocco.

This study was intended to examine the connection between independent variables and the choice of academic majors at the university. The study population consists of Mohammed V University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences students in 2021/2022. Two hundred fifty (205) questionnaires were distributed, and only 180 questionnaires were accepted. The questionnaire was developed based on previous studies. It contained three parts: Part one is the demographic data, including questions related to the respondents' demographic profiles. Part two is about questions that measure the personnel factors influencing their selection of the academic majors at the university. Part three is about inquiries related to job characteristics.

The semi-structured interview data-gathering technique was used to comprehend and supplement the questionnaire mode of enquiry. Twenty (20) interviewees were also intended to support the questionnaire survey project since certain aspects of the research inquiry might not have captured the initial survey adequately. It is expected that this semi-structured interview would provide additional evidence to assess the reasons for first-year university students' choice of academic majors at the university.

4. Results

This paper incorporates findings from the survey of 180 participants and 20 semi-structured interviews with the first-year university students at Mohammed V University, FLHS, in Rabat, Morocco. More than half of the sample (54.9%) were from the 18-20 age group. The second group (25.4%) were undergraduate students from 21- 23. The third group (19.7%) were students whose ages were above 23. Male students represented 83 (46.11%), and 97 (53.89 %) were female students. The findings of this study explain the main integrated findings from quantitative and qualitative stances. It also provides a general account of different factors influencing first-year university students' choice of their academic majors at this faculty. In this respect, first-year university students' testimonies are also used throughout the findings to support the emerging themes, followed by a discussion based on the key findings.

This section discusses the factors underpinning first-year university students' selection of their academic majors at the university. Different meanings and interpretations are also attached to how first-year university students select their academic majors at the university. The analysis suggests that the whole objective of opting for an academic major or field of study at the university is more related to career aspiration, educational goals, personal development, ambition for success, parents' influence, the reputation of majors and former teachers. As shown in figure (1), First-year university students take career aspiration as highly important in selecting their academic majors at the university. The reputation of the academic majors through studying specific academic majors was ranked second. The third most important reason is students' personal development. In addition, the educational goals of the academic majors applied for at the university were an essential concern in students' choice of their specific majors of study. Other participants mentioned parents' influence, expectations, and teachers' influence as factors that push some students to opt for their academic majors at the university.

4.1. Factors Influencing First-Year University Students' Choice of Academic Majors

Before presenting the data for this study, a reminder of the leading research question and sub-questions is helpful to focus on the quantitative and the qualitative results. The main research question is: What factors do first-year University students consider when choosing a major at the university? The sub-questions developed from the main research question were: a) what motivated students to opt for specific academic majors at the university? b) What were first-year university students' main reasons for selecting their academic majors? c) Why did they choose their particular majors to carry on their studies at the university? Answering these questions, the interview data of this study supported the questionnaire findings. It provided a more in-depth understanding of first-year university students' decision-making about their choices of academic majors. In this respect, [12] suggested that interviews help interpret, clarify, and illustrate quantitative findings. The main themes corresponding to each research question are presented and analysed regarding the main results of the quantitative data. Direct quotes from some participants are used to support the findings. The relevant literature is also referred to and discussed to support the interpretation of the data.

4.1.1. Career Aspiration

The survey findings, figure (1), showed that 81 (45%) participants detailed that career aspiration is highly important when opting for their academic majors at the university. 70 (38.88%) stated that career aspiration is very important. Consistent with the earlier quantitative findings, the interviewees shared that selecting an academic major is highly important for improving employment prospects. This is also consistent with recent research [9]; [5], which indicates that employment prospects constitute the most important motivating factor for students to consider when selecting a major to pursue a university education.

