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THE IMPACT OF FACTORS TO CHOOSE AN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, my Papa George, who was my backbone, and never wavered in his support or encouragement of me. I hope you're proud Papa!

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Abstract

The prospect of choosing an online institution to attend can be a daunting task for students and institutions alike. In this quantitative study, 120 first year, online students from two universities in Canada were sampled to determine the most important factors linked to choice, as well as the information sources most commonly used. Core results of the study indicated that flexibility, convenience, and the program are the most important factors students look for when choosing an online institution, and that the university website is the main information outlet utilized for research. Results also indicated that finding sufficient information is often difficult, and that institutions should put more resources into marketing and advertising. These results may prove beneficial to institutions looking to tailor their marketing initiatives, and in due course, will hopefully benefit students by simplifying the research process, and ensuring that institutions focus on the factors they find most important.

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Chapter I

Introduction

What are the main factors linked to online university selection? What impact do these factors have on selecting an online institution? As of now, the very limited literature is not able to agree on answers to these questions, but rather, presents a variety of potential factors, all equally contributing to the selection process. In fact, the literature on this topic is so scant, that the foundational background for this study will predominantly utilize research based on traditional, face-to-face (F2F) universities. The irony of this is that while traditional university enrolment has been declining, online enrolment has been conversely steadily rising, thereby making research into this area both timely and valuable.

As a result of the growth of students opting to pursue higher education programs online, institutions are constantly and actively trying to attract these students by attempting to understand the factors that influence their decisions of school choice (Sarkane & Sloka, 2015). Furthermore, they are contending with more informed and savvier students when it comes to making decisions (Academica Group, 2016). For these institutions, the ongoing question continually remains, why do students pick the schools they do?

Statement of the Problem

There is currently a notable lack of research in the academic realm on factors that influence online higher education choice (Bergerson, 2009). Institutions often conduct their own research into this topic for internal understanding and use, but there does not appear to be any general source of information or articles available.

Choices of institutions are further complicated because students are not limited by location, thereby eliminating one of the key factors linked to F2F institution choice (Simonson et al, 2011). Additionally, removing location as a factor also removes traveling and accommodation expenses that are linked to it, thereby also reducing costs. With one of these factors eliminated, and the other minimized, there is certainly room for students to focus on other relevant factors. However, while the elimination of location as a factor is a benefit for online students, it can simultaneously be seen as a challenge for institutions, who as a result, do not only have to compete with institutions domestically, but internationally as well (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Similarly, while online students have the advantage of being able to study through many desirable institutions worldwide, does location become a relevant factor when combined with other factors; for example, fees, that are affected by residency requirements, or institutional reputation? While the literature does not address this latter issue, this study will certainly attempt to do so.

Ultimately, while many authors write pieces instructing institutions on what needs to be done to attract students, there appears to be a gap in terms of the direct contribution of these very students. The general feedback seems to emphasize the importance of marketing and creating an original brand (Lockwood & Hadd 2007; Munisamy, Jaafar & Nagaraj, 2013; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Sung & Yang, 2008; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton 2004), but without information on the specific demographics targeted by the institution, this is a difficult task (Rovai & Downey 2010). According to Bergerson (2009), further research into factors influencing online higher education enrolment is necessary to form a comprehensive representation of the process.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to identify the main factors of student choice linked to online university selection. The institutions selected for the study were chosen based on institutional reputation and location, the two criteria that formed the basis of analysis. Subsequently, a quantitative methodology was employed for data collection and statistical analysis.

Significance of the Study

First and foremost, this is a highly relevant topic today. Statistics have shown that in Canada, while regular enrolment is decreasing, online enrolment is still increasing. Currently in Ontario, higher education enrolment is declining, and based on research today, institutions should not expect to see the current number of students again until after 2020 (Brown, 2014, September 22). As such, understanding the factors behind student choice would be beneficial to institutions that want to develop or enhance their online learning environments.

Secondly, while the topic of student choice has been widely studied, and has in turn contributed to institutional marketing strategies and student retention tactics in F2F institutions, the same cannot be said for distance education. Distance education is a rapidly growing and evolving field that provides learners with convenient and flexible methods of learning. However, because of these flexible methods, institutions have to compete on a larger, global scale. In order to cater programs and services to students, online higher education institutions need to determine what these students want and expect. Determining and understanding these factors is something that will impact the future growth of online learning, as well as the competitiveness of institutions.

Finally, in a field that has done ample research on student approval and satisfaction, as well as student retention, the topic of factors affecting choice will positively contribute to the existing research. This study will address issues of access, and marketing in HEIs, thereby creating diversity both in student enrolment and in promotional protocols. In addition, it will help fill in some of the gaps in the field, arising from an otherwise unexplored area, and pave the way for future studies in the evolution of online learning.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study is: *What is the impact of factors to choose an online higher education institution?*

To gain further insight into this topic, there are three additional subsidiary questions considered:

1) Is there one unanimous factor that online students look for when picking a school?
2) Are the factors that students value when picking online schools the same as those valued by students when choosing F2F traditional schools?
3) Does location depend on fees, or on reputation/quality?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this paper, the word *factor* was used to describe the various criteria students consider when selecting a school; for example, fees, reputation, quality of teaching, etc.

Additionally, as the paper focuses solely on universities, the acronym *HEI* (higher education institution) was used when describing schools, and *OHEI* was used when specifically referring to online schools.

Institutional Reputation. As a result of growing competition among institutions, and more thorough and savvier perspective students (Academica Group, 2016; Obermeit, 2012), HEIs are having to establish unique brands for themselves that set them apart, and enhance their credibility with the general public (Munisamy, Jaafar & Nagaraj, 2013; Sung & Yang, 2008). These are two components that fall under the umbrella of institutional reputation (Sung & Yang, 2008).

Creating a concrete reputation not only serves to attract quality students, but to advance the institution's position, and give them a competitive advantage (Munisamy et al., 2013; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). In fact, the concept of reputation is commonly used to influence student choice of HEIs (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001), and "…is often more important than its actual quality, because it represents the perceived excellence of the institution which guides the decisions of perspective students to enrol with the institution" (Gatfield et al. (1999) as cited in Munisamy et al., 2013, p. 454). The importance of branding and establishing a unique identity is substantiated by the increase of students searching for HEIs specifically by name over the last six years. In 2015, approximately 90% of E-Expectations respondents stated that their searches included the institution's name (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015).

According to Munisamy et al. (2013), reputation derives from past record, and the positive image created as a result of things like academic ranking, institutional performance, and favourable public perception.

To encompass all of the above components for the purpose of this study, Sung and Yang (2008)'s explanation of university reputation will be used: "…the reputation of an organization refers to public perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple constituents over time" (p. 363).

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations. While this topic has been previously investigated from a mixed methods perspective (Prock & Lefond, 2001; Pampaloni, 2010; Veloutsou et al., 2004), a quantitative methodology was selected here due to its exploratory nature, as well as its potential to reach a wide range of participants. This was deemed appropriate due to the lack of prior research on this topic.

In addition, the sample surveyed only included first year students taking their first DE course/s. There were two reasons for this. First, the priority was to ensure that the focus of the study was solely on the initial choice of institution, rather than sentiment about the institution after experience. Consequently, other students, who had more experience with DE were excluded. Second, first year students would have most recently completed the selection process, so the rationales behind their choice would be most relevant.

Lastly, while there are many online academic certificate, and diploma programs available to students, the online schools investigated in this study were limited solely to institutions offering fully online programs. This again served to create focus.

Limitations. Firstly, the literature review presented in this paper is rather lacking on the topic of factors relating to online selection. However, this is primarily because the existing literature itself is quite lacking in this area. As such, there was not a lot of

information to draw on and correlate with this study, but rather, less than a handful of studies addressing the topic.

Secondly, the population of this study was limited to only two Canadian schools, and 120 students total, which may affect the potential for generalizability in other regions and countries.

Similarly, those willing to participate in the study do not necessarily present an accurate reflection of the audience as a whole. For example, international students were not a focal point in this investigation. As an extension of this, it should be noted that participation in this study was strictly voluntary, so elements such as age, gender, educational background, etc. were not screened for in advance.

Finally, as with most quantitative research, there was a limited ability to explore and analyze participant responses, and in turn gauge the thought process and rationale behind given responses. Two sets of Likert Scales were used in this study, and while the tool is fast and efficient, it fails to measure people's attitudes and beliefs. As such, Likert Scale responses in this study cannot be expanded on, but must stand alone.

Similarly, the two open-ended questions in this study contained no capacity for follow up or expansion, but also must stand alone. While these questions added some breadth and support to the responses provided in this study, they did depend on the participant's recollection. As a result, elements of bias, justification, or simple unclear memories may have been present in some responses.

Summary

This chapter provided the building blocks of the study, including a brief introduction, the significance of the study and the research questions that will be considered moving

forward. Current gaps in the research were also discussed, as well as how this study intends to fit in with the existing body of research.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Over the last decade, the popularity of distance learning has been steadily rising. In the fall of 2006, there were approximately 3.5 million students in the United States taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In 2009, approximately 60% of institutions surveyed, stated that online delivery was an integral part of their future plans (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2011), and in the fall of 2009, there were approximately 5.6 million students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010). In 2011, due to overall decreasing higher education enrolment rates, distance education enrolment only increased by 570, 000 from the previous year to 6.7 million (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Nonetheless, despite this seemingly plateaued result, this amount of students enrolled in at least one online course that year was the highest it had ever been, and while traditional higher education enrolment declined that year, online enrolment still managed to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Once again in 2014, despite overall declines in higher education enrolment, numbers continued to rise in online education. Allen & Seaman found that 5.8 million students were taking distance education courses, with 2.85 million of them taking all their courses online (2016), indicating a 3.9% growth rate from the previous year. Despite these numbers, Allen and Seaman (2016) noted that due to various types of institutions offering online courses, and uneven enrolments, patterns and trends were hard to come by.

