

# Increase in the demand for private higher education: unmasking the “paradox”

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – It is considered a mystery by many people that, despite charging significantly higher fees when compared to public institutions, research has shown an increase in the demand and enrolments at private higher education institutions. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the critical factors considered by students when deciding to make private higher education institutions their institution of choice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study uses a case study approach and draws data from all the six private higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. Self-administered questionnaires were given to students representing at least 5 per cent of the student enrolment and representing all gender, study disciplines and levels of study from each university.

**Findings** – Irrespective of gender, six main factors influencing student choice were identified to be, in order of priority: access and opportunity; promotional information and marketing; reference or influence by others; quality of teaching and learning; fees and cost structure, and finally academic reputation and recognition.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research was focused on a case study of Zimbabwe.

**Practical implications** – The study has implications on the way private higher education institutions market, manage and sustain the quality of educational provision. The study therefore provides private institutions with useful and practical insights on what students want in their institution of choice. This will assist these institutions in strategising in order to sustain or gain competitive advantage and to maximise on the increasing demand for private education. Implications to government and public institutions are also given.

**Social implications** – The study recognises the critical role played by private universities in improving access and recommends African Governments who face financial and resource constraints to fund and expand public universities to encourage private higher education as a meaningful and viable way to improve access and provide higher education opportunities to potential students.

**Originality/value** – The study contributes to the current dearth of literature on factors influencing student choice to study with private institutions.

**Keywords** Private institutions, Access and opportunity, Student decision making

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

During the last decade, Zimbabwe has witnessed rapid growth of both the number of institutions and enrolments in its private higher education sector. This development has been considered as an enigma by many people who perceive that private higher education institutions charge significantly higher fees (Garwe, 2013) and are of lower quality when compared to public higher education institutions. This paradox can be attributed to the limited research on why students are making private higher education institutions their universities of choice. Pursuant to the aim of addressing the existing knowledge gap, the current study provided a research-based analysis of the critical motivating factors considered by students who prefer to pursue their post-secondary studies in private institutions. Although this study focuses on the Zimbabwean context, it is applicable to other countries given that all over the world, a significant



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number the students who are eligible to get admission into public institutions of higher education are willingly seeking admission in private institutions (Long, 2011; Varghese, 2012).

### **Development and expansion of private higher education in Zimbabwe**

The word “university” in the context of Zimbabwe refers to a registered (by the Zimbabwe Council for higher education (ZIMCHE) degree awarding institution which can be private or public (Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) Act, 2006). Public institutions obtain the bulk of their financial resources from the government whilst private institutions are funded mainly by their responsible authorities (churches or trustees) and student fees. Only public and private universities are allowed to award degrees although many other public or private institutions (polytechnics, teachers colleges and professional colleges) offer degrees as associates or affiliates of the registered universities (Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), 2014).

Zimbabwe’s higher education sector comprises of nine public and six private institutions (ZIMCHE, 2014). There is a public university in each province of Zimbabwe. The government policy enunciated in 1990 through the enactment of the National Council for Higher Education (Chapter 25:08) aimed at increasing access to university education allowed the opening up of higher education provision to private players (Garwe, 2013). This led to the establishment of the first private higher education institution, Africa University, in 1992. Currently there are six private universities spread geographically in in six provinces of Zimbabwe. To date, private universities have greatly broadened the pool of universities available to students for degree-level studies, thereby increasing the need for institutions to be competitive. The enouncement of such policies showcases the importance of policy makers in the socio-economic development of nations. The historical antecedents and how private higher education started is detailed in a study by Garwe (2013) which focuses on quality assurance challenges and opportunities faced by private universities in Zimbabwe. The research by Garwe (2013) indicates that the share of enrolments in private higher education institutions increased steadily from 4.6 per cent in 1995 to peak at 10.2 per cent in 2008. The study also revealed a higher (13.1 per cent) contribution of enrolments for females in private universities. In addition to the increase in number of private institutions, the enrolments in the private universities are increasing due to the increase in the number of academic programmes on offer (ZIMCHE, 2014).

