

Factors influencing university and course choice: A study on the students of private universities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The higher education landscape in Bangladesh has grown increasingly competitive, with private universities facing significant challenges in attracting academically talented students. Rising tuition fees and the consumerist mindset of students have further intensified this competition. This study aims to identify the key factors influencing students' decisions when selecting a university and course of study. Data were collected from 200 students across ten private universities in Dhaka city using a structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale. The study used a stratified random sampling technique and simple descriptive statistics to analyze the data. The findings reveal that university reputation and program quality are the most critical factors in students' decision-making process, while tuition fees and future prospects are moderately influential. For course selection, personal interest in the subject, university reputation, career opportunities, peer influence, and the cost of studying the subject emerged as the most significant determinants. The study emphasizes the importance of establishing permanent campuses with open environments, maintaining high ethical standards, and building a strong reputation through quality services to attract and retain students.

Keywords: University choice, Course choice, Factors, Private University

1. Introduction

Choosing a university and course of study is one of the most critical decisions in a student's academic and professional life. This decision not only shapes their educational path but also influences their career prospects, personal development, and long-term socioeconomic status. In Bangladesh, the higher education landscape has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, with the proliferation of private universities playing a pivotal role in meeting the growing demand for tertiary education. As of 2023, there are over 100 private universities in Bangladesh, catering to a substantial portion of the student population (UGC, 2023). Despite this expansion, there remains a paucity of comprehensive research on the factors influencing students' decisions when selecting a university and course, particularly within the context of private universities.

Existing literature on university and course choice highlights various factors, including academic reputation, employment prospects, parental influence, peer pressure, financial considerations, and institutional facilities (Briggs, 2006; Maringe, 2006). However, much of this research has been conducted in Western contexts, with limited attention given to developing countries like Bangladesh, where socioeconomic, cultural, and educational dynamics differ significantly. For instance, in Bangladesh, familial expectations and societal prestige often play a more pronounced role in decision-making compared to individual preferences (Ahmed & Hossain, 2019). Additionally, the rapid growth of private universities has introduced new variables, such as marketing strategies, scholarship opportunities, and the perceived quality of education, which have yet to be thoroughly explored.

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One notable research gap is the lack of studies examining how economic constraints and aspirational goals influence students' choices in a resource-constrained environment like Bangladesh. While some studies have touched on the financial barriers to higher education (Kabir et al., 2020), there is limited understanding of how students navigate these challenges while balancing their academic interests and career aspirations. Furthermore, the role of digital media and university websites in shaping perceptions and decisions has gained prominence in recent years but remains underexplored in the Bangladeshi context.

Another critical gap is the absence of a holistic framework that integrates both push and pull factors influencing university and course choice. Push factors, such as dissatisfaction with existing educational options or limited access to public universities, often drive students toward private institutions. Conversely, pull factors, such as institutional branding, campus facilities, and alumni success stories, attract students to specific universities (Chen, 2008). Understanding the relative weight of these factors in the decision-making process is essential for policymakers, university administrators, and educators aiming to enhance the quality and accessibility of higher education.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the factors influencing university and course choice among students enrolled in private universities in Bangladesh. By employing a quantitative method, the research aims to provide a dynamic understanding of the decision-making process, taking into account the country's unique socioeconomic and cultural context. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on higher education choice while offering practical insights for stakeholders in the Bangladeshi education sector.

1.1 The evolution of private universities in Bangladesh

The emergence of private universities in Bangladesh was driven by increasing demand for higher education and limited capacity in public institutions. The enactment of the Private University Act of 1992 facilitated the establishment of the first private university, North South University (NSU), in the same year. This led to the rapid expansion of private higher education, with several institutions such as the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) and the University of Science and Technology Chittagong (USTC), emerging shortly thereafter (Rahman, 2019).

By the early 2000s, private universities proliferated, primarily in urban centers like Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet, focusing on business, technology, and social sciences (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2020). However, concerns regarding academic quality, faculty standards, and infrastructure necessitated stronger regulatory measures, leading to the Private University Act of 2010, introducing stricter governance and operational requirements (Kabir, 2021).

Currently, 115 private universities operate in Bangladesh, significantly expanding access to higher education (University Grants Commission of Bangladesh [UGC], 2024). Despite their contribution, challenges persist in research output, faculty development, and maintaining global academic standards. Future improvements depend on enhanced regulatory oversight, increased research funding, and stronger industry-academia collaboration.

2. Objectives of the study

The study's main objective is to analyze the factors that influence students of private universities in Bangladesh to choose a university and course of study.

The secondary objectives of the study are:

- To make a rank among the factors that influence students of private universities in Bangladesh to choose a university and course of study.
- To inspect the feasible implications of findings for private universities in Bangladesh.