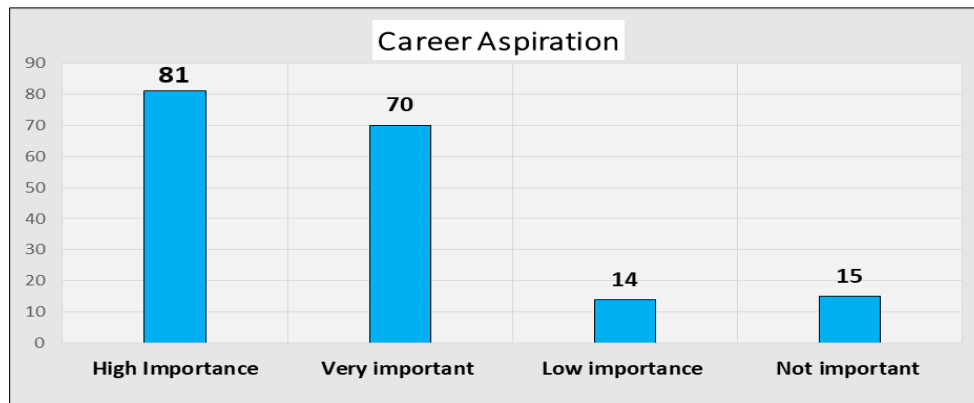


Figure 1 Career Aspiration

Many interviewees revealed that selecting an academic major could lead to more “*engagement prospects*”, “*more job chances*”, and “*door- opener for certain occupations*”. Many participants hoped that selecting an academic major at the university would provide them with more job opportunities and broader choices in the job market. Eighteen (18) interviewees mentioned that they cherry-picked academic majors, making it easier to find a job. For example, P10 from the Arabic studies said that:

“I didn’t endure History and Geography studies because it would not lead me to find a good occupation once I graduated from university. Then I moved to Arabic studies because I believe I can perform better in this major and I can get excellent marks to be selected for being a teacher in high schools” (P10, Male, 18-year-old)

Apart from considering the potential good job opportunities, some applicants also incorporated their interests. For instance, P5 from French studies said that,

“I was interested in French studies as I felt that it would be easy to find a job after graduation”. (P5, male, 20-year-old)

In this study, the same as P6, eight students exhibit a positive and practical approach to their academic pathways. They have well-articulated motivations, goals and plans. This aligns with [13] that “students with aligned ambitions know the type of occupation they want and how much education is needed to get it.” In conclusion, first-year university students in this study used their future career goals and aspirations to stay focused and motivated. They also used these goals to drive their internal incentives.

4.1.2. Reputation of Major

The reputation of the major appeared as the central theme in participants’ responses. 75 (41.16%) stated that the reputation of the academic major is highly important. At the same time, 73 (40.55%) responded that the status of the academic major is very important. Many interviewees mentioned being motivated by the major’s standing or position to pursue a university education. In this respect, participants stated that they consider the reputation of their academic majors when they want to apply for university education.

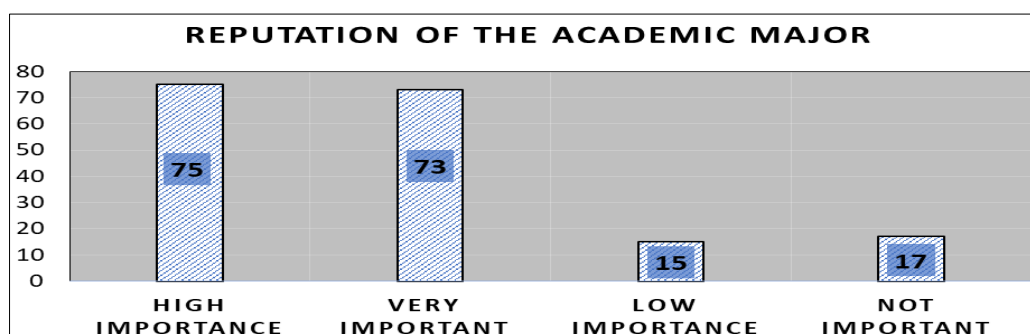


Figure 2 Reputation of Academic Majors

Many participants described their experiences at school from aspects such as the school culture, school activities, and their involvement. However, they are more motivated to do well and achieve their full potential in university. For example, P22 from philosophy studies stated that,

“Joining university education is a chance to improve my previous performance at school. Now, in the university, working hard meant exercising more than previously in high schools”. (P22, Male 21 years old)

Many participants also detailed that educational system practices in their previous schools indirectly affected their academic attitudes. Thus, they mentioned that they always aimed for good grades. They also agreed that the university academic orientation could prepare and push them to strive for high educational objectives and ambitions. Thus, participants described their decisions to put in their best effort and work consistently and reasonably hard to change previous performance and attitudes towards education.