### **Development and expansion of private higher education**

There exist two major categories of private higher education institutions which co-exist in many of the African countries, namely: private universities and private non-degree awarding institutions which offer vocational and professional training. These private higher education institutions can either be state-supported; not-for-profit (self-financing) or for-profit (Varghese, 2006). Although generally a worldwide phenomenal growth of the private higher education sector has been reported, the contribution of the sector varies from country to country. In Malaysia, Phillipines, Japan, Brazil, Chile, Indonesia and India, the share is in excess of 70 per cent (Gregorutti, 2011; Gupta, 2008). In South Korea, Kim (2010) reported that 78 per cent of students are enrolled in private higher education institutions, which command 85 per cent sector. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) reported that by 2025, private higher education enrolments will exceed those of public institutions in Kuwait.

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In Africa, the monopoly that public universities had in providing higher education is fast disappearing due to the de-regulation and legislative policies put in place to encourage private higher education providers (Varghese, 2006). Consequently, the share of private higher education in African countries is rapidly increasing. The UNESCO (2009) report cites private higher education shares of 47, 32 and 24 per cent in Gabon, Mozambique and Ethiopia, respectively. Waruru (2013) reports a contribution of 20 per cent in Kenya and in Uganda, Businge (2013) reports that out of a total of 34 universities 29 are private. According to Materu (2007), about one-third of sub-Saharan higher education institutions established from the year 2000, are privately funded. Private participation in tertiary education has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to easing the social demand for higher education, accounting for up to 20 per cent of enrolments in some countries.

The increase in the demand for higher education is consistent with the findings that expanding higher education contributes to greater technological development, improving the ability to optimise output and narrow the knowledge gaps and poverty in the region, particularly in the context of sub-Saharan Africa (Bloom *et al.*, 2005). At a time when most public higher education institutions in developing countries, especially Africa, are struggling with challenges of student unrest, excessive enrolments, inadequate finances, quality assurance reforms and brain drain of critical academic staff, private higher education institutions enjoy more freedom to enrol students, charge market-related tuition fees and engage part-time lecturers whom they pay well. In some instances, private institutions or their students receive minimal to substantial funding support from the government (Nganga, 2014). For example, Tilak (1999) reported that in India, state assistance to private institutions accounts for more than 90 per cent of the total recurrent expenditure.

Private higher education institutions have been lauded for possessing the following attributes: learner-friendliness, cultural diversity, less prone to political interference or activism, secular (Levy, 2007), improving access (Oketch, 2009; Chae and Hong, 2009; McCowan, 2004), more responsive to national economic priorities (Jalowiecki, 2001) and accommodative to societal higher education needs (Galbraith, 2003). The fact that enrolment statistics of private institutions are significantly lower than those of their public counterparts makes it possible for extensive interactions among students and lecturing as well as non-lecturing staff members. These institutions typically have programs specially designed to facilitate communication and dialogue thus enabling students to build strong and personal relationships with their lecturers, instructors, mentors and administrators. It is very common for private institutions to organise dinners, cocktails and other events that facilitate interaction and correspondence between academic staff and students on a personal level. This motivates students and lays fertile ground for effective and individualised teaching and learning. Private institutions also offer extra-curricular activities and programs for students to participate in, thereby developing in them a sense of community.

One of the most key advantages of private institutions is in the area of graduate employability. Because the majority of private higher education institutions in Africa are self-financing, they tend to offer demand-driven and labour market-friendly programmes (Varghese, 2006). This rides on the fact that the demand for particular programmes is usually determined by the job opportunities and the potential earnings associated to graduates (Corominas *et al.*, 2010). Examples of such programmes offered by private institutions include: business administration, computer sciences, accounting,

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marketing, economics and communication. These programmes also tend to be more cost effective as they demand less financial, as well as teaching and learning resource inputs, for example, specialised equipment and infrastructure.

### **Student choice of higher education institution**

According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2002), institution choice refers the ability of a student to be admitted in the institution that appeals the most to one's desires and that suits their academic capabilities. The paper further elucidates that policy makers view choice as closely related to access whereas both choice and access are aspects of educational opportunity. Access is providing access (immediately when due or at any time) to students to enable them attend university (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999).

Kim and Periyayya (2013) report that students face hard choices in selecting the institution of higher learning to enrol in after completing secondary education. Private institutions should therefore do their best in assisting prospective students in the process of making decisions. Institutions can only contribute effectively after identifying the appropriate and key attributes that are highly valued by prospective students (Samsinar *et al.*, 2003). Although very few studies have explored the factors that students consider when deciding to make private institutions their institutions of choice, several studies have dealt with the factors that affect the decisions by students to select institutions with respect to public institutions (Chapman, 1984). These studies reveal that the ultimate decision to select an institution is a complex multi-stage process (Kusumawati *et al.*, 2010; Shankle, 2009) that is affected by a number of factors, namely: institutional characteristics; financial reasons; students' characteristics; influence from influential persons; graduate employment as well as promotion and marketing.