In a contradictory paper published in January 2017 The Foundation of Blended and Online Learning, stated that “The total number of students in the United States attending online and blended schools is unknown. A reasonable estimate is between one

and two million students, or roughly 2–4% of all students in the country" (p.6). This discrepancy is confusing and unclear, especially since the reports were published within a year of each other, but the rationale could perhaps be due to different sectors or locations being measured. Nonetheless, the vast inconsistency indicates the often seen volatility when assessing numbers in this field.

Meanwhile in Canada, while there are no organised national statistics or numbers of current online learners, online learning is thriving, and should continue to do so in the coming years with new vested government interest and funding (Contact North, 2012). This can be further evidenced by the commitment to expansion and development of online programs by institutions (Canadian Virtual University, 2012) including the government created eCampus Ontario which opened in the fall of 2015 and includes access to all 45 publically-assisted higher education institutions, as well as a plan of a 72 million dollar investment over five years (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2015, October 8).

University choice for students is considered to be a very high-risk decision making process due to the impact the decision has on lives and careers (Pampaloni, 2010; Simoes & Soares, 2010). Simultaneously, considered to be one of the most important influences of university enrolment, student choice factors have been widely studied in connection to traditional, face-to-face schools. With learners becoming more diligent and thorough with their research, and competition among higher education institutions rising, knowing and understanding the reasons behind why students choose their institutions is a crucial element to the development of resources and marketing strategies within institutions, to recruit the best students (Academica Group, 2016; Han, 2014; Lubbe &

Petzer, 2013; Neuman, 2002; Rapos & Alves, 2007), and additionally to preserve the quality of online education.

While various factors attributed to student choice are continuously explored, four are most recurring in the literature: fees, location, reputation, and course content/quality/offerings (Bergerson, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Clarke, 2007). Nonetheless, while many of the various studies exploring student choice investigate similar factors, they often attribute choice to different factors, and ultimately vary in conclusions, resulting in rather inconclusive results of what definitively influences enrolment. This in turn exposes the rather subjective nature of the topic.

This discussion becomes even murkier when discussing OHEI choice. Though many maintain that the future of distance education looks bright, the specific components relating to why students pick certain schools remain predominantly unexplored. As such, the literature stemming from F2F institutions will be the main focus of the bulk of this literature review.

F2F Factors

Commonly considered to be a key factor linked to decision-making, fees and financial components are very frequently referenced in almost any discussion on student choice of HEIs. In their UK study investigating whether increases in fees would impact students' choices of institutions, Wilkins, Shams and Huisman (2013), determined that financial factors were the most important to students; overshadowing factors like institutional quality and reputation, and moreover, that increases in tuition fees would completely affect students' HEI choices. This is supported by Maringe (2006)'s idea that

students are becoming more like consumers, and as such consider programme and financial elements more important than other factors.

Nonetheless, while fees and financial elements are traditionally thought of as obstacles to higher education, some studies show that this is not in fact the case. Pasternak (2005) describes the institution selection process as one where *costs* are compared to *benefits*. Her qualitative study investigating three Israeli institutions explored the various factors that influence college choice, and took a particularly strong look at whether economic factors were discernable between students who attend schools where tuition is significantly higher, from those who attend schools with lower tuition. Results showed that students who paid higher tuition had higher expectations in terms of teaching quality, support services and materials; results corroborated by Bowman and Bastedo (2009), who explained that students and/or their parents often associate high tuition with quality, prestige and other positive attributes. A common consensus among various studies appears to be that while students consider fees important, they are in no way a determining factor, but one considered amidst an array of other factors (Bergerson, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Clark, 2007; Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015; Raposo & Alves, 2007).

One such study is that conducted by Raposo and Alves (2007), which provides an overview of the results of ten prior studies, spanning from 1981-2005, outlining factors that influence college and university choice. These studies serve as a foundation for their own study that surveyed 1024 students at a university in Portugal. In their results, Raposo and Alves (2007) indicated that the most important factors to the selection process were: proximity to home, fees, parents, and the recommendations of faculty; results coinciding with the foundational studies they outlined at the start of their paper.

In another study of a Portuguese university, surveying 1641 students, results also confirmed that geographical proximity was the most important factor for students choosing HEI (Simoes & Soares, 2010). Nonetheless, despite this indicated correlation between the two studies, it is unclear how the aforementioned foundational studies and researchers cited by Raposo and Alves (2007) were selected, and why the authors chose them specifically, out of dozens of other studies. Also noteworthy, is that these results differ from those found by Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh and Barry (2012).

Dunnett et al. (2012) examined the various factors that impact student college choice in the UK, with a focus on the impact of fees, particularly on minorities and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In their research they included evidence from a very small focus group outlining the various factors that students consider, among which are: university reputation, course reputation, teaching/faculty quality, location and fees. The focus group and the literature coincided and both determined that fees were not a strong motivator to choice, but that students deemed university reputation, course reputation, and location most valuable. The only group who were somewhat impacted by fees, were students who were the first in the family to attend a HEI; that is, students whose parents never went to university.

Contrary to the aforementioned authors, despite examining similar factors as Raposo and Alves (2007) and Dunnett et al. (2012), Mehboob and Bhutto (2012)'s comprehensive study into enrolment decisions yielded no conclusive results, and concluded that there is no single factor that influences students, but rather, a wide range of variables come into play at different times. In this study, the authors chose eleven factors and placed them into three categories: *internal*, *external*, and *social*. Perhaps most

noteworthy in the results, is that career, an internal factor, was ranked the highest of all the factors as the reason that students pursue higher education; and the factor "facilities," an external factor, was deemed one of three factors most indicative of choice. While the term "facilities" is not specifically defined in the study, but rather used as an encompassing word for instructional aids, accommodations, and other campus services, it is significant to note that in direct contradiction to these findings, Sarkane and Sloka (2015)'s study of a Latvian university, determined that sports facilities influenced student choice extremely minimally, and were therefore not a significant factor to HEI choice.

Further inconsistencies can be seen when examining the role of family. Lubbe and Petzer (2013)'s South African study determined that parents were one of the two most influential factors when picking an institution, and that perspective students often turned to these family members for advice and guidance. However, in direct contradiction to this, Sarkane and Sloka (2015) determined that recommendations from family and friends were two of the least contributing factors to choice.

In addition to the influence of parents, Lubbe and Petzer (2013) also identified that brochures had a significant impact on student choice. Based on these findings, the authors recommended that the responsibility lies with institutions to ensure that brochures and websites are engaging, up-to-date, and properly designed, so that they are appealing to students and parents alike. This study corroborates Briggs and Wilson (2007), and Simoes and Soares (2010), who also emphasised the importance of the university website as a key source of information for students.

Similarly, Poock and Lefond (2001) highlighted the importance of utilizing marketing tools, particularly websites, for recruitment purposes, particularly at a time

where most students utilize them as their first method of acquiring information. In 2015's E-Expectations study, approximately 80% of the 3000 high school juniors and seniors surveyed, stated that the school website strongly influenced their perception of the institution, and further added that they used websites as their main source of information and research (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015).

Conversely, Pampaloni (2010)'s study which sampled perspective students from seven schools in New Jersey found that institutional characteristics were the most influential components to choice, and that open houses and tours were the third most important factor to decision making, after programs and location. Students saw these in-person campus visits as a way to gauge the quality of the institution and how it presented itself, as well as how they themselves would fit into life there. The general consensus amongst these students seemed to be that these campus visits were more beneficial than informational resources such as pamphlets and brochures. The authors further attribute this factor as a potential reason why the majority of students opt to attend schools in their own states.

Most recently, in an empirical study exploring students' choice of HEI for master's programmes in Ghana, Mbawuni and Nimako (2015) identified seven factors affecting student choice: *cost*, *student support quality*, *attachment to institution*, *recommendation from lecturers and other staff*, *failure to gain alternative admissions*, *location*. While the results of the study are still significant, the authors note the limitation that there is little empirical data on student choice in developing countries, and that this study, though limited in context due to data collection from only one university in a developing country, can still help institutions become competitive and appeal to students.

Other factors found to be contributors to choice include: lecture and learning facilities (Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003; Veloutsou et al., 2004), course content (Lopez-Bonilla et al. 2012; Pasternak, 2005), and teaching quality (Dunnett et al., 2012; Pasternak, 2005; Veloutsou et al., 2004).

Lastly, while no formal research studies have been conducted to evaluate this component, the admission process and requirements can also be seen as an influence to student choice. In their quest to recruit the best students, these institutions often manoeuvre components like admission requirements to target their desired student body (Steindl, 1990), and as such, some students may consider these requirements unreachable. DiMaria (2014) explains the importance of diversity in the admission process to promote inclusivity and target minorities. To provide a better overview of where the literature predominantly stands, a chronological summary, informed by Raposo and Alves (2007), presents the aforementioned factors most commonly considered to influence student choice (see Appendix E).

Online Factors

One thing that is very prevalent amidst the literature is the noticeable absence of information and research about OHEI choice (Bergerson, 2009.) However, despite this lack of research, what is prominent in the literature is that innovative technology (Richardson, Beck, LaFrance & McLeod, 2016), and creative marketing (Han, 2014; Sarkane & Sloka, 2015) are believed to be at the core of the successful OHE programs; and furthermore, are considered key components of student retention. As is evidenced above, the latter is also considered influential in attracting traditional students. However, whether students consider these factors when picking OHEIs is unclear. Students are

often unaware of the services available to them, and to the extent they can make use of technology (Potter, 2013), so the importance of these factors as having an impact on choice would need to be explored further.

Nonetheless, while there are no conclusive studies currently available about OHEI choice, amidst their various investigations into online learning, the National Online Learners Satisfaction and Priorities Report, which surveys more than 118,000 online students across the United States, explored the factors that lead to online students enrolling in courses (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016). The findings of the survey are outlined in Table 1 below.

Most significant from the results is that *convenience* is the key factor perspective students look for when choosing an OHEI. Also significant is that *reputation of institution* and *cost* were fifth and seventh respectively on the priority list; two of the main factors commonly considered by students enrolling in traditional HEIs. This discrepancy is unclear, but could simply be a result of the different mediums of delivery, and what students associate with each.

