

# Factors Affecting Students' Choice for MBA Program in Kuwait Universities

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## Abstract

The attempt is made in this study to identify students' motives and reasons behind enrolling in a MBA program offered by universities operating in Kuwait. It also explores criterion used to select the program. To achieve these objectives, data were collected through a well-designed and structured questionnaire and pre-testing was carried out to examine the efficiency of the instrument. The study showed that the main reasons behind selecting the MBA program by students are to satisfy their personal concerns and improve their knowledge and skills. Moreover, the students used program alumni and campus visit as main sources of information followed by friends' suggestions and university websites. When evaluating the MBA programs, the students cited overseas accreditation as the most used criteria followed by faculty reputation, institution reputation and admission requirements.

**Keywords:** college choice decision, MBA program, business school, decision making, learning skills, higher education institutions, Kuwait

## 1. Introduction

Higher education in management has obtained special attention in business literature. The central issue in this literature is whether there is a difference among universities to attract students through attributes institutional factors that affect students' college choice decision in higher education institutions.

Several researchers have attempted to identify the key factors considered important by students in selecting Master of Business Administration (MBA) program that becomes most common career choices amongst the youth in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) (Note 1) countries today due to the advantages that the course offers. As a result, there are four institutes in Kuwait that offer full time residential MBA program. Empirical studies demonstrated the factors behind influencing students' college choice decision regarding MBA program are location, academic programme, college reputation, educational facilities, cost, availability of financial aid, employment opportunities and advertising. The findings may not be applicable to the Arab environment such as State of Kuwait due to the differences in socioeconomic and political factors, and, more significantly, to cultural beliefs related to the practice of science and knowledge in general.

The purpose of the study is to explore the reasons students pursue an MBA degree, the sources of information used by students to choose institution and factors that influence students' choices of the institution in Kuwait. Studying the causes behind students selecting MBA program is appreciated for program planners in developing professional MBA program that are more responsive to the needs of learners and that more satisfactorily meet their professional development goals. Characteristics of decisions made by students to enter MBA program are not well understood. Therefore, it might increase knowledge about factors that are considered influential. Furthermore, it will offer information about a constituency whose needs have been overlooked in previous studies.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The next section related literature and previous studies. Then, a brief description of the research methodology is presented. Next, the finding and results are discussed. Finally, the paper ends with conclusion, limitations and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review and Previous Studies

The MBA is one of the most well-known postgraduate degrees (Rydzewski et al., 2010). MBA curriculums are designed for those who decide to work in the field of business and management by providing them with the skills needed in managerial positions (Baruch, 1996). It offers more than thirty courses in several disciplines such as accounting, finance, human resources management, and marketing. According to Fisher (1994) the program of MBA should be shifted from delivering knowledge to applying knowledge in real-world situations. The value-added for students from completing MBA program stems from increased knowledge, higher earning potential and recognition status in society (Simpson et al., 2005). Accordingly, graduate business students are become the foundation for leadership and management in the increasing complex and uncertain economy.

In empirical literature, there are several studies have been conducted to examine the attitude of students regarding factors behind studying MBA programme (see for example Chiu & Stembridge, 1999; Chiu, 1999; Sidin et al., 2003; Zabid & Ling, 2003; Ming, 2010; Simpson et al., 2005; Grzeda & Miller, 2009; Mihail & Elefterie, 2006; Monioukas et al., 2007; Marks & Edgington, 2006; Ng et al., 2008; Rydzewski et al., 2010; Hinds et al., 2010; Bell et al., 2010; Epstein et al., 2013; Sherman, 2013. Teowkul et al., 2009; Saeed & Ehsan, 2010; Saba et al., 2011; Waseem & Zarif, 2012; Shahid et al., 2012; Anwer et al., 2013; Rao & Sharma, 2010; Patel & Patel, 2012; Chattopadhyay et al., 2013; Galhena & Rathnayake, 2011; Ghourchian et al., 2013; Hasangholipour et al., 2013; Shetty & Gujarathi, 2013). The following section reviews in brief these studies.