#### *Institutional characteristics*

Literature review shows that in many studies, the highest ranked factor is characteristics of the institution (Chen, 2006; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003; Price *et al.*, 2003; Seneca and Taussig, 1987). Institutional characteristics include the image; geographic location; academic programmes and facilities; social life and social facilities, accommodation and dining facilities; safety, lighting and security, sports facilities (Absher and Crawford, 1996; Discenza *et al.*, 1985; Hooley and Lynch, 1981; Roberts and Higgins, 1992; Servier, 1994; Tackey and Aston, 1999) as well as the possibility for students to live at or close to home or families (Jackson, 1982; MORI, 2002). The Academic programme offerings, in terms of entry requirements, content, structure, flexibility and duration were reported to be critical (Bourke, 2000; Ford *et al.*, 1999; Holdsworth and Nind, 2006; Nagaraj *et al.*, 2008; Shanka *et al.*, 2005; Qureshi, 1995; Yusof *et al.*, 2008).

Joseph and Ford (1997) indicate that students are interested in institutional factors such as degree programme flexibility, academic reputation and prestige reflecting national and international recognition, physical aspects of the campus such as the quality of the infrastructure and services, and the time required for the completion of the programme. In addition to these characteristics, Maringe (2006) found that availability of equipment, for example, computers, quality of library facilities, quality of lecturers, reputation for research, hygiene, part-time employment opportunities; staff attitude towards students, availability of telephones and quiet areas for study as well as graduate employment rates to have a bearing on students' choice of institution.

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Kusumawati *et al.* (2010) suggests that the reputation of the institution was the most significant factor in a student's decision for further study. However, Ciriaci and Muscio (2011) argue that "good" universities may act as a magnet for good brains thus reflecting a link between student characteristics and institutional characteristics. Students tend to be very sensitive about the reputation of an institution and hence they make it a point to find out more about the institution before enrolling in it (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003; Nagaraj *et al.*, 2008). Thus institutional characteristics strongly influences and has persuasive power in making students decide on their institutional of choice (Brown, 1991; Lay and Maguire, 1981; Murphy, 1981). Information about institutional characteristics is usually obtained from institutional websites, hearsay, marketing and promotional material and past experience (Ivy, 2001).

#### *Study costs*

Several researchers have examined the effect of cost in making a choice of institution (Domino *et al.*, 2006; Joseph and Joseph, 1998; Wagner and Fard, 2009; Webb, 1993). Some studies found that the costs associated with learning at an institution were the most important factor affecting institution choice (Domino *et al.*, 2006; Wagner and Fard, 2009; Webb, 1993) whilst others found that although cost has a major bearing on institution choice, it was ranked as the fourth (Beneke, and Human, 2010) important factor of university choice. Other studies discovered that allowing for flexibility in fee payment, in the form of payment plans and availing scholarships and financial aid are among the major factors influencing student choices (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Foskett *et al.*, 2006; Jackson, 1986; Manski and Wise, 1983; Wagner and Fard, 2009; Yusof *et al.*, 2008).

#### *Students' characteristics*

Student characteristics were defined by Çokgezen (2012) as a set of variables related to students and/or those having an influence on them. Hearn (1984) and Heller (1997) identified income or the socio-economic status of a student and/or student's family to be the critical determinants of choice of institution. Chapman (1984) and Braxton (1990) found that abilities, aptitudes, personal aspirations and academic performance of students as measured by entry grades and/or aptitude test scores as an important determinant of student choice of an institution. Drewes and Michael (2006) found that students with lower grades made significantly different choices than those with good grades and thus they did not apply to prestigious universities where there is little chance of admission. Gender (Paulsen, 1990; McDonough, 1997), age (Chapman, 1984; Jackson, 1982) and race (Hearn, 1984; McDonough, 1997) constitute other determinants of which institution to select. A study by Agrey and Lampadan (2014) in Thailand, found that students do not make decisions in isolation, they consult their parents, relatives, friends, teachers and others (Chapman, 1981; Oosterbeek *et al.*, 1992; Hossler *et al.*, 1999).