Table 1
Enrollment factors at four-year institutions

Item	Importance %
Convenience	96%
Flexible pacing for completing a program	93%
Work schedule	92%
Program requirements	89%
Reputation of institution	86%
Financial assistance available	85%
Cost	83%
Ability to transfer credits	82%
Future employment opportunity	81%
Distance from campus	60%
Recommendations from employer	58%

(Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016, p. 4)

In an additional perspective, the London School of Marketing (2015) recently released a list outlining ten factors that perspective students should consider when choosing an OHEI. The factors are listed like so: *accreditation*, *availability of information*, *statistics*, *cost*, *credit transfers*, *reputation*, *courses offered*, *accessibility*, *interaction*, *quality faculty*. Despite providing a comprehensive list, it is unclear how these items were compiled, and if any students were consulted prior to its assembly. However, what is most interesting about the list is that less than half the components coincide with factors outlined in the literature investigating choice in traditional schools; ultimately indicating that parallels cannot be easily drawn between the two. Furthermore, only three of the factors on this list, *credit transfers*, *cost*, and *reputation* coincide with factors extracted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016).

Most recently, The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning (2017) conducted a study whereby *flexibility* (primarily in schedule) was found to be the factor that students (and their parents) most wanted in an online institution. However, in a different perspective from Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016), this flexibility was found to be linked to things like mental health issues, bullying, and other social issues. These elements were not considered in this study.

While each of these studies had different variables and circumstances, their various findings and conclusions only further indicate that there is a lack of consistency on the subject, and that further research into OHEI choice is necessary to gain understanding into student choice.

Commentary on the Literature

Evident amidst all the literature, is that while there are a number of recurring factors indicating reasons for both F2F and online student HEI selection, conclusions are fairly inconsistent, and at times, contradictory. While explanations for this are speculative at best, one potential hypothesis is that due to the different variables present in each study, as well as the methods of research, environments and research instruments, results have rendered different conclusions. A simpler hypothesis could be that due to the subjective nature of the topic, finding consistency in results is ultimately unlikely (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Nonetheless, one thing that is apparent is that parallels cannot easily be drawn between F2F students and online students.

Decision Making Models

The specificities behind the decision making process have been widely studied and investigated over the last several decades by researchers and scientists alike. In an attempt to further understand this topic, many of these investigators have shared their ideas of what they believe goes into decision making, and how people approach the process. The following section will briefly outline some of the relevant decision making models that apply to student choice and the general exploration of this topic.

Hossler & Gallagher's Three-Phase Model. When exploring the idea of student decision-making, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-phase model is commonly prevalent throughout the literature. Each phase in the model is linked with a particular age, and the process is believed to commence in high school. At this time, students initially develop a *predisposition* to attend a HEI, thereby leading them to *search*, or research information on perspective schools, and ultimately make *choices* to attend a specific school. Throughout the three phases, various external elements have significant

influences, for example, the advice of family and friends, socio-economic status, student ability, etc. (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). As a result, the phases are not mutually exclusive, but often intersect and impact one another. Other elements that may meaningfully impact decision-making are individual student characteristics, and student college values (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

While this model certainly accounts for the various stages in decision-making, its main deficiency lies in its subjectivity. In fact, while many students may go through these stages, it is not compulsory for them to go through all three. Not only might students reach different phases at different times or not at all, but the external factors they contend with may significantly alter their path, thereby altering or contradicting the decision-making model.

Perna's Conceptual Model. Unlike the other structured decision-making models that exist, Perna (2006)'s conceptual model is based on the premise that there is not one specific process that students follow when choosing HEI, but rather, that many paths are possible. She centers her model on human capital investment, and like Pasternak (2005), focuses her idea on HEI decisions being based on a comparison of costs and benefits, which are in turn influenced by academic preparation and the ability to pay tuition fees. Based on the model, there are four levels of decision-making: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. These four areas ultimately emphasize individual student differences, and the resources they possess when making a decision (Perna, 2006).

Similar to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-phase model, this conceptual

model also depends on hitting specific levels of decision-making. However, once again, it is unclear if students necessarily hit all of these levels, or if they jump between them. As such, like the three-phase model, the main deficiency here lies in the fact that the typically messy decision-making process is perhaps quite ironically attributed to a very structured model.

Lewin's Force Field Analysis. Lewin's *force field analysis* is a method used to evaluate the various enticers and detractors in decision-making in a systematic and objective way (Keenan, 2015), that is, it helps a person look at the big picture of a situation. At the heart of the analysis are two forces: *driving forces* and *restraining forces*. The two oppose each other, and where the former pushes for change, the latter resists. When utilizing this method, users first identify and lay out all the driving and restraining forces, visualize and describe their desired outcome as specifically as possible, and then come up with an action plan to address and meet this outcome (Keenan, 2015). Throughout the process, adjustments and alterations can be made, as well as additions and subtractions to any of the existing factors.

While each of the theories presented possesses relevant components to the decision-making process, Lewin's theory seems to most resemble the decision-making process a student would take when selecting a HEI, in that the process is quite unstructured and unpredictable. Corresponding to Lewin's method, students weigh out the pros and cons of each HEI under consideration, before choosing the one that most meets their needs. As a result, the analysis takes into account the distinct characteristics of individual students, and allows them to identify the factors they deem important. This analysis is the one that will be drawn from in this investigation.

Summary

The above literature review references a variety of studies and reports from around the world, addressing student choice of HEIs. The F2F research, which forms the bulk of the review, outlines a variety of relevant factors, with the most prevalent ones being, fees, location and reputation. While there are noticeably fewer resources about online HEIs, there are three sources mentioned above which discuss the topic, though they are quite inconsistent.

Despite various factors, methodologies, and environments, the majority of studies agree that universities need to improve their marketing strategies in order to attract future students. This chapter concludes with a description of three decision making models that have been drawn on in various studies on this topic, and an explanation on why Lewin's Forcefield Analysis will be applied to the decision-making process in this study.

Chapter III

Method

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative methodology, and was designed with the goal of understanding student choice of HEIs, as well as the information sources they utilize to aid them with their choice. A survey-based method was utilized for efficiency, to allow for a wide range of questions to be asked, to ensure reaching a large number of students, and to allow for potential generalizations to be made to other areas.

In choosing this method, this study was based on the key assumption that students were informed on this topic, adequately recalled their decision making process, and would answer questions truthfully.

Population, Sample, and Participants

For the purpose of this study, the population was limited to 2016/2017 first year university students, currently pursuing a Bachelor's or Master's degree program fully online.

One hundred and twenty students took place in the study, 60 from a university in western Canada, and 60 from a university in central Canada. The small sample size was chosen to allow for more control, and despite including a wide range of opinions, was sufficient to identify existing patterns from the data.

Participation in the study was voluntary and based purely on interest. Willing participants had to read an information letter, as well as a letter of consent (Appendices B & C). Due to this voluntary nature, demographics and characteristics of learners are uncontrolled and random.

Instrumentation

Prior studies have already examined this topic in traditional institutions, and have identified several relevant factors. However, as previously mentioned, the factors identified were often contradictory, and none examined the factors considered when selecting online schools.

As a result of this novelty a quantitative approach was used to investigate this topic. A survey design, specifically a web based one employed via *LimeSurvey*, was utilized to collect data. There were several motivations for this choice. First, because the intention of this study was to survey students from two universities across Canada, this design is more efficient than others in terms of time and cost. Second, a survey design is advantageous for generalizations to a larger population than the one being studied, which in this case would be first year students who have just started studying at their university. This in turn could help to expand the range of the study. As an extension of the previous point, it was generally easier to get statistically significant results, thereby maintaining reliability (Creswell, 2014). Finally, because the intended survey was administered to students via the Internet, another benefit of this design was that distribution was convenient, and data collection efficient.

The survey itself was designed by the researcher, and was constructed by drawing on the existing research in this field. The twenty-two factors chosen were accumulated from the various research studies in this paper's literature review, primarily from those used by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016), in their study exploring online institution choice. The London School of Marketing (2015)'s report also inspired a number of the factors on the list.

The nine information sources were accumulated based on a combination of the existing F2F research noted above, and general methods typically utilized when gathering research.

The survey was divided into four sections. To start, the first section served to elicit profile information such as gender, age, marital status, current degree type, etc. The aim of these questions was to establish some background information on the participants, and determine what profile sector they fell under. Subsequently, the core data investigating factors affecting student choice contained approximately twenty statements, and utilized a Likert Scale, with responses limited to values between 1-7, or "Not important at all" to "Very important." A 7-point scale was selected in an attempt to gather the most precise and accurate responses possible. In this section, students were asked to read some short phrases, and select the numerical value that most corresponded with their views. The reasoning for this design was two-fold. First, it was the most efficient way to gauge student opinions and attitudes, and second, Likert Scales are typically easily quantified. Part three of the survey also utilized a 7-point Likert Scale, and contained eleven statements. This section sought to determine the types of information sources students used when gathering information, and how valuable they found each to be. Finally, the survey ended with part four, which consisted of two open-ended questions, serving to both summarize the responses, and conclude the survey. The complete survey can be seen in the table in Appendix E.

Variables. The independent variables in this study were the students, specifically, University A and University B students. The dependent variables were the different

factors students considered when making their decisions, for example, cost, reputation, convenience, etc.

Preliminary Inquiry

In September 2016, a preliminary inquiry was conducted with six participants to ensure the reliability of the survey, and to provide insight into the suitability of the instrument, and whether it measures what it is intended to. All participants were at the time graduate students taking their degree program online. Additionally, they were all in an older age category (45+), and none represented the international student population. In terms of the latter point, the official study contained a general invitation, so the status of international students who may have responded was completely unknown. Nonetheless, while the preliminary inquiry respondents resembled the ones in the formal study in that they were all graduate students taking degree programs fully online, they differed in that in the formal study, the vast minority of respondents, only 27%, were over the age of 45.