Chiu and Stembridge (1999) examined the selection criteria employed by full-time employees in Hong Kong in selecting a part-time MBA program. They found that university prospectuses as their most favored source of information followed by suggestions of friends, educational seminars and fairs, and educational consultants. They also observed that participants cited institutional reputation as the most used criteria followed by program curriculum, tuition fees, mode of delivery, and local supporting facilities. Chiu (1999) added that most students are concerned about the institution's reputation, its programme curriculum, mode of delivery, supporting facilities, and placement opportunities. Chiu concluded that business schools should also give more thought to the MBA degree that they offer as being more valuable to the employers of their prospective students.

Sidin et al. (2003) examined the criteria with which students select their tertiary institutions. They found that student selection of colleges depends on several criteria, including academic quality, facilities, campus surroundings, and personal characteristics. They also found that income affects the choice of students. Sidin et al. provided evidence that the factors of costs, duration of studies, and academic quality are also important considerations for students and their families. Zabid and Ling (2003) examined the factors considered important in hiring local and foreign MBA graduates. They found that the key factors considered important in hiring MBA graduates included decision-making ability, written communication, oral communication, analytical skills, and interpersonal skills. Zabid and Ling suggested that MBA program providers should review the existing MBA curriculum and assess its effectiveness in meeting employer expectations for graduates' managerial, technical, business, and work skills. Ming (2010) found that the factors behind affecting students' college choice decision are location, academic programme, college reputation, educational facilities, cost, availability of financial aid, employment opportunities, advertising and campus visit.

Simpson et al. (2005) tried to explore the nature of extrinsic and intrinsic benefits from the MBA and how these might vary by gender. They found that gender and age interact to affect perception of career outcomes. They found men when they study MBA seem to gain confidence from having fuller skills sets whereas women are more likely to gain confidence from feelings of self-worth. They also found that men focused on how they had learned to give up control whereas women focused on how they had gained a voice in the organization. Grzeda and Miller (2009) pointed out that students selected an MBA to develop integrative skills, combining knowledge from different disciplines broaden their understanding of the business world and learn new ways of thinking about the world. They observed that flexibility is a significant criterion for selecting an online over a traditional program, even more so for older respondents and women. Grzeda and Miller provided evidence that the most important reasons are accessibility, fit with personal life, perceived progressiveness of the program and desired specializations offered.

Mihail and Elefterie (2006) examined graduates' perceptions of newly established accredited MBA programs in Greece. They found that the MBA degree has contributed to obtaining a new job with better employment conditions after graduation. They also found that MBA program provided graduates with stronger managerial skills. They provided evidence that MBA studies allowed graduates to negotiate successfully for more challenging jobs after their graduation. Monioukas et al. (2007) tried to identify the factors related to students' satisfaction from the postgraduate courses offered at the University of the Aegean Business School in Chios.

They found that the majority of the students who selected their studies at postgraduate level to improve their chances of entering the job market. Monioukas et al. observed that the most satisfied students seem to be the permanent residents of the island of Chios, where the school is located, as well as students at an older age.

Marks and Edgington (2006) examined the motivations for women in the pursuit of an MBA degree. The researchers found that women and men are driven by the same motivators—career enhancement, career switching, and personal development for job success. They also found that women, more than men, appear to be motivated by the desire to enhance their careers. Men, on the other hand, appear to be motivated more by the desire to switch careers and to achieve the goal of starting their own business. Ng et al. (2008) found that men and women appear to have similar patterns in the factors affecting their career choice. They also found that students placed a strong emphasis on self-development. They observed that the majority of students aspired to careers reflecting a desire for career benefits and becoming wealthy.

Rydzewski et al. (2010) added that availability, quality, program length, cost and courses in the curriculum are factors that vary in importance to students when selecting an MBA program. Rydzewski et al. suggested multiple factors that are important to online MBA students as they require multiple needs to be addressed from an online MBA program. Hinds et al. (2010) designed and distributed questionnaire to identify the perceptions that students at South-eastern Louisiana University (LSU) hold about its MBA program and the MBA programs of its main competitors. They found that LSU and Tulane University MBA programs have perceptions that are similar to one another in both aspects. They observed that Southeastern MBA students consider Southeastern as a friendly learning environment and perceive Southeastern's MBA program to be pretty close to the friendliness of their ideal MBA. Bell et al. (2010) discovered that the demand for the MBA program is strong, and most respondents believe the degree would help them in their current career path. They also reported that convenience, cost and flexibility are key concerns for most respondents. Bell et al.; suggested that a program at the University of Montevallo need to be open to students without experience and the program may need to be general rather than specialized.