#### *Influence from publicly available sources*

Society affects ones decision on choice of institution. To many students seeking to enrol in institutions of higher learning, the process of collecting of information pertaining to the best institution that suits their requirements is very challenging. They therefore rely on other people to assist them in evaluating the available options. The influence

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from members of the family, teachers, friends, peers and other influential persons have a significant role to play in assisting students in selecting among the institutions available (Baharun, 2002; Falsey and Haynes, 1984; Joseph and Joseph, 1998; Hossler and Stage, 1987; Shanka *et al.*, 2005). Bonnema and Van der Waldt (2008) using the South African context, studied the effect of stakeholders on the decision by students to select a particular university. They classified the sources of information into three groups, namely: media (advertisements), social (parents, friends, teachers, fellow students) and direct (provided by the universities, e.g. prospectuses). They discovered that the sources of information for students varied according to their characteristics, such as location, family income, age, race and language.

#### *Graduate employment*

Paulsen (1990) investigated the extent to which graduate employment rates affects choice of institution and found that this variable is a powerful predictor of enrolment decisions. Similar studies also found that employment rates of graduates are positively correlated decisions to enrol at a particular institution (Garma and Moy, 2003). The study by Maringe (2006) reveals that the weight given to the prospects of graduate employment and career prospects is significantly greater than that of pursuing higher education based on interest in programme offerings. Graduate employment and career prospects includes the possibility to combine work and studies, university assistance in job search and existence of organisations that recruit university graduates.

#### *Promotion and marketing*

It has been observed that the higher education sector has become highly competitive thereby forcing institutions to position themselves aptly (Maringe, 2006). Hossler and Bean (1990) opine that marketing and promotion efforts as well as marketing channels influence student's choice to a very large extent. Moogan (2011) studied the major marketing communication activities that impact on the students' choice of a university in the UK. Her study revealed that a prospectus and a website were the two critical sources of information. Hossler (1999) investigated the effect of advertising on student choice of institution and discovered that radio and television channels are the best vehicles for educational communication. The importance of coming up with a good marketing mix that represents the institution's brand is vital in order to make the institution competitive. The components of the marketing mix should depend on the expectations of the students. Maringe (2006) posits that degree programme and cost attributes of the marketing mix strongly determine the choice of institution y students when compared to variables in other marketing mixes. Echoing similar sentiments, Maringe (2006) revealed that students employ a "consumerist approach" when selecting institutions to pursue their studies. He found programme and price mix to be more important than any other variables of institutions' marketing mix. Institutions that organise career and open day events that allow students to visit the institution before enrolling also position themselves favourably (Hossler, 1999; Sevier, 1992). These events tend to persuade prospective students to enrol at the institutions.

Promotion and marketing is directly related to institutional characteristics. An institution needs to build strong and desirable characteristics which help it build a good reputation. Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) recommend that building and maintaining a good image gives institutions competitive advantage.

### The problem statement

The expansion of the higher education sector led to the growth in the numbers for both public and private institutions. These institutions have different fee structures and they offer different academic programs packaged differently. This implies that prospective candidates have a large pool of institutions to select from. An increase in enrolments and in numbers of private institutions has been reported in Zimbabwe. The foregoing analysis of literature revealed six categories of factors that have a bearing on choice of institution by students, namely: institutional characteristics; financial reasons; students' characteristics, family; influence from influential persons; graduate employment as well as promotion and marketing. The question that remains to be answered is: what are the factors that attract students to pursue studies in private institutions of higher education? This study was therefore designed to investigate the reasons underlying the student preferences to undertake studies in private institutions of higher education. The researcher hypothesised, that the same factors affecting choice of students to study at public institutions would perhaps explain the current trends and patterns of increasing enrolments in private institutions.

### Research objectives

The objectives of the study were to determine and prioritise the main reasons influencing students' preference to pursue post-secondary studies in private institutions higher education.