4.1.3. Personal Development

Based on the survey findings, 70 (38.88%) participants stated that personal development is highly important when opting for their academic majors at the university. Of other participants, 66 (36.66%) expressed that personal development is very important for them to carry on their studies at the university. Consistent with quantitative results, twenty-one participants shared that selecting an academic major is highly important for their personal development. Participants’ interpretations revealed their motivation to mend further aspects of their lives.

The majority of the applicants believed that a university education is a chance for personal improvement or development. The main themes regarding this aspect confirm the main findings of the quantitative results and provide more informative explanations. Personal development is an important aspect to develop after first-year university students join the university. In this respect, many participants highlighted two primary skills they intended to develop, mainly *self-confidence* and *communication skills*.

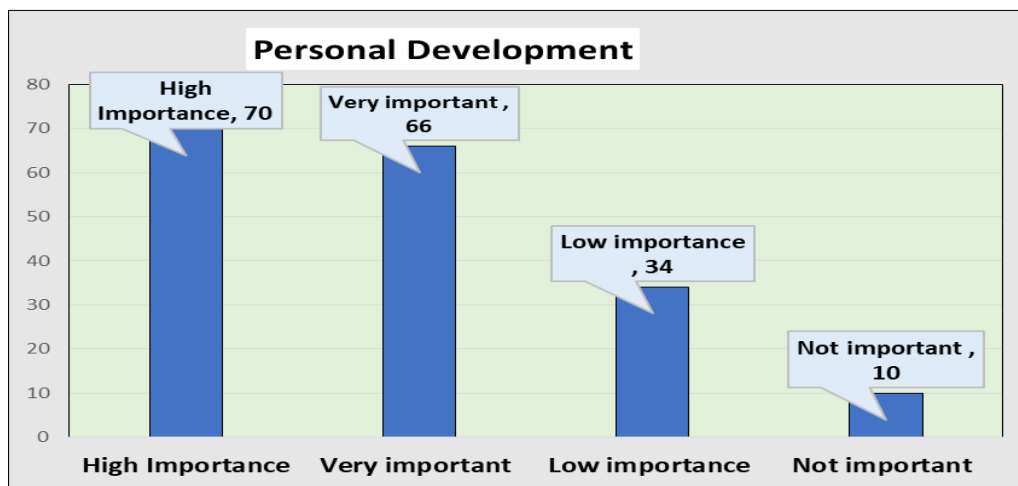


Figure 3 First-Year University Students’ Personal Development

Participants’ self-interests or self-motivation constituted why students chose their study major. In this analysis, participants’ overall understanding is about strong self-determination to increase their academic performance to achieve their goals. All the participants mentioned they wanted to be more self-confident, pointing out that this is particularly important in an independent-living context such as the university. For example, constructing self-confidence was crucial for many participants who were not confident in making their own decisions. For example, P17 from Islamic studies stated that,

“I hope the learning process at university will help us be more confident about ourselves. Personally, I was very close to my parents to the extent that, in many cases, I would depend on my parents to make decisions for me, and I think it is the same with other new students here.” (P17, Male, 23-year-old)

Similarly, P26 from sociology studies acknowledged that,

“I want to be independent and get out of my comfort zone. From my primary school until I joined the university, I always stayed with my family, I felt comfortable, but now I want to get out of this comfort zone. I know it is not easy to deal with, but I have no choice. I should overcome it.” (P26, Female 23- years- old)

P26 has a long desire to be independent and get out of her comfort zone. This can be understood and combined with her decision to attend university. She expected the learning and living process at university would help her be more confident about herself. Furthermore, other participants showed their inspiration to improve additional aspects, such as the significance of developing good communication skills. Though it was hard for them to define communication skills, many participants directed the definition of the concept to their ability to communicate. Many interviewees confessed that they lack the knowledge, particularly those from a family environment where speaking is not daily. Other students, for example, recognised that they wanted to acquire some skills to enable them to communicate more effectively in French, English or even standard Arabic. Many agree that it is why they opt for university education. They all suggest that university is a way of “improving and bettering persons”. Thus, a university education is an opportunity for self-discovery and development.