Epstein et al. (2013) found that when students enter the program, they are primarily motivated by external factors such as hoping for a promotion, hoping for a raise, and hoping to obtain better employment than they currently hold. They also observed that the internal motivation such as the need for affiliation, achievement, self-actualization increases by the end of the program. Sherman (2013) added that the factors that determine the design of a new MBA student orientation beyond extend cost and location. They suggested the desired level of manipulation students of self- efficacy.

Teowkul et al. (2009) distributed questionnaire among students to examine why they decide to study Master program. They found that motivational factors in the pursuit of MBA are not related to gender, as both male and female students had very similar scores on the four motivational factors namely, personal development, career enhancement, career switching, and environmental factors. They observed that Master degree students expect to gain more compensation, to easily change jobs, and to smoothly shift to new careers.

Saeed and Ehsan (2010) used questionnaires survey to find out the most influencing factors in business school as a brand in Pakistan from the student's perspective. They found that the name of the university is considered as the most valued factor to be considered in business school branding initiatives. They also found that the "qualification of faculty" is an important variable in branding the business school. Saba et al. (2011) attempted to assess the impacts of MBA degree on enhancement of skills and career advancement. They found that MBA degree can enhance capability of stress management, good communication and also good writing skills as well as better time management skills. Waseem and Zarif (2012) explored that most of the students got admission in management sciences programs due to their personal interest but the choice does not vary due to market trend. Shahid et al. (2012) used interviews to identify the reasons, why students choose a particular university. They found that the most influential is word of mouth which has great significance for all other factors such as environment and social conditions that are the basis of positive word of mouth. The least important in accordance to the research seems to be the role of generic marketing communications such as advertisement when choosing a university. Anwer et al. (2013) added that career growth and higher salaries are the most influential factors intend the students to join MBA program.

Rao and Sharma (2010) tried to explore the factors influencing the choice criteria in respect of selecting a bank by MBA students. They found that reliability is a significant choice criterion, which includes employee's courtesy, parking facility, loyalty programs, brand name, security system and low charges with the bank. Patel and Patel (2012) used questionnaire survey to explore how various factors have influence on the decision of students in selecting institute for master degree. They found that computer lab facility is the most influencing

factor at the time of selection of the institute. They also found that specialization offered and course provided by the college are the most influencing factors among all the academics related factors. Patel and Patel provided evidence that geographic location and infrastructure have more influence on the student at the time of selection of the institute. Chattopadhyay et al. (2013) added that a significant number of students preferring for distance education. They found that a strong preference has been experienced towards the enrolment in management program after graduation irrespective of the discipline.

Galhena and Rathnayake (2011) used questionnaire to explore the influence of various factors on career choice decision of studying management in Sri Lanka. They found that skills and abilities, education and personality are the most influential factors. They also found that teachers are the greatest influencers on determining students' career choice.

Ghourchian et al. (2013) examined the factors affecting foreign students' choice of university in Iran. They found that the location and environment of university and the diversity of curricula and educational levels are highly important to foreign students' choice of university. Hasangholipour et al. (2013) attempted to discover the factors that affect students select model and decision making process in international campus. They found that selection of international campus are influenced by university program, schedule and size, personal improvement which highly influenced student decision model for selecting the international campus.

Shetty and Gujarathi (2013) used questionnaire survey to examine the students' perception about the quality of the MBA program in India and USA. They found that Indians completing MBA from USA, perceived good quality with the only problem of finding a good job in America after completion of an MBA.