### Methodology

The study used the case study approach as described by Yin (2003) and draws data from all the six private universities in Zimbabwe. The case study approach was chosen because of the interest in understanding the contextual circumstances pertaining to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2003). For example, Baxter and Rideout (2006) in his study to determine the types of decisions made by nursing students and the factors that influenced the decision making utilised the case study approach in order to get a true picture of nursing students' decision making within the context it occurred. Self-administered questionnaires were used to reach a population of 8,030 students enrolled in the six private universities in Zimbabwe representing all gender, study disciplines and levels of study from each university. The enrolment figures of these institutions ranged from 34 to 2,751 students (Table I). These institutions offer undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in diverse disciplines including: agricultural sciences; business and commerce; humanities, social sciences and gender studies; health sciences and theology.

**Table I.**  
Enrolment figures  
and percentage  
distribution of  
private universities  
from which students  
were sampled

Institution	Enrolment (2013)	Sample (%)	No. of students
Women's University in Africa	2,751	6.3	173
Reformed Church University	197	5	20
Africa University	2,504	8.3	208
Solusi University	2,142	8.2	176
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	402	7.5	30
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	34	30	10

**Note:**  $n = 617$

Self-administered questionnaires offer several advantages over alternative methods. Respondents answer questionnaires at their convenience and there is no need to organise interview appointments. The costs are lower hence the method is economically advantageous. In addition since no interviewer is present, there is no bias in the way the questions are asked or answered. The major disadvantages of self-administered questionnaires include the long timelines, low-response rates and the need for literate respondents. However, in this study these did not pose challenges since the distribution of questionnaires was overseen by deans and done by student representatives who were given definitive timelines to return completed questionnaires. The respondents were undergraduate students whose literacy levels are beyond reproach.

The researcher initially analysed the student profiles from each of the six universities and then used these to identify the number of students to sample from each category using secondary data available in the ZIMCHE database. The secondary data included university enrolment database, university official websites, brochures, prospectus and annual reports. Purposive sampling was used to select students to participate in the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). According to the secondary data.

After analysis of the student profiles in terms of field of study, year of study, level of study and gender, the researcher determined the number of students to be sampled that was representative of all these categories. A predetermined number of questionnaires (1,000) were then given to students' representatives through their deans. The student representatives distributed and collected the completed questionnaires to students who were available and willing to participate in the study. The deans were responsible for receiving the completed questionnaires from student representatives and sending them back to the researcher. Out of the 1,000 questionnaires that were distributed to the six private universities, 617 (response rate of 61.7 per cent) were completed and returned. The actual numbers of completed questionnaires and the sample representation are shown in Table I. The sample sizes from each university represented at least 5 per cent of the population thus allowing the researcher to make for university wide inferences.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The preliminary section included five questions focusing on demographic characteristics of respondents inclusive of age, sex, year of study, study programme and level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate). The main section required students to list the six major factors that influenced their choice of university. Based on the literature review, a list of the six factors influencing university selection was made to guide students, namely: institutional characteristics; study costs; students' characteristics; influence from influential persons; graduate employment as well as promotion and marketing. However, the students were asked to include other factors that influenced their own decisions that might have been different to the ones listed to guide them. The students were requested to rate each of the six factors of their choice using a five-point Likert scale (where 1 means the factor is extremely important and 5 means important).

The final section of the questionnaire was open ended, it required students to give their reasons why each of the six factors they prioritised was important and to give further details, for example, if promotional information exerted a lot of influence on their choice what were the major sources of information? If influence by others was important who influenced them and how? If the quality of teaching and learning was a critical factor for them what aspects did they consider and why? If study costs influenced them then why did they select a private university?

## Results

The results showed that 60 per cent of the respondents were female and 40 per cent were male. This is consistent with the finding by Garwe (2013) that private universities in Zimbabwe enrol more female students than male ones. This was attributed to the positive role being played by the Women's University in Africa (WUA) in empowering disadvantaged women. The percentage of female enrolment for WUA was 75 per cent but its vision is to end up with a share of 85 per cent women (WUA website). Out of the 153 respondents from the WUA, 150 of them were females. All the respondents were at various stages in their study programmes. In total, 95 per cent of the respondents were pursuing undergraduate studies and 5 per cent were undertaking postgraduate programmes all at the masters level. In total, 65 per cent of the respondents were employed and the rest were not employed.

The objective of the research was to identify and rank the major factors affecting the decision to choose to enrol at a private university. Table II shows the ranking of the six most important factors that influence the students to select private universities, based on mean values (refer to Table II). Among these factors, access and opportunity was identified as the main determining factor leading students to enrol in private universities (mean value, 4.6). The other factors in descending order of importance were: promotional information and marketing; reference or influence by others; quality of teaching and learning; fees and cost structure, and finally academic reputation and recognition. The information given on each factors will be presented and discussed in the forthcoming sections.