In terms of observations, one participant noted the potential for dishonesty with questions relating to age or marital status. Another participant noted that some of the language used might be a bit too complicated for the average learner. This participant also expressed that the factors of *convenience*, *flexibility*, *and work schedule*, were the reasons she decided to take an online degree in the first place, so while they were relevant to her decision to study online, they were not really relevant to her overall institution choice. While these factors were still included on the final survey, this explanation should be taken into account when dissecting the results. However, based on the feedback

received from participants, the survey was modified accordingly, and prepared for the official sampling process.

Data Collection

Data was collected from two universities in Canada: University A, located in western Canada and University B, located in central Canada. These institutions were chosen based on three primary components, institutional reputation, geographical location and number of degree programs offered. Appendix F outlines these specific attributes for both the universities. As there are no existing formal rankings of Canadian OHEIs, the components under institutional reputation were retrieved from each of the university's individual websites.

Participation in the study was purely voluntary, and participants were garnered with the assistance of the two institutions in this study. Each institution posted a letter of information on their respective announcements boards, thereby reaching out to interested students.

Sampling was conducted at the start of the winter semester, over a one-month period from January 2017 to February 2017. The justification for this time span was to ensure that students had settled into their university of choice, but had not yet had the chance to determine whether the school met the factors they deemed important when initially making their decision. This was predominantly meant to ensure that students remain focused on the given topic.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from this survey was exported to SPSS Statistics for analysis. To see the number of times each factor and information source were selected on the

Likert Scale respectively, descriptive statistics were utilized, and a frequency chart with percentages was produced. Results were then grouped by importance, unimportance, and neutrality/inapplicableness to allow for easier analysis, and then ranked by popularity.

Despite the rationale provided above about the Likert Scale groupings, the table created ranking frequency and popularity did not take into account the differences between points within each group. In order to meet this demand, a second table was created presenting the visible big gaps between the top rated and second top rated points. For the sake of the chart, a "big gap" was considered to be a difference of 20% or more. Additionally, numbers were included next to each of the relevant factors indicating their position in the Likert Scale groupings, for comparison purposes.

Ethics

Before beginning the sampling process, ethics approval was obtained from both of the universities in the study. "Institutional Access Permission" was also acquired in order to recruit students to the project from both University A and B. Finally, participants had to give consent acknowledging, and adhering to the policies for research participation outlined by their respective universities.

Summary

This chapter discussed the development of the research instrument and its reliability, as well as the sources drawn from for its creation. The various sections in the survey were broken down, and the population, sample, and participants were explained. Finally, data collection and analysis procedures were outlined.

Chapter IV

Results

This study surveyed a total of 120 students: 60 from a university in western Canada, and 60 from a university in central Canada.

Demographics

Females were the most common respondents in this study at 64%, while males made up 34% of respondents.

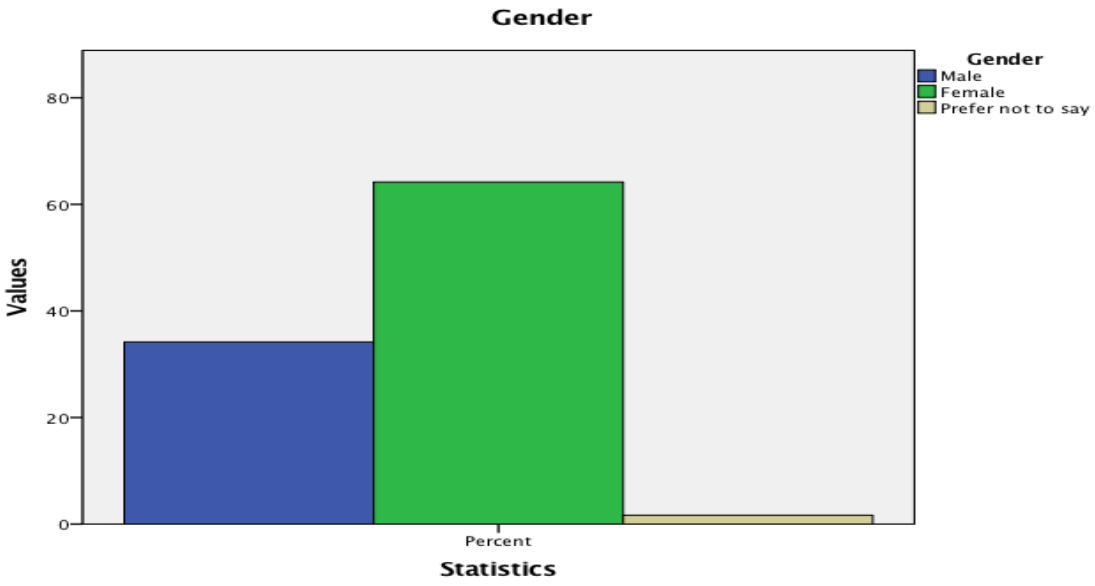

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents by Gender.

There was no dominant age range observed, but rather a fairly even distribution of ages between 17 and 49 years old. Despite the close proximity in age ranges, it should be noted that the majority of candidates came from the 31-39 age range group with 28% responding. Also noteworthy is that the range of ages over 50 years old consisted of just 8% of participants.

Of those surveyed, 25% stated that English was not their first language, and 47% stated that they were a first generation student.

As typically attributed to online learners, 81% of respondents stated that they were working while studying, and of those, 61% stated they were working full time.

In terms of institutions considered, while the majority of respondents (38%) stated that they only considered one DE institution, the one they were currently attending, 33% considered two, and an additional 23% considered three. Also noteworthy is that 51% of participants stated that they considered both online and face-to-face institutions during their selection process.

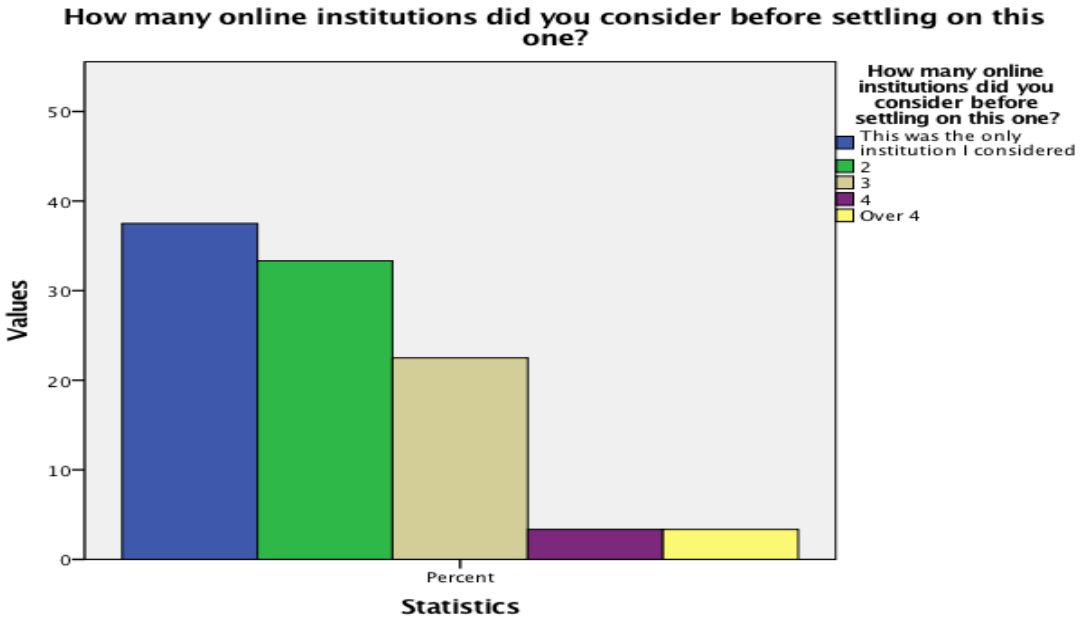

Figure 2. Number of DE Institutions Considered.

However, when asked which they considered more important between the program and the institution, an overwhelming 81% stated that the program is more important.

A comprehensive summary of responses to the asked profile questions can be viewed in Appendix G.

Factors

To determine the most important factors that students consider when selecting an OHEI, a 7-point Likert Scale was utilized. Overall, 120 responses were accumulated and analyzed from this section to garner results.

Flexibility and *convenience* ranked the highest amongst all the factors with 115 (96%) and 114 (95%) respondents out of 120 selecting them as important.

In addition, *institutional reputation* and *institution location*, two of the most important factors in the selection process of F2F institutions were selected by 72% (86) and 46% (55) of participants respectively as important.

Fees in general ranked quite high in the study, which surveyed *cost of individual courses*, as well as, *cost of the entire program*. The former ranked just slightly higher with 72% (86) ranking it as important, compared to 70% (84) for the latter.

The lowest ranking factors were *online ranking and reviews (*44%), *financial aid* (38%), *recommendations of teachers/counsellors* (22%), *recommendations of friends* (19%), and *recommendations of parents* (8%).

The table in Appendix G provides a full list of the results of the Likert Scale portion of the study, as well as a comparison to the Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016) results.

In addition, because this section utilized a Likert Scale, Cronbach's alpha was utilized to measure scale reliability. The alpha coefficient for the twenty-two factors measured was .871, suggesting a fairly high internal consistency.

Gaps Between Points. Coincidentally, the biggest differences, or gaps, were all between the Likert Scale points *Very important* and *Important*, indicating a strong feeling of importance towards certain factors.

Despite there being present a small variation between the factors *convenience* and *flexibility* compared to the ranking of factors mentioned above, the top three factors still had the biggest gap between first and second: convenience = 58%, flexibility = 55%, available programs = 35%.

Additional gaps were present with work schedule (32%) *future career opportunities* (25%), *length of program* (20%) and *credit transfers* (34%), which ranked 9th, 13th, and 15th in the Likert Scale groupings respectively, but had big gaps between first and second.

Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is credit transfers, ranking 15th in the groupings, but 4th in terms of gap, with a 34%.

The table in Appendix I provides a full list of the differences between the top rated and second top rated points.

Information Sources

Like the selection factors, a 7-point Likert Scale was also used to rank the information sources most commonly used to gather research on OHEIs. The results of this indicated that 82.5% of participants used the university website as their main source for accumulating information into institutions. A distant second was personal proclivities and inclinations, with 53%, followed by random Internet searches, with 29%. Least important to students were: *advertisements* (17%), *printed brochures* (12%), and *in-person visits* (12%). The full list of results can be seen below in Table 2.