4.1.4. Academic Goals

According to the survey findings, 65 (36.11%) participants stated that academic goals are highly important when opting for their academic majors at the university.

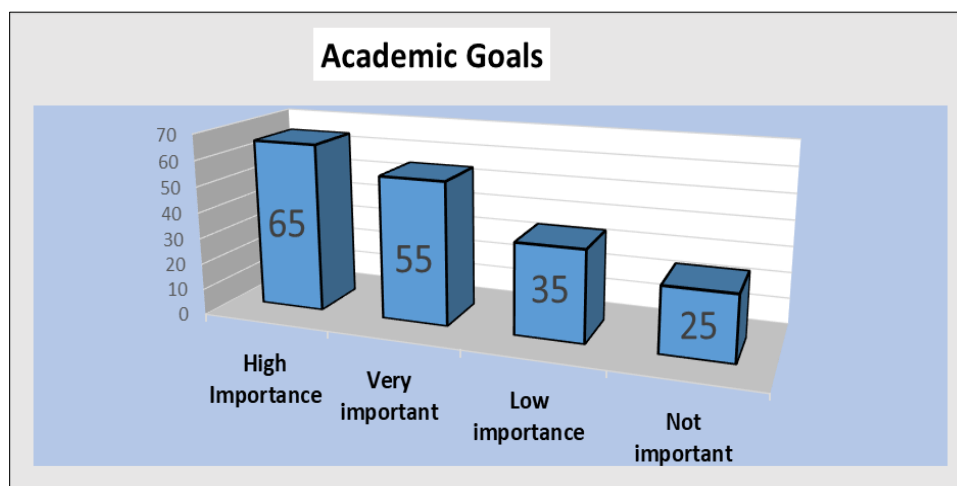


Figure 4 First-Year University Students’ Academic Goals

Consistent with the earlier quantitative findings, ten interviewees shared that achieving educational purposes in the university context is important to meet the university’s expectations. Despite being from broken families and lacking cultural capital, first-year university students showed academic potential to begin university education. Their attitudes towards higher education or knowledge about university education are not well developed or even discussed. For example, as described by many participants, they always have high ambition to achieve high grades in their studies. Their teachers always said they would attend university one day, but they don’t know.

Based on students’ responses, 18 participants said they became interested in going to university when they were in high school, although unsure which academic major to study. However, their strong self-determination to do well is a way to overcome any weaknesses and demonstrate satisfactory academic progress. Based on this analysis, first-year university students’ behaviours, actions, thoughts and beliefs are influenced by their inside ambition to succeed. High school grades are often viewed as representations of a specific end within this context. Thus, it is not surprising that many participants mentioned that they have to suffer and struggle; however, the advantage is only for those with a high score. In this respect, P7 from the French studies stated that,

“To achieve specific goals, you have to work hard. You know this is a typical process at the university. It is an open competition where many students from different educational backgrounds, socio-economic, and academic capacities compete for the same objective. Adding that the prominence of getting high grades is to meet the entry requirements for university and to secure a place in a public university like Mohammed V University, FLHS.” (P7, Female, 18-year-old)

P7 words represent her personal view and the view of other participants in this study. In this respect, participants' overall understanding is about their strong self-determination to increase their academic performance to attain their goals. Furthermore, high academic motivation is important to secure an optimistic future. Regardless of background, all the participants believed they would be able to access university, be admitted to the course in which they were interested and, finally, get their degrees if they achieved high grades.