Compared to the factors obtained from literature that determine student choice, the respondents came up with a new list of factors most of which were related to the ones in the guiding list. However, a completely new factor; access and opportunity, emerged and was the highest ranking factor. The factor of graduate employment which featured in literature and was part of the guiding factors, was not included among the top six factors by the respondents. This might be so because most of the students (65 per cent) are already employed and are only interested in upgrading their academic and professional credentials.

### *Access and opportunity*

Respondents ranked access and opportunity as the number one factor that influences their decision to join private universities. Access here was considered in terms of geographical location of the university as well as the recruitment policies and entry requirements. However, the structure of the questionnaire did not make it possible in to determine how much influence on choice is due to entry requirements, how much due to affordability, how much due to flexibility and how much due to geography. Some students considered proximity to home as very important. This was so because the tuition fees at private

**Table II.**  
Ranking of factors  
irrespective gender

Rank	Characteristic	Mean value
1	Access and opportunity	4.16
2	Promotional information and marketing	4.06
3	Reference or influence by others	3.79
4	Quality of teaching and learning	3.21
5	Fees and cost structure	2.93
6	Academic reputation and recognition	2.67

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universities was high and hence by staying at home or close to come students were able to balance the costs. This might explain why fees and cost structures *per se* did not appear to be the major determining factor in the ultimate choice made by students.

Respondents explained that the recruitment policies for all the nine public universities articulate that the normal entry into university requires a prospective student to have obtained at least two points in two advanced-level subjects. However, because of the intense competition for places, only students with more than ten points end up getting those places. Private institutions on the other hand put more emphasis on the ability to pay since they charge full cost fees. Therefore, students with fewer points easily get access into private universities. These universities also pitch their minimum entry requirements at five ordinary-level subjects and not advanced level as in the case of public universities. In addition, mature students and working students have better opportunities to study at private universities because of their flexibility of learning times and venues. On the whole, a lot of students including females and those from other African countries, who would otherwise find it impossible to enter public universities, are given a lifetime opportunity to get university education.

The issues of access were also subject to previous research, for example, Aluede *et al.* (2012), found that of the proportion of students admitted annually in Nigeria ranged from 5.2-15.3 per cent of the total applicants thereby implying that approximately 84.7-94.8 per cent of students applying to be admitted failed to get admission into universities in Nigeria. This is very worrying considering that access to education is a right according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although private education is not free, issues of access are still of great importance in Africa. Okeke (2008) defined access to higher education as free and unlimited opportunities availed to people to enable them to acquire knowledge, skills and capabilities required to effectively contribute to and participate in national development.

#### *Promotional information and marketing*

Respondents indicated that their major source of information pertaining to private universities was from promotional materials, websites, radio and television advertisements, exhibitions at public for a, for example, Zimbabwe International Trade Fair and the Harare Agricultural Show, and career guidance and counselling during open days and school events. In addition, respondents cited current students as important ambassadors who represent and market their institutions by interacting with their juniors at their respective former schools as well as other schools they interact with. This therefore builds a strong case for the need to effectively market and promote private universities. This is against a background that private universities have to compete not only among themselves but also with their public counterparts which are relatively well established and who enjoy government subsidy. Furthermore, public universities in Zimbabwe are overwhelmed with student applications and rarely require any promotion outside the official websites. Respondents suggested that private universities should employ various forms of promotional tools in order to effectively market their institutions and their academic programmes to the public as well as prospective students, their families and friends. These findings agree with those by Veloutsou *et al.* (2004) who interviewed 306 students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and found that students needed information to enable them to make decisions. Al-Hawary and Batayneh (2010) found that through use of effective marketing and promotion activities, universities in Jordan were well sought after by students including international students.

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Kitchen (2003) avers that marketing and promotional tools should include advertising, public relations, personal selling among others. James *et al.* (1999) and Foskett *et al.* (2003) pointed out the importance of marketing through use of career advisers to provide information on higher education institutions. Evans (1995) posited that institution's own members of staff, through telephone conversations and e-mail correspondences to prospective students, also play a major role in influencing student choice decision. Pasternak (2005) is of the opinion that information given by the institution's own printed materials such as prospectus is also very influential in student choice process.