Once again, because of the use of a Likert Scale, Cronbach's alpha was used to measure scale reliability. The alpha coefficient for the nine information sources in this section was .893, which again indicates a high internal consistency.

Table 2
Information Sources Rankings

Information Sources	Groups: 1-3 1 = not important at all 2 = not very important 3 = somewhat unimportant	Groups: 5-7 5 = somewhat important 6 = important 7 = very important	Groups: 4-N/A 4 = neutral
The university website	11 (9%)	99 (83%)	10 (8%)
Personal proclivities and inclinations	23 (19%)	64 (53%)	33 (28%)
Random Internet searches	35 (29%)	61 (51%)	24 (20%)
Secondary/external websites not affiliated with the university	46 (38%)	47 (39%)	27 (23%)
Conversations with institutional representatives or advisors	41 (34%)	47 (39%)	32 (27%)
Conversations with current students or alumni	45 (37%)	38 (32%)	37 (31%)
Advertisements	65 (54%)	20 (17%)	35 (29%)
Printed brochures	74 (62%)	14 (12%)	32 (26%)
In-person campus visits	55 (46%)	14 (12%)	51 (42%)

Open Ended Questions Responses

In addition to the Likert Scale questions, this survey contained two open-ended questions to help support the data collected from the Likert Scale, and to offer some extra information into the research questions. The first question posed was "*What were the top 3 reasons you chose your institution?*" There were 118 complete responses to this question, with 33 overall reasons suggested.

In accordance with the Likert Scale results, this first question found *flexibility* (44%), *convenience* (36%) and *program* (22%), to be the top reasons of choice. Factors

mentioned that were not part of the Likert Scale factors included: *program affiliation* (16%), *program length* (4%), and *French programs/courses* (4%). *French programs/courses* was a factor selected solely by University B students, as University B offers courses in both English and French. The table in Appendix I shows a complete list of the reasons suggested by students.

The second short answer question was, "*In your opinion, what should online institutions focus their resources on to attract students?"* This question had 110 viable respondents with 28 suggestions elicited. A coding process was utilized to decipher and organize the information, and as such, a table including terms, definitions and responses was created, and can be found in Appendix K. The definitions pertain specifically to this study, and their sole purpose is to explain and clarify the terms used in the coding process.

The top responses to this question were as follows: 1) *flexibility* (23%), 2) *advertising* (18%), 3) *communication* (12%), 4) *fees* (10%), and 5) *student support* (10%). At the bottom end of the spectrum were: *job opportunities* (2%), *admission requirements* (1%), and *recommendations of others* (1%).

Summary

This chapter aims to provide the results of the research questions in this study, and determine the factor/s that students find most relevant to their DE institution selection, as well as the information source/s they most commonly use during their research process.

Based on the results, the factor most commonly and repetitively reported in various sections of this study was *flexibility*. *Convenience*, and *available programs* were

also high ranked, and seen as significant factors to decision making, followed by qu*ality course material*, and *work schedule*.

When it came to gathering information, the university website was the most commonly utilized tool by a large margin.

Chapter V

Discussion & Conclusion

The following section includes a discussion of the major findings of this study, broken down by research question, as well as generally by category, followed by implications for institutions, and recommendations for further studies.

General Discussion

Several observations can be made based on the demographics. First, in terms of the big gap between female (64%) and male (34%) participants, it is unclear if this is a reflection of the female to male ratios that take DE courses, whether females are more likely to respond to research studies, or whether these numbers are simply random. It is also unclear if gender is at all connected with choice, or played any role in the results of this study.

A second notable observation is that just over half of participants indicated that they considered both F2F and online institutions during their decision making process. This shows that there is still very much competition between the two mediums, and that many students are open to both options. However, despite this openness, students stated that the program was very important to them, which could possibly have been the determining factor in their decisions. This supports conclusions made by both Maringe (2006) and Pampaloni (2010), and provides further validation to institutions' commitment to expanding programs (Canadian Virtual University, 2012). Additionally, this furthers the need for marketing strategies for institutions.

As previously discussed, *Lewin's Forcefield Analysis* was drawn on in this study to better understand the decision making process. Responses from participants indicated

that in choosing an online HEI, they assessed each institution by analyzing if it would be able to meet their individual priorities; thereby assessing pros and cons (Keenan, 2015). This can be most prominently seen in that over half of students were open to both F2F and online HEIs, but ultimately decided on an online school after weighing out the advantages and disadvantages of each. In short, various factors were weighted based on importance, and a choice of institution was made based on the results of this weighting. However, another element that arose from this process is that while attempting to weight factors, many students discovered that often times, there was not enough information available about the various institutions for them to adequately assess, thereby forcing them to adjust their expectations, and form their analysis based on the information that was available, and their general instincts and personal proclivities. This lack of available information was one of the key motivators of this study.

Important to also note is that education is no longer as black and white as DE vs. F2F, but that now it is possible to combine the two in terms of blended learning. As such, the decision making process may be even further complicated in the future. Students will be able to "get the best of both worlds," which can somewhat be seen in terms of the profile question asking if they considered online programs, face-to-face programs, or both. Results showed 49% considered only online program, while 51% considered both, thereby indicating that neither of these channels has a clear majority over the other, but that students can very much be swayed either way, and that blended learning may be a happy medium between the two.

Research Question 1:

Is there one unanimous factor that online students look for when picking a school?

The short answer to this question, is no. Based on the results of this study, there is not a single unanimous factor that students look for when picking a school, but rather, a combination of factors. However, *flexibility* was a continually recurring factor in each of the questions, with 96% of participants deeming it as important to their selection process, and 44% selecting it as the main reason they chose their institution. The rationale for this is that DE students are typically balancing various areas in their lives, such as work, families, and social obligations, in addition to their studies. As a result, they are looking for an institution that will give them the flexibility to maintain all of these things simultaneously, as well as give them leeway with extensions and deadlines. This can be further corroborated, as 81% of respondents found *work schedule* to be an important factor to their decision-making.

In addition to flexibility, the factors *convenience* and *programs* also ranked high with 36% and 22% of participants selecting them respectively as two of the top reasons they chose their institution. The former supports the above rationale, which was also included in the study conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016).

Research Question 2:

Are the factors that students value when picking online schools the same as those valued by students when choosing F2F traditional schools?

This question was included in this study because the bulk of the literature review was made up of studies based on F2F research. As such, a comparison between the two methods of delivery seemed both relevant and necessary.

Based on the literature reviewing various studies, the four most explored and recurring areas of importance for students when selecting a F2F institution are: fees,

location, reputation and course content/quality/offerings (Bergerson, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Clarke, 2007). While each of these four factors were often present and selected as important for online students, the only one of these in the top four for online students was fees, with 22% of respondents deeming it as a deciding factor to their choice of institution in the short answer question. It ranked third amongst the factors provided by respondents, but tenth (course cost) and twelfth (program cost) in the Likert Scale, with approximately 70% finding it important. This discrepancy could be because the Likert Scale asked participants to consider each factor as a separate entity, whereas the open-ended question allowed them to suggest their own ideas. In addition to this, 16%, 15%, and 6% selected location, reputation, and course offerings respectively as deciding factors.

Location was initially assumed not to be a relevant factor to choice for online students. However, the results of this study have somewhat contradicted this assumption, indicating that despite the distance component, students are often partial to locations closer to home, and generally in the province that they reside. They seem to find comfort in what they know and what is familiar to them. Despite this, only 46% of respondents indicated that location was an important factor to choice in the Likert Scale. Again though, location being a separate entity may be the reason for this.

The table in Appendix L shows the overlap between the factors chosen by students in this study and those chosen by F2F students based on the above literature review.

Research Question 3:

Does location depend on fees, or on reputation/quality?

As the most prevalent factors to choice in the research of F2F institutions, it was necessary to see if these same factors would also have an impact to choice of online institutions. Based on this study, fees have more of an influence on location than reputation/quality. This is simply based on the fact that fees ranked higher in all results.

One possible reason for this could be that there is insufficient information available on the reputations of institutions, so perhaps fees were more dominant by default. An alternative explanation could quite simply be that fees, as many researchers have found, are always relevant and significant when discussing institution choice, and would therefore have ranked higher regardless. (Bergerson, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Clark, 2007; London School of Marketing, 2015; Maringe, 2006; Mbawuni and Nimako, 2015; Raposo and Alves, 2007; Ruffalo Noel Leviz, 2016; Wikins, Shams & Huisman, 2013).

Most significantly, in corroboration with Dunnett et al. (2012), who found that fees were typically important to first generation students, this study, which contained a large percentage of first generation students (48%), also found that costs of individual courses and the program as a whole were typically important to students. Due to the quantitative nature of the study, this connection cannot be conclusively proven, so a qualitative component examining this point in the future could prove valuable.

Similarly, the effects of fees may be influenced by age as well. For example, perhaps the reason that fees were not as prevalent in this study as others is because 76% of respondents were over the age of 23, and in turn, possibly more financially stable, whereas with younger students, it is possible that there is parental influence over matters of fees.

Main Research Question

What is the impact of factors to choose an online higher education institution?

The simple answer to this question is that there are no specific patterns of factors indicated through this study, but that certain factors are more likely to attract students to an institution, while others are just irrelevant to them. For example, recommendations from others, which were often prevalent in various F2F studies (Raposo and Alves, 2007; Sarkane & Sloka, 2015), were the lowest ranked factors in this study.

Essentially, the five most important factors to choice, based on the Likert Scale in this study are: *flexibility*, *convenience*, *available programs*, *quality of course material* and *work schedule*. Based on these results, one could reason that if institutions put their efforts into developing these things, they would attract more students.

In terms of information sources, the university website was by far the most valuable tool for students seeking information about an institution, and therefore requires the most focus by administrators. One could even go so far as to say that if an institution has a comprehensive website, they do not need anything else by way of advertising.