It is evident that a limited number of empirical studies have been undertaken on to assess the reasons why students pursue an MBA degree and criteria that these perspectives applicants use to select the MBA program. This suggests the need for empirical testing in different environmental contexts of country such as GCC region which attributed an oil-based economy. Therefore, the current research was undertaken.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### *3.1 Instrument*

A questionnaire consists of two main sections: general information of participants and the perception of the student toward MBA program. In addition to the demographic questions, the questionnaire asked students for the reasons students pursue an MBA degree, the sources of information used by students to choose institution and factors that influence students' choices of the institution. The structure questionnaire was developed by the researchers according to the purpose of the study and based on previous studies.

The questionnaire was reviewed by five university professors at AOU-Kuwait branch and Kuwait University to reach the high level of validity and modified according to their suggestions and recommendations. As a result, new questions were added and others were adapted. The modified questionnaire contained 5- point Likert scale items. The questionnaire allows the participants to rate each of the factor items on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) where (3) stood for a neutral response.

It is worth to be mentioned that previous studies have used this scale such as Chiu (1999) and Chiu and Stenbridge (1999) in Hong Kong, Mihail and Elefterie (2006) in Greece, Marks and Edgington (2006); Rydzewski et al. (2010) and Hinds et al. (2010) in USA, Rao and Sharma (2010) in India. The questionnaire had a Cronbach's alpha co-efficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency of the items (Zabid & Ling, 2003).

#### *3.2 The Procedure*

The data gathered were entered to SPSS for comprehensive analysis based on the objectives of the study. The data were analyzed for descriptive statistics for all independent and dependent variables. In addition, a mean and standard deviation were performed to examine the attitudes of students towards MBA program in Kuwait universities.

#### *3.3 The Survey Sample*

The questionnaire survey attempted to identify the students' attitudes towards MBA program in Kuwait universities. Thus, it was dealt with universities currently offer MBA programs in Kuwait including Kuwait University (KU); Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), American University in Middle East (AUM) and Kuwait Maastricht Business School (KMBS).

Table 1. Distributed, returned, and missing questionnaire comparison

	Description	Quantity	Percentage (%)
1	Questionnaire distributed	180	100
2	Questionnaire returned	140	78
3	Questionnaire valid and returned	137	76
4	Missing	43	24

A total of 180 questionnaires were distributed among students who study MBA program in Kuwait universities and 140 questionnaires were gathered. From this number, 137 questionnaires were considered as valid questionnaires for analysis (Table 1).

#### 4. Results and Analysis

##### 4.1 Respondents' Background

Table II summarizes background statistics of the participants who took part in the survey. The table reveals that the majority of the participants (74 percent) are Kuwaitis and the rest (26 percent) are non-Kuwaitis. It also shows that the majority of the participants (59 percent) are female and (41 percent) are male.

Table 2. Informational background about the respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
<b>1)Nationality</b>		
a)Kuwaiti	101	74
b)Non-Kuwaiti	36	26
<b>2)Gender</b>		
a)Male	56	41
b)Female	81	59
<b>3)Occupation</b>		
a)Student	59	43
b)Employee	78	57
<b>4)Participant age</b>		
a)Less than 25 year old	52	38
b)From 25 to 35 year old	68	50
c)From 35 to 45 year old	16	12
d)More than 45 year old	0	0
<b>5)Place of your study</b>		
a)Kuwait University	20	15
b)American University in Middle East	34	25
c)Gulf University for Science and Technology	54	39
d)Kuwait Maastricht Business School	29	21
<b>6)Place of last academic degree</b>		
a)Kuwait	113	83
b)Arab countries	18	13
c)European countries	3	2
d)North America	3	2

Table 2 also shows that more than 85 percent of participants' ages are below 35 years, suggesting that the students have made educational plans and set their goals early. Moreover, it is appeared that the majority of the participants (83 percent) have received their bachelor degree from Kuwait, while few students have graduated from North America and Europe.