#### *Reference or influence by publicly available resources*

Respondents explained that decisions about selecting a higher education institution are not made by students alone there are other people who influence these choices. Those who provide students with information based on their own personal experience or on information obtained from others, press and visits exert a strong influence on how prospective students choose their study destination. The study found evidence that choices were influenced by family, friends and acquaintances of the students. Alumni usually form very strong ties with their former institutions so much that they take every opportunity to proudly give recommendations others to pursue studies at their former institutions. One respondent had this to say: "My friends told me that it is great to study at the Women's University in Africa. You can actually study whilst you are still on full time employment" and "Some of my colleagues have studied at Solusi University and they secured jobs there immediately after graduation. That is what attracted me here". Students also feel at ease going to a university with friends and family. "My sister is studying at Africa University. All my family members thought I should study there too, so that we can take care of each other". However, despite these various information sources, there is still a general lack of adequate information for prospective students and their parents to make meaningful comparison among various higher education institutions. Accordingly, respondents suggested that instead of them finding information from all over the place, private universities should invest more into marketing their institutions and academic programmes.

#### *Quality of teaching and learning*

There were four major areas that were established to influence quality of teaching. These were: quality of staff; teaching and learning facilities; equipment; hard copies of books as well as electronic resources. Respondents' perception of teaching quality embraces the rating given to the academic services that are offered by institutions to students during their educational training. The quality of teaching also includes the curriculum design and content; available technologies and methods delivery as well as qualifications and experience of teaching staff. The availability of facilities was ranked number 7 the respondents. The findings revealed that private higher education institutions made various facilities available to students in order to make the campus environment as conducive as possible to teaching and learning. These included: teaching and learning facilities such as computers; laboratories; teaching venues equipped with multimedia systems; good libraries equipped with physical and electronic reading resources; sporting facilities; bookshops; clinics accepting medical aid and banking facilities.

#### *Fees and cost structure*

The financial factor was ranked as the number five factor by students. Students were more interested in access to higher education such that the costs involved in pursuing

studies at private institutions were not an impediment. Furthermore, private universities are usually attended by employed students or by children of relatively well-off parents since the tuition fees in private universities is higher than for public universities (Garwe, 2013) and the students are not supported by the fiscus. The fact that most of the students are from the working class also made them select local private higher education institutions for their convenience and flexibility. For example, working students from Mutare could only choose to study at Africa University as there are no other public universities in the vicinity with the exception of the Zimbabwe Open University which offers open and distance learning only. In Harare whilst there are three public universities, working students choose to enrol with the WUA because they are so flexible that they offer some degrees at the workplace. The lecturers carry out their training on site as is the case with the Airforce of Zimbabwe students studying for the masters in development studies.

#### *Academic reputation and recognition*

The university's reputation and recognition was the least ranked factor influencing the choice of an institution. Respondents based their perceptions on the reputation of a private university on its presence, status and prominence in the public eye since no national university rankings were being done in Zimbabwe. They also regarded a stable and efficient leadership as an important factor contributing to students choosing to study at private institutions. The stability was measured by the non-existence of strikes very little corruption in allocating resources. Private universities were also applauded for their low involvement of students in politics.

Although studies performed in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England by Veloutsou *et al.* (2004), found university reputation, to be the most critical factor, this study found this factor to be of relatively little importance mainly because issues of access were more prominent.

#### **Implications**

This objective of this study sought to identify and offer useful and practical guidelines to private higher education institutions pertaining to the major factors that are considered by students when choosing a private university. The results of this study are beneficial to private higher education institutions in crafting strategies to attract and satisfy students in a highly competitive environment. The implications of the study apply in the Zimbabwean context but can also be useful in other contexts especially in the African context. Some of the findings were comparable to those articulated in the review of literature pertaining to students' choice of a public university. Findings of this study featured access and opportunity as the key driver when selecting an institution of choice. The implication is that, in order to effectively influence the choice process among potential students, private higher education institutions should address the important variables considered by students. The issue of providing access to university education has been considered by the Government of Zimbabwe as evidenced by the increase in the number of public institutions and the policy to allow private players in the higher education arena. However, results from this study shows that the government still need to come up with more strategies to improve access to higher education.