4.1.5. Parents' Influence and Expectations

The analysis in this part is to understand the role played by parents as a contributing factor to students' decisions to opt for an academic major.

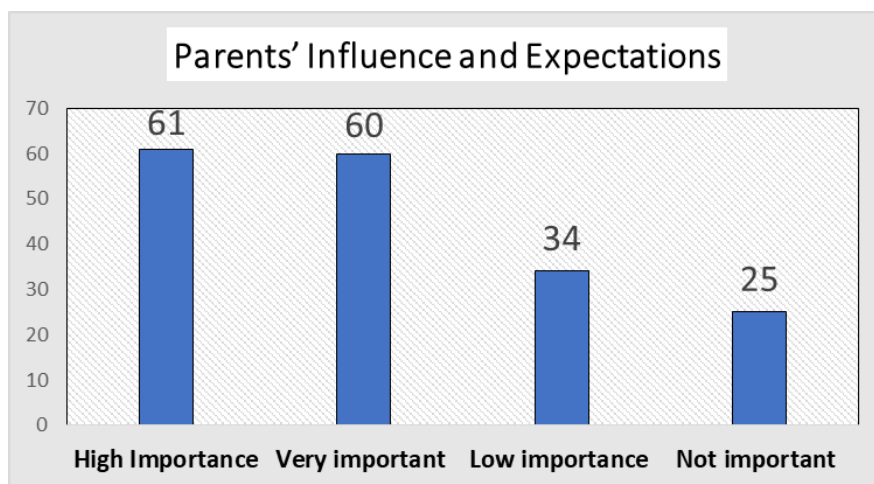


Figure 5 Parents' Influence and Expectations

Parental influence is consistently identified as a crucial factor in university decisions to select a field of study by first-year university students [8]. Given the sample's composition of 60 (33.33%) participants and the interviewed students, it was expected that the family background would strongly influence the choice of students' majors at the university. Only some participants from different majors in the sample considered that their parents had not impacted their choice of the major at the university.

The rest of the sample willingly acknowledged their parents' influence in a decision perceived as an important step in their students' lives. Most of the undergraduates in the sample seemed to trust in the capacity of their parents to provide them with more support and advice for a decision that would influence their life for at least three years of studies and possibly many more. One of the interviewees stated that,

"My father played a great role in selecting my major at the university because he is a good person to rely on. After it is often my responsibility to choose, but at least I have all the elements. Yes, I often ask my parents' advice to make important decisions. Their opinions will be critical to opt for majors at the university." (P16, Male 21 / Researcher translation)

Along with high expectations for educational attainment, the analysis has shown that parental support and encouragement are some of the most significant indicators of students' university aspirations. This supports previous findings from several studies [14]. Students in this study are strongly encouraged by their parents through advice, a constructive learning situation at home, and additional resources for study.

"My family is purely Berbers, but they all studied English at school, pushing me to study English studies. My parents, brother, sister, and everyone have studied English studies. My friend, who is also an English teacher, influenced me also." (P3, Male, 18)

In this study, parents have always maintained close relationships with students when dealing with aspects related to their personal development or their studies. The research shows that this influence begins very early and has multiple ramifications. Usually, it starts with choosing the foreign language studied at school, when students are too young to decide on their own. Interestingly, this choice of a foreign language is very often influenced by the foreign language studied by parents themselves or the personal experience of parents.

In the same vein, [14] showed that family background plays a vital role in shaping students' perceptions of higher education. Thus, the knowledge growth and confidence accumulated from parents learning directed students' specific interest in certain areas, which further influenced their choice of major for university study. This was also evidenced in P12 words from Arabic studies, who stated that,

"My mother went to university. She had diverse knowledge. As a result, I could absorb information from her. My mother majored in Arabic studies at the same university. She is a teacher of Arabic now. Influenced by her, I followed her footsteps and majored in Arabic studies at the university and wanted to continue it for my master's studies". (P12, Female, 21 / researcher translation)

This means that parents with higher education degrees would be more conscious of and attentive to cultivating academic skills in their children at an early age. The above examples confirmed Bourdieu's argument that children can inherit cultural capital from family socialisation through participation in cultural activities [3].