#### 4.2 Reasons for Pursuing an MBA Program

Number of reasons that may influence students to pursue an MBA program was listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were asked to give their degree of agreement about each of them. (Note 2)

Table 3. Reasons for pursuing an MBA

	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1	Personal satisfaction	4.2482	.77442	1
2	Improving my knowledge and skills	4.0949	.77539	2
3	Career opportunities	4.0803	.89161	3
4	Desire to know about business and economics	4.0803	3.33003	4
5	Income prospects	4.0584	.99089	5
6	Enhancing promotional opportunities	3.9635	.96565	6
7	Opportunity for innovation	3.8467	.81250	7
8	Opportunity for independence	3.8321	.93596	8
9	Competing in the job market	3.7445	1.00754	9
10	Job security	3.7226	1.07601	10
11	Obtain business qualification	3.6642	1.11986	11
12	Improving social status	3.4526	1.16928	12
13	Desire for authority	3.2701	1.17263	13
14	Family pressure	2.4526	1.37718	14

The result of the analysis is reported in Table 3. It is obvious from the table that the participants believe that the most important reasons are to satisfy their personal concerns and to improve their knowledge and skills with means of 4.2 and 4.1 respectively. The possible explanation for this finding is attributed to the fact that the majority of the participants in this survey believed that obtaining an MBA degree could satisfy personal concerns by improving their knowledge and skills so that they feel appreciated and recognized for their achievements in the workplace. It is important to upgrade skill sets in order to meet an increase of job requirements. Students need to learn new ways of thinking about the world and broaden their understanding of the business world (Grzeda & Miller, 2009). This is where the MBA becomes a tool for building up existing competencies to find plausible answer to business issues. Furthermore, MBAs are designed to improve skills and personality traits which are critical for succeeding in the business world.

This finding is consistent with those reported by Waseem and Zarif (2012) in Pakistan, Chiu and Stembridge (1999) in Hong Kong and Teowkul et al. (2009) in Thailand who reported that personal interest is the main reason behind students' pursue the MBA program. Moreover, the finding is consistent with those reported who raised the significant role of analytical skills and interpersonal skills, technical skills (Zabid & Ling, 2003), team-working skills (Simpson et al., 2005), integrative skills (Grzeda & Miller, 2009), managerial skills. (Mihail & Elefterie, 2006) and knowledge and skills (Anwer et al., 2013).

#### 4.3 Main Sources of Information

Number of sources of information that may influence students to enroll on an MBA program was listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were asked to give their degree of agreement about each of them.

Table 4. Sources of information

	<b>Sources of Information</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1	Program alumni	3.7153	1.19403	1
2	Campus visit	3.6058	.96526	2
3	Friends' suggestions	3.5255	1.10534	3
4	University websites	3.5109	1.00818	4
5	Educational seminars/ fairs	3.3796	1.36194	5
6	Family's advice	3.3650	1.14965	6
7	Magazine and journal	3.2190	1.29317	7
8	Posters in Public places (Avenues)	2.8248	1.19986	8
9	Advertisement in TV	2.8029	1.27094	9
10	Advertisement in Radio	2.7518	1.22343	10
11	Posters on public transport (buses)	2.6934	1.30363	11

The result of the analysis is reported in Table 4. It is obvious from the table that the participants believe that the program alumni and visits to campus are the most important sources of information followed by suggestions by friends and university websites. The possible explanation for this finding is attributed to the fact that the state of Kuwait is small area with few universities offered MBA program. So that students have a big chance to visit the campus and discuss the needed information with the people working on program alumni.

This finding is in line with those reported by Patel and Patel (2012) in India who reported that industrial visit organized by the college and seminar conducted by the college are the most factors considered by student while making selection of institute. However, the finding is not in line with those reported by Chiu and Stenbridge (1999); Hoyt and Brown (2003); Schoenfeld and Bruce (2005); Monioukas et al. (2007) who reported university web site is the major source of information for students to select the institute program.

#### 4.4 Attractive School for Students

Number of criterions that may influence students to select an MBA program was listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were asked to give their degree of agreement about each of them.