The findings, whilst confirming some of the choice criteria reported in literature, also revealed different ranking of variable to that of the existing literature. For example, whilst many studies pinpoint reputation and cost as the key attributes, this

study found that access and opportunity as well as marketing and promotion were the major factors influencing students' choice. Cost and reputation were not as critical as was found in previous studies (Domino *et al.*, 2006; Wagner and Fard, 2009; Webb, 1993). The findings might imply that this ranking of factors is unique to the Zimbabwean higher education context.

Although currently there is no direct competition for students between public and private universities in Zimbabwe due to the high demand for university places, the study showed that promoting and marketing institutions is of prime importance in providing information to potential students and other influential stakeholders. Considering the recent drastic increase in higher education provision and the increasing demand for accountability and quality, private institutions need to be more business-like in order to survive. This implies that they should assent to the modern day marketing and promotion concept, advocating the imperativeness of student satisfaction. This is because students are discerning and will always opt for higher education institutions that show potential to best fulfil their needs and concerns. It was also clear from the study that students choose institutions that are mainly promoted through promotional materials, websites, radio and television advertisements, exhibitions and by word of mouth from family, friends, peers, teachers and other interested and influential persons. Private institutions should therefore be encouraged to use these methods to market and promote their programmes to potential students. In addition, current students are suggested to become ambassadors by representing their institutions and interacting with their juniors at their respective former schools.

The finding that quality of teaching and learning is considered an important factor of choice is extremely critical to both private higher education providers and policy makers, since it indicates clearly that student choice an institution can be influenced positively if knowledgeable and experienced academics are available, thus attracting students to choose it for their higher education studies. Accordingly, private institutions should focus on improving the academic status of their teaching staff in order to promote their institutions to potential students.

The fact that graduate's employment opportunities was not important in this study points out to the niche occupied by private universities who are flexible enough to allow employed people to also partake in higher education whilst still working and providing for their families. The public universities in Zimbabwe can benefit from these findings and improve on flexibility of their programme offerings in order to attract fee paying students thereby boosting their financial resource base.

Private higher education institutions in Zimbabwe occupy their own niche in that they are more flexible in terms of access and study mode, most of them are church related and hence offer learners with a complete learning experience. They are also free from challenges related to students' demonstrations. This state of affairs is not unique to Zimbabwe as depicted in the literature review wherein many researchers have also documented similar advantages of private higher education institutions including: learner involvement, learner-friendliness, cultural diversity, less prone to political interference or activism, improving access, alert to national socio-economic priorities (Chae and Hong, 2009; Jalowiecki, 2001; Levy, 2007; Oketch, 2009; McCowan, 2004).

### **Conclusions**

The findings of the current study identified the major factors considered by students when making choices to study in private universities. This will enable the institutions to make good use of limited funds in attracting students. The findings of this study also

contribute towards closing the knowledge gap by contributing to the body of knowledge on factors affecting choice of private institutions.

The results of this study recognises the critical role played by private universities in improving access to higher education by offering opportunities otherwise unavailable at public institutions who pitch their entry requirements at levels unattained by many students. Further to that the study also confirmed the niche occupied by private higher education institutions in terms of their flexibility and learner-centeredness as well as providing a calm environment conducive for holistic education. These results will be useful especially to African countries whose governments face financial and resource constraints to fund and expand public universities. Policy makers can therefore, encourage the growth of private higher education institutions as a meaningful and viable way to improve access and provide higher education opportunities to potential students.

Against a background where private universities need to sustain their growth as well as reaching out to students who would otherwise enrol in public institutions due to lack of knowledge on opportunities offered by private universities, the study also highlights the importance of marketing and promotional activities in aiding the prospective students to make a choice of institution since preferences for attending the selected institution are rooted in both the social and the marketing environment. The study, therefore, recommends that private institutions should strengthen and sharpen their marketing and promotional strategies so as to reach out to as many people as possible. These strategies need to be reinforced by targeted career guidance and counselling, open days and exhibitions at public fora.

The study concludes that there are several factors that influence student choice to enrol in a private institution. It is the researcher's consideration that the objective of this study that was set out to identify and rank the underlying reasons for students' choices of private institutions was successfully achieved. However, although the study revealed six most critical factors considered by Zimbabwean students when choosing a private institution, these factors and their ranking order may be unique to Zimbabwe and thus may be interpreted in that context. Future research is needed can build on these findings especially in the contexts of countries other than Zimbabwe.

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