4.1.6. Teachers' Influence

In comparison with parents, teachers seem to hold a preeminent position in students' early conceptions and expectations of university. Teachers shared practices about university life with their students. This gave them early information and expectations. Teachers are perceived as essential agents for students in several ways: motivation, academic support, and university knowledge. Teachers in school are crucial role models for students. They explained that teachers have a pervasive effect on them.

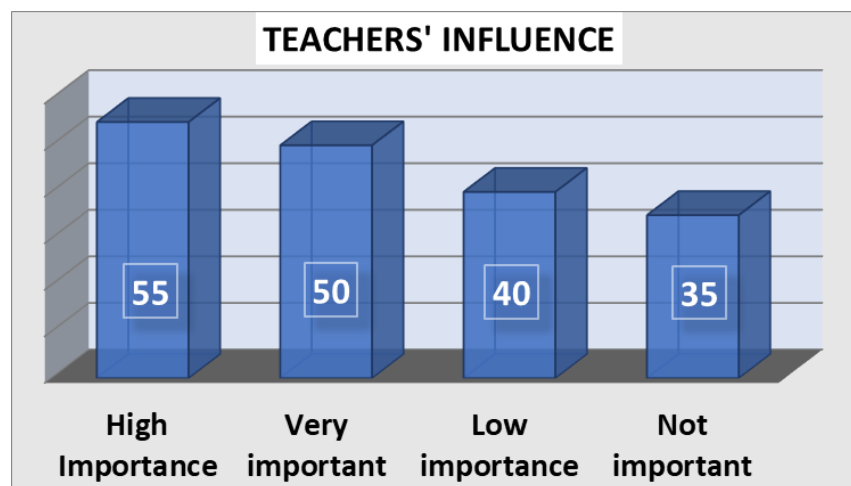


Figure 6 Teachers' influence

Students perceived that their teachers are essential, particularly in providing motivation, encouragement, and assistance through their education. Teachers' influence with 55 (30.55%) ranked as an influence that first-year university students take into account to carry on their studies at the university. Teachers' encouragement could greatly motivate the students to opt for their academic majors. For instance, one student, P18, from Islamic education said,

"Our Islamic studies teacher's class was lovely as what she taught was very easy to understand and interesting, which made me want to explore the Islamic studies field in greater depth". (P18, Male, 22 / researcher translation)

Teachers' impact on developing students' motivation for learning has long been established. More importantly, teaching methods and style influenced students' interests in certain areas. Influenced by teachers, some students develop their interest in a particular subject. For some undergraduates, the interest designed by their teacher would often lead to success in certain school subjects in their later studies. For example, P4 from English studies said,

"I was an excellent student of English during high school because our English teacher's class was stimulating. Apart from teaching us something in the textbooks, she gave us some interesting additional awareness. My English was not worthy during middle school; still, after having her classes, I became interested in it and made good progress thanks to her". (P4, Male, 19)

The significant positive impact of teachers on their students might be partly explained by the special teacher-student relationship combined with traditional Moroccan culture. Students respect teachers, and teachers are treated with open and complete respect in this context. Such expressions as “a teacher is a parent” or “my educator for a day is a parental for a lifetime” are widely accepted among Moroccan students. One student noted concerning his teacher that,

“Besides my parents, my teacher is the second motivation to enter university and opt for French studies. I always visit him, and he shared his experience at university, so I also want to go through the same experience”. (P2, Male, 20)

From P2 words and other participants’ expressions, it is understood that students’ aspirations to attend university and opt for specific academic majors are greatly affected by the encouragement and support received from their teachers. This study found that the level of motivation to prepare students for university education received from teachers is more remarkable for students with higher levels of academic performance. For example, teachers always had high expectations of students with academic achievement and identified them as students most likely to get the best grades. For P11 from Arabic studies, his teachers’ expectations and belief in his intellectual ability affected his achievement motivation. He stated that,

“My teacher of Arabic studies always supports Me., He always inspires me and tells me that I would enter the university because I am one of the best students in school. He always gives attention to me, so his expectations inspire me to continue my studies at the university, opting for Arabic studies. Thanks to my teacher, I’m very pleased with my choice.” (P11, Male, 22 / researcher translation.