Factors

This study used all but one factor from the Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016) study, but despite this, results differed substantially. *Convenience* and *flexibility* still emerged in the top two, but in reverse order from the Noel Levitz study, with *flexibility* ranking just 1% higher than *convenience*. This in and of itself is not conclusive enough to draw any tangible conclusions, however, when combined with the fact that flexibility was selected as number one in three different areas in this study, the conclusion can be made that flexibility is the number one factor that students look for in a higher education institution. One explanation for these numbers could be that these are the two factors that persuade

students to study online in the first place, and therefore may not necessarily be significant factors they look for within each institution they consider. However, a second explanation could be that a large number of respondents (81%) admitted to working while studying. It could therefore reason that this percentage of people more than likely contributed to these two factors ranking so high.

Regardless, in terms of *flexibility*, institutions are generally aware of the importance of this component and try to create courses accordingly. This result corroborates findings most recently described the Foundation for Blended and Online Learning (2017), in their paper titled *Why do Students Choose Blended and Online Schools*, flexibility was found to be the most important factor to students.

Aside from these two factors, all other factors varied both in terms of rank, and popularity. The factor *institution location* (46%), received 60% in the Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016) study. Similarly, *financial aid* (38%) received 85% in the Noel Levitz study. However, this discrepancy could simply be due to the difference in the number of participants. This study had 120 participants, while the Noel Levitz study had 3000. Similarly, the ages of participants could also have been a contributing factor, with all of the participants in this study being enrolled in DE courses, and the Noel Levitz participants being high school students. This age difference also implies differences in life commitments and obligations, and therefore priorities.

Also striking is the large gap between *institution location* (63%), and *online ranking and reviews* (46%). This is the largest gap between factors in the Likert Scale, and while it does not reveal anything conclusively, could certainly be attributed to the fact that these rankings and reviews simply do not exist for DE institutions.

Another large gap is that between *recommendations of teachers/counsellors* (38%) and *recommendations of friends* (22%). This is a result consistent with the F2F literature as well, and shows that whereas the opinions of friends may be valued in general social decisions, they are not valued at all in institution decision-making, but rather, the opinions of teachers and counsellors, one might say experts in the field, are valued much more highly.

Gaps between Points. The addition of this section aimed to emphasize the specific factors that were most popular based on Likert Scale points, as a result eliciting strong student sentiments.

Aside from the top three factors and *work schedule* (5th), which contained the biggest differences between first and second in this section, the other three factors containing big gaps were actually ones that ranked towards the lower half of the Likert Scale groupings list: *future career opportunities* (9th), *length of program* (13th), and *credit transfer*s (15th). Each of these factors was deemed "Very Important" by a high margin of students, indicating their value, and perhaps warranting future attention by institutions. *Credit transfers* in particular were reported by several respondents to be the primary reason for their institution selection.

Information Sources

Essentially, what these results indicate is that students have a strong online presence when gathering research, and that it is the information they find on their online searches that most influence their decision-making. The popularity of the university website as the number one tool, also shows characteristics of *Lewin's Forcefield Analysis*, as when visiting various websites, students are comparing the pros and cons of

each institution, and applying the information they collect to their individual priorities (Keenan, 2015). This could also serve as justification for why personal proclivities and inclinations ranked second on this list.

These results contradict findings by The Foundation of Blended and Online Learning (2017) who found that students and parents found out about new schools through "non-traditional communications" (p. 20). These communications were generally in the form of word of mouth from teachers, parents, siblings, administrators and counselors from their F2F schools. While these sources were present in the Likert Scale, they all ranked significantly below electronic sources in this study.

Two things are noteworthy from this section of the study. The first is that the university website ranked significantly higher than all other information sources. This corresponds with findings made by Lubbe and Petzer (2013), Poock and Lefond (2001), and Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016). Additionally, there is an approximate 30% gap between the first and second ranked items in this section, thereby indicating an almost landslide result.

The second noteworthy thing is that printed brochures, items deemed important to attracting students in a F2F study by Lubbe and Petzer (2013), were actually found to be quite insignificant with only 12% of respondents finding them important. This is significant as print advertisements are generally much more expensive than electronic, and if these sources are not hitting the demographic they are intending to, institutions can save money in this area, and allocate it to a more relevant place.

Open Ended Questions

The two open ended questions in this study were added in an attempt to provide a little bit more insight into the decision-making process. The first question simply asked participants to list the three factors that most influenced their choice of institution. The rationale for this was two fold. First, to see if factors outside the ones included in this study would be introduced and deemed relevant, and second to see if the factors collected by other researchers were on par with the views of students.

After analyzing the results, the bulk of factors suggested by respondents coincided with both the ones provided in this study, and the body of research. Most interesting of these factors was the recurrence of *credit transfer*, which was also considered important in the Likert Scale questions with 67.5%. This factor also ties in with the flexibility, as students want the credits they earn to be relevant and transferable to other areas of interest.

The second question asked here was more open ended than the first as it sought to elicit feedback from students on what areas they believed institutions should focus their resources on, and provided them with the opportunity to explain their choices if they wanted. While responses in this are varied, the recurrence of *advertising*, *communication*, and *student support* in the top 5 of drawn responses is very telling.

Advertising is a component frequently mentioned in some capacity by various researchers, typically under the general umbrella of marketing (Academica Group, 2016; Han, 2014; Lockwood & Hadd 2007; Lubbe & Petzer, 2013; Munisamy, Jaafar & Nagaraj, 2013; Neuman, 2002; Poock and Lefond, 2001; Rapos & Alves, 2007; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Sung & Yang, 2008; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton 2004). This is not just linked to brand establishment, but also student attraction and retention. With a wide array

of institutions at their disposal, students must research and compare in order to identify the school that is the best fit for them. This is typically the case with most big decisions. Unfortunately, because the field is not yet as advanced as its F2F counterpart, as per DE students, information on online schools is often sparse and unsubstantial. Students noted that finding the information they wanted on programs, courses and degrees was difficult and suggested that institutions advertise more, both online, through different social media outlets, such as Facebook, and through seminars and fairs held at high schools. For many, it was only through intensive research and conversations with administration that they were able to get answers to lingering questions. In their 2001 findings, Poock and Lefond emphasized the importance of utilizing websites for student recruitment, as they are generally the primary resource used for gathering information. This study corroborates this conclusion, and finds that 15 years later, focusing on online advertising and marketing is more crucial than ever.

As an extension of advertising, communication was another area students felt required focus from institutions. Communication was seen as valuable both during the initial research period, where students are gathering information, and subsequently when they are applying and completing applications. Respondents stated that they appreciated the promptness their queries were responded to by administration and faculty, both over the phone, and via email. Students connected this promptness with efficiency and organization, which created feelings of confidence and reassurance about the institution as a whole. In addition, they benefited from the one on one contact from personnel and the detailed responses and guidance they received. This communication often compensated for the information they were unable to find online.

Student support was the third highest criteria listed in this section and substantially ties in to the idea of communication. DE schools often cause feelings of trepidation, and require a significant amount of the independence on the part of the student. This makes sense given that students do not have in-person access to faculty, administration, or campus tours. As a result, unlike with F2F institutions, students are often unsystematically navigating through an array of schools online, with often limited information at their disposal. As such, they are forced to fill in a lot of the blanks they encounter. To aid them with their searches and queries, students have suggested that student support resources be available. Support can come in the form of forums, one on one sessions, or group peer mentoring from student volunteers/workers, or alumni with experience and knowledge about the institution and programs. This would also aid in creating a community of support and foster relationships in the DE world.

Implications for Institutions

The findings of this study have several implications for DE institutions that will be discussed. In addition, there will be a small section for each of the two universities in this study, culminating some common thoughts expressed by students.

First and foremost, as the top rated factor in various sections of this survey, instructional design efforts should be focused on ensuring that degrees, programs, and courses have significant components of flexibility. Students have indicated that this is the primary factor they look for in an institution, which makes it extremely valuable. Flexibility can be incorporated with assignment requirements, types of assessments, methods of collaboration, diversity in technology, resource materials, and deadlines, as well as credit transfers to and from other programs and schools; in short, anything within

reason that could simplify the life of a student, without compromising the integrity of the institution.

Secondly, and quite significantly, institutions need to maintain that their websites are detailed, informative, and user friendly, to ensure that students receive all the important information they require upon visiting. As their primary information source, participants in this study, as well as prior research studies, frequently expressed the need for school websites to be comprehensive and in tune with student needs. A creative and detailed website is also an opportunity for DE institutions to create individual and unique brands for themselves, setting themselves apart from other institutions.

Also relative to this, results indicated that 62% of respondents found printed brochures to be an unimportant information source. As such, institutions should consider decreasing, or eliminating altogether, the production of these printed sources. As previously stated, this holds the added benefit of being a cost saver.

Amidst other prevalent factors, students also value a variety of programs and diverse courses, both of which institutions could benefit from including in advertisements and general marketing. Opportunities for future employment and pathways to other programs would further aid in showing both the relevance and connections of the institution to employers, and the general community, thereby inspiring a positive reputation.

Finally, as simplistic as this may seem to be, institutions could also benefit from including reasons why DE degrees and programs are generally advantageous to students. Despite their growing popularity, many students are just not aware of the benefits of studying online, and how this could greatly simplify their lives, without compromising

the quality of the education they receive. Listing these benefits could serve in eliminating the daunting feelings of trepidation and isolation some students encounter when considering taking a degree online, and in turn, promote renewed enthusiasm for this method of studying.

University A. Several University A students indicated that they liked the variety of programs offered, as well as the university's willingness to recognize older university credits, and that it allowed them to directly transfer into several diploma programs. They also admired that it was a leading innovator in the field of distance education, and allowed for a balance of group work and individual assessments.

University B. For University B specifically, advertisements and marketing initiatives should continue promoting French and bilingual programs, as several students attributed their choice to them. Additionally, the partnership that currently exists with the CPA and CGA programs received very positive feedback, as several of them chose the institution solely based on these partnerships.

Summary

This purpose of this chapter was to provide a discussion and analysis of the results in this study. Both areas that supported and contradicted the literature were identified, and potential reasons provided for discrepancies. In addition, connections were made between the decision making process in this study and Lewin's Forcefield Analysis. Finally, the implications of these results for DE universities in general, and the two universities in this study specifically, were also discussed.