3. Literature review

The decision-making process behind university and course selection is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. This literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting students' choices, focusing on the context of private universities in Bangladesh.

3.1 Theoretical frameworks

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) posits that individuals make decisions by evaluating the costs and benefits of available options to maximize their utility (Becker, 1976). In university choice, students are assumed to weigh factors such as tuition fees, employment prospects, and institutional reputation to make an informed decision. RCT provides a useful lens for understanding how economic considerations, such as affordability and return on investment, influence students' preferences for private universities in Bangladesh, where financial constraints are a significant concern (Kabir et al., 2020).

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) emphasizes the role of environmental and social factors in shaping behavior. This theory highlights how family, peers, and societal expectations influence students' decisions. In Bangladesh, where familial and cultural norms play a significant role in educational choices, this framework helps explain why students may prioritize institutions and courses that align with their parents' aspirations or societal prestige (Ahmed & Hossain, 2019).

The Push-Pull Model, initially developed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), categorizes factors influencing student mobility into "push" (factors that drive students away from their current situation) and "pull" (factors that attract them to a specific institution). In Bangladesh, push factors may include limited seats in public universities or dissatisfaction with public education quality, while pull factors could include scholarships, modern facilities, and strong industry connections offered by private universities (Chen, 2008).

3.2 Empirical studies

Empirical studies consistently highlight the importance of academic reputation and institutional branding in university choice. Briggs (2006) found that students in the UK prioritize universities with strong academic rankings and positive reputations. Similarly, in Bangladesh, private universities with established reputations, such as North South University and BRAC University, attract many students due to their perceived quality of education and alumni success stories (UGC, 2023). Similarly, financial factors, including tuition fees and the availability of

scholarships, are critical determinants of university choice, particularly in developing countries. Kabir et al. (2020) found that affordability is a primary concern for Bangladeshi students, with many opting for private universities that offer flexible payment plans or financial aid. This aligns with global findings that economic constraints significantly influence higher education decisions (Johnston, 2010). Correspondingly, cultural and social factors significantly shape educational choices in collectivist societies like Bangladesh. Ahmed and Hossain (2019) found that parental expectations and peer recommendations heavily influence students' decisions, often outweighing individual preferences. This is consistent with findings from other Asian countries, where familial obligations and societal norms dictate educational pathways (Maringe, 2006).

Equally, the perceived employability of graduates is a key factor in university and course selection. Chen (2008) noted that students are increasingly drawn to institutions with strong industry connections and high graduate employment rates. In Bangladesh, private universities emphasizing job placement and internships, such as East-West University, are particularly attractive to students seeking practical career advantages (UGC, 2023). Likewise, modern facilities, such as well-equipped libraries, laboratories, and recreational amenities, are also significant pull factors. Maringe (2006) found that campus infrastructure and student support services significantly influence students' decisions. In Bangladesh, private universities that invest in state-of-the-art facilities and vibrant campus life are more likely to attract students (Kabir et al., 2020). Consistently, the role of digital media in shaping students' perceptions and decisions has grown exponentially in recent years. Universities that leverage social media, websites, and virtual tours to showcase their strengths are more successful in attracting applicants (Briggs, 2006). However, this area remains underexplored in the Bangladeshi context, where digital marketing by private universities is still evolving.

3. Methodology of the study

This study employed a stratified random sampling technique to gather quantitative data from 200 current students across 10 private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. A structured, pre-tested questionnaire utilizing a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1, "least important," to 5, "most important"), served as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire was designed to assess the factors influencing students' university and course selections. Specifically, it explored 10 factors affecting course choice and 30 elements, categorized under 7 thematic headings, impacting university selection. Participants were also provided an opportunity to identify additional factors beyond those included in the questionnaire that they perceived as significant.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and variance, to determine the relative importance of the identified factors. Furthermore, the questionnaire incorporated demographic and classificatory data, encompassing participants' age, gender, current and desired subjects of study, and their perceived reasons for the importance of university education.