Table 5. Criterions of selection the MBA program

	<b>Criterions of selection</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1	Overseas accreditation	4.2409	.87888	1
2	Faculty reputation	4.1241	.86130	2
3	Institution reputation	4.1103	.94808	3
4	Admission requirements	4.0876	.83556	4
5	Student Testimonials	4.0365	2.72895	5
6	Program curriculum	4.0219	.87839	6
7	Program duration	4.0000	1.00000	7
8	Quality of the program	3.9927	.88697	8
9	Employment perspective	3.9562	1.05627	9
10	Mode of delivery	3.9051	.93842	10
11	Application process	3.8978	.85134	11
12	Alumni profiles	3.8978	1.10670	12
13	Supporting facilities	3.8540	.98921	13
14	Profile of current students	3.8467	1.07026	14
15	Tuition fees	3.6861	1.06240	15
16	Attractiveness of location	3.5255	1.16367	16

The result of the analysis is reported in Table 5. It is obvious from the table that the participants believe that the accreditation is the most important influential factor that influences students to select an MBA program followed by faculty and institution reputation.

The possible explanation for this finding is attributed to the fact that accredited institutions are attractive by students since they offer academic prestige to students and hire skilled faculty as well as help students in

competitive corporate environment. Moreover, accelerated programs are sophisticated one since they are designed with real-life issues and help students to think differently.

This finding is in line with those reported by Nguyen (2009) who reported that the quality of an MBA program is an important factor affecting student's choice the program. Moreover, Rydzewski et al. (2010) stated that program quality is one of the main criteria for students to select the MBA program. The finding is consistent with the finding of Chiu (1999) who reported that academic reputation and quality of faculty play an important role affecting student's choice the program. This finding is confirmed by Hoyt and Brown (2003), Sidin et al. (2003); Schoenfeld and Bruce (2005); Moniukas et al. (2007), Ming (2010) (Rydzewski et al., 2010), Guha et al. (2013); Hasangholipour et al. (2013).

This finding is not in line with those reported that flexibility to enroll to the program and adequate time to complete the course are the main factors affecting student's choice the program (Kathawala et al., 2002). It is also inconsistent with other studies that reported the convenience is highly important to students' choice of university (Bell et al., 2010), high employment opportunities (Waseem & Zarif, 2012), the location and environment of university (Ghourchian et al., 2013).

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, an attempt was made to identify students' reasons behind enrolling in a MBA program offered by universities operating in Kuwait as well as criterion used to select the program. In order to achieve this objective, 180 questionnaires were distributed, from which 137 were valid for analysis. The reliability test was conducted to test the internal consistency of construct validity. The stability of the questionnaire was verified by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, where the results of the analysis showed that the reliability coefficient was above 0.70.

Most of the participants to the survey were fairly young, with limited professional experience in industries. These findings recommend that an MBA program in Kuwaiti universities need to be open to students without experience, and the program may need to be general rather than specialized in order to attract the greatest number of prospective students.

It is obvious that personal satisfaction and improving knowledge and skills are the main reasons behind student's pursuing the MBA program in Kuwait. Therefore, business school should seriously consider the value of MBA program and the mode of delivery that most suits students.

Given that program alumni and campus visit are the most significant sources of information about the MBA program, the employees in alumni offices and MBA program should be trained how to deal with customers, they need to negotiate more to the benefits of the program. Furthermore, more pictures and testimonials might be added that could demonstrate how current students or potential graduates have been able to advance up the corporate ladder.

Participants ranked university accreditation and faculty reputation are the most important influential factors behind students' selection an MBA program. Students believe that the accredited MBA program provides graduates with stronger managerial skills. Therefore, schools are advised to encourage the faculty members most esteemed by the students to offer MBA program. The MBA program should have the knowledge of the existence of standardization and customization that help the program quality and meet students' target.

In conclusion, the current study is an early effort to explore the students' attitudes towards MBA program in Kuwait universities, particularly from the viewpoint of the students. It is hoped that follow-up studies would provide more coverage relative to the findings of this research. It might extend this study to cover students from other master programs to identify the similarities and the differences regarding the relative importance of the factors determining students' satisfaction as well as the assessment of each specific course.

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## Notes

Note 1. GCC established in May 25 1981 and consists of six countries namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and United Arab of Emirates.

Note 2. The choice of the variables was based on the fact that these variables were heavily investigated in previous studies. Examining the same factors furnishes a logical ground for comparison.

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