Recommendations for Further Research

The responses generated by the participants in this study corroborated a lot of the existing research, contradicted other existing research, and contributed some new findings. However overall, the findings corroborated the initial purpose of conducting this study. Students often find that there is simply not enough information available about DE institutions. Perspective students often do not know what kind of programs and courses are available, the relevance of DE programs to job opportunities, and the overall advantages of taking degrees online. One definite conclusion of this study is that if online institutions want to attract students, they must put more resources into marketing and advertising, and target those resources towards the factors important to students, such as flexibility, communication, and student support.

Nonetheless, despite these conclusions, this study was not all encompassing. It did not take into account international students, or students who had taken more than one year of DE studies, but only focused on two Canadian universities, and students in their first year of studies. As such, research in this area that includes a more diverse student base, and expands the scope of the study to other universities, or possibly colleges could add to the wealth of knowledge in this area.

Also, further research into the importance of fees and location, and their relevance to choice would also be beneficial, as the results in this study were not enough to make any tangible conclusions. The recurrence of location as a factor was an interesting development, as typically, given the online learning environment, it should not be relevant at all.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, a study with a larger number of participants would also add in identifying existing trends and patterns, and focusing on participant profiles could aid in demonstrating the areas different demographics are drawn to.

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Appendix A

The Impact of Factors to Choose an Online Higher Education Institution

June 29, 2016

Principal Researcher: Mariam Awad (Mariam_Awad03@hotmail.com)

Supervisor: Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes (Martic@athabascau.ca)

My name is Mariam Awad and I am a Master's of Education student at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about the factors that influence student choice of online universities. This study will seek to determine the prevalent factors behind student choice, and the consistency of these factors based on institution location and reputation I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes.

I invite you to participate in this project because you are currently a first year student pursuing a degree program online.

Your feedback will provide information on your individual experience when selecting an institution, and the factors you considered when making the choice; thereby contributing to the scant knowledge base in this area, and allowing institutions to tailor resources and initiatives towards criteria valued by students.

Participants in the study will be asked to complete an online self-administered survey revolving around the various factors students considered before selecting their current institution, as well as the information sources used during the research process. This should take no longer than 10-15 minutes of your time. You will find a series of questions in the survey that will be linked to you via email once you have returned the consent form.

The research should benefit students and institutions alike, by allowing institutions to focus their resources and design process on areas students deem most relevant to their online higher education selection process. I do not anticipate you will face any risks as a result of participating in this research.

Thank you for considering this invitation. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me, (the principal investigator) by e-mail at Mariam_Awad03@hotmail.com or my supervisor at Martic@athabascau.ca.

Thank you.

Mariam Awad

This project has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this project, please contact the Research Ethics Office by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca or by telephone at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718.

Appendix B

The Impact of Factors to Choose an Online Higher Education Institution

Online Participant Consent Form (for anonymous survey-based research)

Principal Researcher: Mariam Awad (Mariam_Awad03@hotmail.com)

Supervisor: Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes (Martic@athabascau.ca)

You are invited to participate in a research study about the factors that influence student choice of online universities. This study will seek to determine the prevalent factors behind student choice, and the consistency of these factors based on institution location and reputation I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes. I am conducting this study as a requirement to complete my Master's of Education degree.

As a participant, you are asked to participate in this study by completing a short online questionnaire about the various factors you considered before selecting your current institution, as well as the information sources used during your research process. Participation will take approximately 10-15 minutes of your time.

Involvement in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any questions or to share information that you are not comfortable with. You will not be asked to provide any personal or identifiable information or data.

You may withdraw from the study at any time by simply closing out of your browser. Once you submit your completed survey, however, data cannot be withdrawn as the survey is completely anonymous. Please print a copy of this consent form for your records.

Please note that all data gathered during the tenure of this research study will be stored for at least 5 years as per university policy. All electronic data will be kept in a password-protected computer at my office, and encrypted. However, as data will contain no identifying features, it will not be possible to link information back to participants.

Results of this study may be disseminated in one or more of the following:
1) Final research report to be provided to AU. The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital Thesis and Project Room and the final research paper will be publicly available.
2) Article(s) to be submitted to academic and professional journals.
3) Presentation(s) at academic/professional conferences.

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Mariam Awad or Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes using the contact information above.

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project.

Mariam Awad

CONSENT:
The completion of the survey and its submission is viewed as your consent to participate.

BEGIN THE SURVEY

Appendix C

Ethics Approval

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AUREB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The AUREB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **22275**

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Mariam Awad, Graduate Student
Centre for Distance Education\Master of Education in Distance Education

Supervisor:
Dr. Marti Cleveland-Innes (Supervisor)
Dr. Cynthia Blodgett-Griffin (Co-Supervisor)

Project Title:
The Impact of Patterns of Factors on Choosing an Online Higher Education Institution

Effective Date: August 10, 2016 **Expiry Date**: August 9, 2017

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date:** August 10, 2017

Sherri Melrose, Acting Chair
Centre for Distance Education, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

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Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
University Research Services, Research Centre
1 University Drive, Athabasca AB Canada T9S 3A3
E-mail rebsec@athabascau.ca
Telephone: 780.675.6718

Appendix D

Survey

Part I: Profile Questions

The following section aims to gather some profile data. Please put an "**x**" in the appropriate box.

1) English is my first language

( ) Yes
( ) No

2) Age

( ) 17-23
( ) 24 to 30
( ) 31 to 39
( ) 40 to 49
( ) 50-59
( ) Over 60

3) Gender

( ) Male
( ) Female
( ) Prefer not to say

4) Marital Status

( ) Single
( ) Single with children
( ) Married
( ) Married with children
( ) Prefer not to say

5) Are you a first generation student? (A student whose parent(s)/guardian(s) has/have not attended a postsecondary institution.)

( ) Yes
( ) No

6) Are you currently working while studying?

( ) Yes
( ) No

7) If you answered "yes" to question 6 are you working full time or part time?

( ) Full time
( ) Part time

8) Degree Type
( ) Undergraduate
( ) Graduate

9) What is your current program?
_____

10) In your opinion what is more important, the program itself or the institution?
( ) The program
( ) The institution

11) How many online courses have you completed to date?
( ) This is my first online course
( ) 2 to 3 courses
( ) 4 to 5 courses
( ) More than 5 courses

12) How many online institutions did you consider before settling on this one?
( ) This was the only online institution I considered.
( ) 2
( ) 3
( ) 4
( ) Over 5

13) During your decision making process, did you consider online programs, face-to-face programs, or both?
( ) Only online programs
( ) Both online and face-to-face programs

Part II – Selection Factors

Each of the statements below describes a factor considered in the selection of an online higher education institution.
The numbers represent a scale of importance from 1-7. Based on the scale, select the number that indicates how important the listed factor was to your decision making process

1 = not important at all
2 = not very important
3 = somewhat unimportant
4 = neutral
5 = somewhat important
6 = important
7 = very important
N/A = does not apply

How important were each of the following factors in your institution selection process?

Level of Importance (Factors)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
1) Convenience								
2) Flexibility								
3) Work schedule								
4) Institutional reputation								
5) Institution location								
6) Admission requirements								
7) Cost of individual courses								
8) Cost of entire program								
9) Recommendations of parents								
10) Recommendations of friends								
11) Recommendations of teachers/counsellors								
12) Online rankings and reviews								
13) Available programs								
14) Program requirements								
15) Length of degree program								
16) Quality of course material								
17) Variety of course offerings								
18) Quality of faculty								
19) Technology utilized								
20) Financial aid								
21) Ability to transfer courses								
22) Future career opportunities								

Part III – Information Sources

How important were each of the following information sources in your institution selection process?

Level of Importance (Information Sources)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
1) Printed brochures								
2) The university website								
3) Secondary/external websites not affiliated with the university								
4) Random Internet searches								
5) Conversations with current students or alumni								
6) Conversations with institutional representatives or advisors								
7) In-person campus visits								
8) Advertisements								
9) Personal proclivities and inclinations								

Part IV – Open-Ended Questions

1) What were the top three reasons you chose your current institution?

1) _____
2) _____
3) _____

2) In your opinion, what should online institutions focus their resources on to attract students?

_____
_____
_____

Appendix E

Table A3
Factors that Influence Students' Choice of University

Author(s)	Factors
Prock and Lefond (2001)	- Marketing tools
Brooks (2002)	- Fees - Location - Reputation - Course content/Quality/Offerings
Veloutsou, Lewis, and Paton (2004)	- Learning facilities - Teaching quality
Pasternak (2005)	- Convenience - Course content - Teaching quality
Maringe (2006)	- Programme - Price - Employment and career prospects
Briggs & Wilson (2007)	- Better quality information - Marketing tools
Clark (2007)	- Fees - Location - Reputation - Course content/Quality/Offerings
Raposo and Alves (2007)	- Location - Fees - Parents - Recommendations of faculty
Bergerson (2009)	- Fees - Location - Reputation

	- Course content/Quality/Offerings
Bowman and Bastedo (2009)	- Reputation/Rankings
Pampaloni (2010)	- Programs - Location - Open houses/Tours
Simoes & Soares (2010)	- Location
Mehboob and Bhutto (2012)	- Job prospects/Careers
Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh and Barry (2012)	- Reputation - Course content/Quality/Offerings
Lubbe and Petzer (2013)	- Brochures - Parents
Wikins, Shams & Huisman (2013)	- Fees
Mbawuni and Nimako (2015)	- Fees - Student support quality - Attachment to institution - Recommendation from lecturers and other staff - Failure to gain alternative admissions - Location
Sarkane and Sloka (2015)	- State budget financing - Accreditation - International Possibilities (Careers)