3. Analysis and findings

3.1 Descriptive statistics

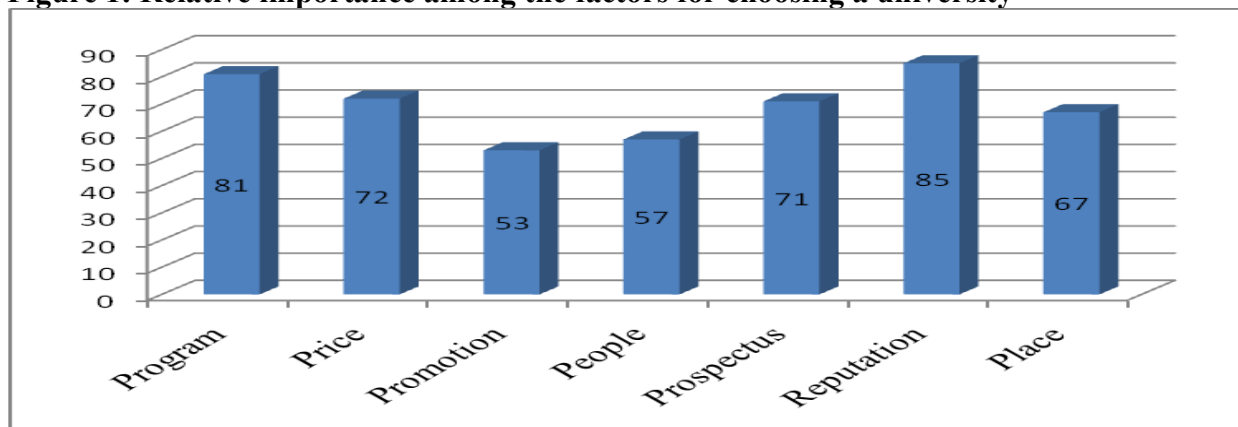
The two hundred respondents mainly consisted of both male and female students. The sample was balanced in terms of age 18-24 years. The survey participation percentage is 62% male and

38% female students. Out of them, BBA & MBA (50%), Pharmacy, CSE & EEE (20%), LLB (11%), BA (10%), and others (9%).

3.2 Factors affecting university choice

The thirty elements influencing university choice were organized into seven distinct categories. To determine the significance of each factor in the undergraduate students' decision-making process, the mean score, standard deviation, and variance were calculated. The relative importance assigned by students to each university selection factor is visually represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Relative importance among the factors for choosing a university



Source: Survey

Program (81%) and reputation (85%) seemed to be the most important factors in selecting a university for the students. Price (72%) and prospects (71%) proved to be the average determinants; Place (67%) is the essential factor in the selection of university for female students; People (57%) & Promotion (53%) are moderate factors in the selection of university for the students. Regarding the factor "program," the field of study and desired course significantly impact university choice. Previous studies' results have been proved that Bangladeshi students are more influenced by job opportunities, accommodation costs, and financial problems in their judgment about university and course of study.

Table 1: Ranking the factors through mean, standard deviation & variance

SN	Factors & Key Elements	Mean	Std. Dev	Variance	Rank
1	Program (field of study, desired course, major area of study, and course structure)	4.05	0.35	0.1225	2
2	Price (fees, flexibility in paying fees, transport cost, living costs, and distance from home)	3.6	0.93	0.8649	3
3	Promotion (advertising in media, academic research, and teachers' credentials)	2.65	1.12	1.2544	7
4	People (administrative staff, academic staff, alumni, co-education, and graduate profiles)	2.85	1.17	1.3689	6
5	Prospectus (UGC listed, program booklets, and university prospectus)	3.55	1.04	1.0816	4
6	Reputation (institutional reputation, press	4.25	0.42	0.1764	1

	reviews, staff reputation and institutional website)				
7	Place (university's own campus, campus accommodation, facilities, class size, classroom decoration, and racial diversity)	3.35	0.98	0.9604	5