P11 words support [15] and [2] views, where teachers’ expectations affect students’ academic success. Additionally, teachers support students by assisting them in their studies. The teachers help them undertake extra work and are easier to access and more willing to help, even if they no longer teach them. It was an advantage for students to continue contacting their former teachers. As is evident from prior research [4], students in this study rely heavily on teachers for university information. Almost all students contacted their teacher to get advice about which academic major to select. Students consult their teachers because they perceive them as more experienced and knowledgeable, thus assisting their selection. The great positive impact of teachers on their students might be partly explained by the special teacher-student relationship combined with traditional Moroccan culture. Students admire teachers, and teachers are treated with open and, apparently, complete respect.

5. Discussion

This study makes several significant contributions to the literature on first-year university students’ academic major choices. Understanding the political values and personalities of individuals in a major field will provide students with a portrait of those they will likely encounter if they select that major. Assisting first-year university students in making informed decisions about choosing a major should promote greater student satisfaction with and success in their undergraduate experience. There were numerous concerns to consider when reviewing the present study’s results. There was some debate on which factor was the most influential to students when choosing their academic major in previous literature. While most tended to lead slightly more toward personal factors, interpersonal and practical reasons also played a part in the decision-making process. The results above further prove that all areas influence students throughout the process. Though not statistically significant, all three subcategories played an almost equivalent role in the participants’ choices. In previous research, participants often came from a single academic population, like students enrolled in an Accounting program. The current study builds upon that by including students from all academic areas. Additionally, while previous research generally measured the influences, this research broke down the factors into three separate subcategories. While previously, students may have ranked “interest in the subject” as their number one and “cost of school” as their number two, by breaking it down, we can see if there is a more specific way to identify what influences students the most.

This study was intended to explore what factors influence students’ academic major selection. Specifically, what influenced undecided students’ major choices? The following research questions were asked: What factors influence a student’s choice of major? What role did monetary returns play in major selection? Who influences a student’s academic major decision? This part will review the study’s findings concerning the research questions, provide recommendations for student affairs professionals, and include suggestions for future research.

Several factors influenced the participant’s major selection, but interest in the subject was the most dominant. A study by [1], found that a student’s interest in the specific major they chose was the most critical factor when selecting. These results were echoed in the current study. Peers, family members, and faculty members also seemed to play a large part in deciding their majors.

[1] found that most of the students in their sample found information about their major from people they knew, including their peers and family members. All participants in this study also mentioned influence regarding their major from peers, family members, and even high school counsellors. Many participants stated that they know about their major through a conversation with friends and realising it might be something they would like to do. This result may suggest the importance of consulting with others before making a major selection. Students could benefit from thinking about the occupations of peers and or family members and deciding if it is something they could see themselves doing.

Limitations

The limitations of this study perhaps prevented an accurate reading of the factors that most influence students' decision of academic major. The first is the sample size. Only 180 students responding to the survey can hardly be considered a representative sample. In order to generalise the results across the population at Mohammed V University, FLHS in Rabat, Morocco, as well as other universities like it, more research would need to be done on a much larger scale.

6. Conclusion

The choice of a university academic major can be one of the essential verdicts first-year university students can make. The educational major choice determines where these students will take most of their paths within an institute, thus, in turn, affecting much of their connections with faculty and other students. In this respect, the analysis revealed that multiple factors come into play to influence students' academic major choices. This study classifies the most significant factors first-year university students consider when deciding on their academic major at the university. It revealed that career aspiration, the reputation of academic major, students' personal development, educational goals, parents' influence and teachers' impact all come into play to affect first-year university students' selection of their academic majors at the university.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Statement of informed consent

Informed approval was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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