Appendix F

Table A4
University Attributes

	University A	Univeristy B
Institutional Reputation	- First Canadian university to focus on distance education. - Serves 40,000+ students. - Caters to students from every province and territory across Canada, as well as 87 international countries. (Athabasca University, 2016).	- Best in the province employment rate - 95% after two years. -Top 10 in Maclean's 2015 overall rankings – primarily undergraduate. - 50% growth from 2000-2010. (Laurentian University, n.d.)
Number of Degree Programs Offered	Bachelor's – 60 Master's – 15 Doctoral - 2 (Canadian Virtual University, 2016)	Bachelor's - 15 Master's – 2 Doctoral – 0 (Laurentian University, n.d.)
Geographical Location	Western Canada	Central Canada

Appendix G

Table A5
Profile Question Responses

Profile Question	Options	Number of Responses	Percentages
Is English your first language	Yes	90	75%
	No	30	25%
Age	17-23	28	23%
	24 to 30	25	21%
	31 to 39	34	28%
	40 to 49	23	19%
	50-59	6	5%
	Over 60	4	3%
Gender	Male	41	34%
	Female	77	64%
	Prefer not to say	2	2%
Marital Status	Single	48	40%
	Single with dependents	8	7%
	Married	19	16%
	Married with dependents	31	26%
	Other	12	10%
	Prefer not to say	2	2%
Are you a first generation student?	Yes	57	48%
	No	63	53%
Are you currently working while studying?	Yes	97	81%
	No	23	19%

If you answered yes to the above question, are you working part-time or full time?	Part time	73	61%
	Full time	26	22%
Degree Type	Bachelor's	104	87%
	Master's	16	13%
What is more important, the program itself, or the institution?	The program	97	81%
	The institution	23	19%
How many online DE courses have you completed to date?	This is my first online course	49	41%
	2 to 3 courses	31	26%
	4 to 5 courses	18	15%
	More than 5 courses	22	18%
How many online institutions did you consider before settling on this one?	This was the only institution I considered	45	38%
	2	40	33%
	3	27	23%
	4	4	3%
	Over 5	4	3%
Did you consider online programs, face-to-face programs, or both?	Only online programs	59	49%
	Both online and face-to-face programs	61	51%

Appendix H

Table A6
Factors Rankings

Factors	Groups: 1-3 1 = not important at all 2 = not very important 3 = somewhat unimportant	Groups: 5-7 5 = somewhat important 6 = important 7 = very important	Groups: 4-N/A 4 = neutral	Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016) Study Results + Rank
Flexibility	3 (0.025%)	115 (96%)	2 (0.016%)	93% (2)
Convenience	3 (0.025%)	114 (95%)	3 (0.025%)	96% (1)
Available programs	7 (6%)	101 (84%)	12 (10%)	
Quality of course material	9 (7.5%)	97 (81%)	14 (11.667%)	
Work schedule	12 (0.1%)	97 (81%)	11 (0.091%)	92% (3)
Program requirements	7 (6%)	93 (78%)	20 (16.667%)	89% (4)
Variety of course offerings	12 (10%)	90 (75%)	18 (15%)	
Technology utilized	21 (17.5%)	90 (75%)	9 (7.5%)	
Future career opportunities	15 (12.5%)	90 (75%)	15 (12.5%)	81% (9)
Cost of individual courses	19 (16%)	86 (72%)	15 (12.5%)	
Institutional reputation	16 (0.13%)	86 (72%)	18 (0.15%)	86% (5)
Cost of entire program	16 (13%)	84 (70%)	20 (16.667%)	83% (7)
Length of degree	15 (12.5%)	83 (69%)	22 (18.333%)	

program				
Quality of faculty	15 (12.5%)	82 (68%)	23 (19.167%)	
Ability to transfer courses	18 (15%)	81 (67.5%)	21 (17.5%)	82% (8)
Admission requirements	21(17.5%)	76 (63%)	23 (19.167%)	
Institution location	33 (27.5%)	55 (46%)	32 (26.66%)	60% (10)
Online rankings and reviews	43 (36%)	53 (44 %)	24 (20%)	
Financial aid	44 (37%)	46 (38%)	30 (25%)	85% (6)
Rec. of teachers/counsellors	58 (48%)	26 (22%)	36 (30%)	
Rec. of friends	62 (53%)	23 (19%)	35 (0.291%)	
Rec. of parents	70 (58%)	10 (8%)	40 (33.333%)	

Appendix I

Table A7

Gaps Between First and Second Most Popular Points

Factors	**First = Very Important**	**Second = Important**	**Difference**
2) Convenience	74%	16%	58%
1) Flexibility	73%	16%	57%
3) Available Programs	53%	18%	35%
15) Credit Transfers	47%	13%	34%
5) Work Schedule	53%	21%	32%
9) Future Career Opportunities	45%	19%	25%
13) Length of Program	38%	18%	20%

Appendix J

Table A8

What were the top 3 reasons you chose your institution? Responses

Reasons	# of Respondents /118	% of Respondents
Flexibility	52	44%
Convenience	42	36%
Program	26	22%
Fees	26	22%
Credit transfer	20	17%
Location	19	16%
Reputation	18	15%
Program affiliation	13	11%
Recommendation of others (students, teachers, managers, counsellors/advisors)	8	7%
Courses offered	7	6%
Program length	5	4%
French programs/courses	5	4%
Admission requirements	5	4%
Accessibility	5	4%
Quality Faculty	4	3%
Program availability	4	3%
Degree requirements	3	3%
Default (only place student got accepted)	3	3%
Free tuition	2	2%
Course content	2	2%
University website	1	0.8%
Small classes	1	0.8%
Prior experience	1	0.8%
Nature/environment	1	0.8%

LMS ease of use	1	0.8%
Helpful staff	1	0.8%
Freedom	1	0.8%
Course reviews	1	0.8%
Career opportunities	1	0.8%
Bilingual program	1	0.8%
Appreciation of senior students	1	0.8%
Accreditation	1	0.8%
Access to tutors	1	0.8%

Appendix K

Table A9

In your opinion, what should online institutions focus their resources on to attract students? - Terms, Definitions and Responses

Term	Definition/Explanation	# of Respondents /110	% of Respondents
Flexibility	Something that can be done with compromise or modification.	25	23%
Advertising	Using social media, and other outlets to provide information about programs and offerings.	20	18%
Communication	Prompt responses to emails and inquiries, from both faculty and administration.	13	12%
Fees	- Cost of program - Cost of courses	11	10%
Student support	Tools and resources available to help students.	10	10%
Courses offered	The types of courses offered.	8	7%
Credit transfer	The ability to have credits transferred to, or from other institutions and programs.	6	5%
Course availability	Whether the institution has a particular course available to students.	6	5%
Technology (User-friendly) (Up-to-date)	Tools used to facilitate and develop learning in courses.	6	5%

Faculty	- Certified - Qualified - Efficient in teaching	5	5%
University website	Informative, user-friendly, ease of access of information.	5	5%
Pathways	Provide transition options to programs/courses upon successful completion of certain courses/credits.	5	5%
Convenience	Something that saves time or simplifies tasks.	4	4%
Scholarships/bursaries	Financial awards/aid for students.	4	4%
Accessibility	Ease of access of course material, regardless of location. Alternatives provided for older operating systems.	4	4%
Online tutors	Tutors available to provide extra support for students	4	4%
Information sessions	Visiting schools and providing face-to-face information sessions on DE programs.	3	3%
Reputation	The standing of an institution in its field	3	3%
Interesting courses	Up-to-date, relevant and stimulating topics and content	3	3%
LMS (Learning Management System)	A system that's user-friendly, appealing, and encompasses all course material.	3	3%

Reputation	Provide information/statistics on the institution's achievements, credibility and successes.	3	3%
Program availability	Whether the institution has a particular program available to students.	2	2%
Job opportunities	Provide information on how various degrees are relevant to particular jobs. Provide perspective job opportunities to students.	2	2%
Recommendations of others	- Students - Counsellors/advisors - Teachers - Testimonials/feedback	1	0.9%
Admission requirements	Clear and achievable criteria to gain acceptance.	1	0.9%
Individual courses	Ability to take individual courses without getting a degree.	1	0.9%
Various assessments	Tests, assignments, essays, etc.	1	0.9%
Partnerships	Create partnerships and connections with employers and external fields.	1	0.9%

Appendix L

Table A10

Comparison of this survey with F2F Factors

This Survey	F2F Factors
Flexibility (96%)	
Convenience (95%)	*Convenience* (Pasternak, 2005)
Available programs (84%)	*Available programs* (Maringe, 2006; Pampaloni, 2010)
Quality of course material (81%)	Course content/quality/offerings (Begerson, 2009; Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Brooks, 2002; Clark, 2007; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh and Barry, 2012; Pasternak, 2005)
Work schedule (81%)	
Program requirements (78%)	
Variety of course offerings (75%)	*Course content/quality/offerings* (Bergerson, 2009; Briggs & Wilson 2007; Brooks, 2002; Clark 2007; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh and Barry, 2012; Pasternak, 2005;)
Technology utilized (75%)	
Future career opportunities (75%)	*Employment and career prospects* (Maringe, 2006; Mehboob and Bhutto (2012)
Cost of individual courses (72%)	
Institutional reputation (72%)	*Reputation/rankings* (Bergerson, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Bowman and Bastedo 2009; Clark, 2007; Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh and Barry, 2012)
Cost of entire program (70%)	*Fees* (Bergerson, 2009; Brooks, 2002; Clark, 2007; Maringe, 2006; Mbawuni and Nimako, 2015; Raposo and Alves, 2007; Wikins, Shams & Huisman
Length of degree program (69%)	

Quality of faculty (69%)	Teaching quality (Veloutsou, Lewis, and Paton, 2004; Pasternak, 2005)
Ability to transfer courses (68%)	
Admission requirements (67.5%)	
Institution location (63%)	Location (Brooks, 2002; Clark, 2007; Raposo and Alves, 2007; Bergerson, 2009; Pampaloni, 2010; Simoes & Soares, 2010; Mbawuni and Nimako, 2015)
Online rankings and reviews (46%)	
Financial aid (44%)	
Recommendations of teachers/counsellors (38%)	Recommendations of faculty (Raposo and Alves; 2007; Mbawuni and Nimako 2015)
Recommendations of friends (22%)	
Recommendations of parents (19%)	Parents (Lubbe and Petzer, 2013)