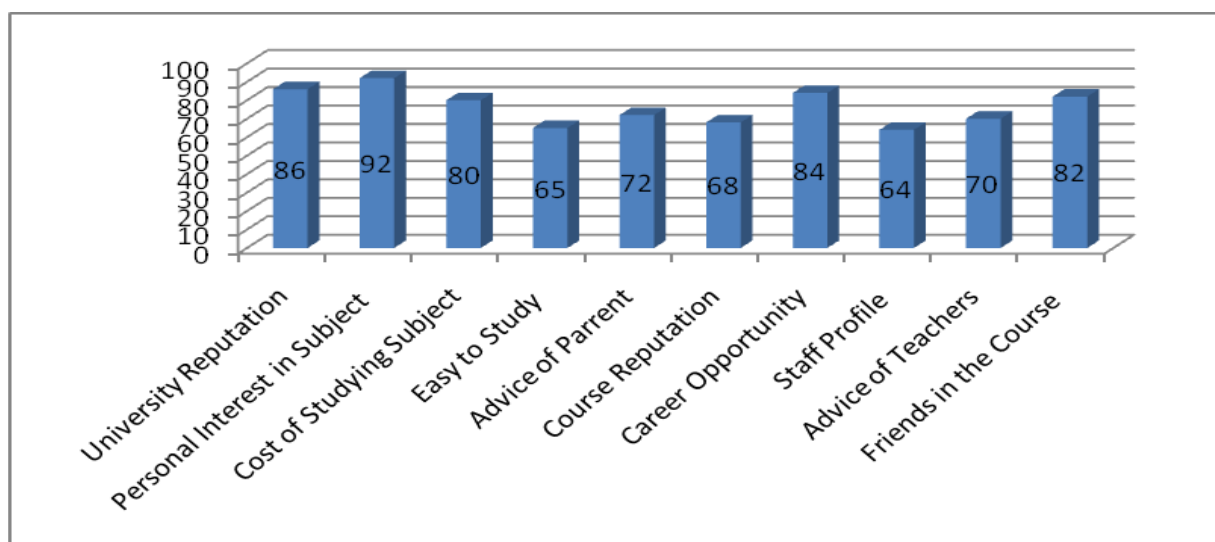
Source: Survey

The above table shows that the university's reputation is the most crucial factor in Bangladeshi students' choice of university. Bangladeshi students also consider program, price, prospectus, place, people, and promotion activities as 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th, respectively. Students from low-income and rural backgrounds preferred universities and courses with lower tuition fees. They indicated that their selection of a specific university and course was often dictated by the limited availability of alternative educational options within their local area.

3.3 Factors affecting course choice

Applicants were queried regarding the factors they deemed significant in their course selection.

Figure 2: Relative importance among the factors for choosing a University



Source: Survey

The students rank personal interest in the subject (92%), university reputation (86%), career opportunity (84%), friends in the course (82%), and cost of studying the subject (80%) as the most critical determinants for choosing course whereas, the factor of advice of parent (72%) & advice of teachers (70%) are the moderate important for selecting the course. Course reputations, ease of study, and staff profile are the least important factors.

Table 2: Ranking the factors through mean, standard deviation & variance

SN	Factors & Key Elements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Rank
1	University Reputation	4.3	0.24	0.0576	2

2	Personal Interest in Subject	4.6	0.13	0.0169	1
3	Cost of Studying a Subject	4.0	0.64	0.4096	5
4	Easy to Study	3.25	1.12	1.2544	9
5	Advice of Parent	3.6	0.98	0.9604	6
6	Course Reputation	3.4	1.23	1.5129	8
7	Career Opportunity	4.2	0.42	0.1764	3
8	Staff Profile	3.2	1.02	1.0404	10
9	Advice of Teachers	3.5	1.08	1.1664	7
10	Friends in the Course	4.1	0.25	0.0625	4

Source: Survey

The above table shows that the essential factors of Bangladeshi students for choosing a course from higher to lower are (1) personal interest in the subject, (2) university reputation, (3) career opportunity, (4) friends in the course, and (5) cost of studying the subject and (6) advice of parent & (7) advice of teachers (8) course reputation, (9) easy to study and (10) staff profile

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the primary driver behind students' choice of a university and course is their aspiration or passion for a particular field of study and institution. The significance lies in coordinating academic programs with students' genuine motivations and career aspirations. The selection process is heavily influenced by cost-benefit analysis, where students assess the perceived returns on their investment in future career prospects, employability, and personal growth. The rational approach emphasizes universities' importance in effectively communicating their programs' value and long-term benefits to potential students. The study reveals students' skepticism towards traditional promotional tools like prospectuses and press reviews, which they perceive as misleading. This suggests universities should rethink their marketing strategies and explore more authentic platforms like blogs, social media, and student testimonials. By leveraging digital tools and transparent communication channels, institutions can build trust and better connect with their target audience. The learning environment on campus significantly influences students' decisions, and universities that promote an open, inclusive, and ethically sound atmosphere are more likely to attract and retain students. Private universities in Bangladesh should invest in creating a vibrant campus culture that promotes academic excellence, personal development, and social responsibility. Institutional reputation is crucial, and newer or less-established universities can learn from mature institutions to enhance their credibility and appeal.

The study reveals that students are generally dissatisfied with certain university services, such as administrative support, infrastructure, and career guidance. Addressing these gaps is

crucial for private universities to remain competitive and meet student expectations. University authorities must take proactive measures, even if it requires significant investment, and seek greater oversight from regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission and the Ministry of Education. Implementing stricter quality assurance mechanisms and providing resources can elevate higher education standards in Bangladesh. The study highlights the influence of personal aspirations, financial constraints, and institutional attributes on students' choices. It suggests that by addressing gaps and implementing innovative marketing strategies, private universities in Bangladesh can improve their appeal and contribute to the overall improvement of the higher education sector. It calls for collaboration between universities, regulatory bodies, and policymakers.

The study offers valuable insights but has limitations, such as not examining students' decision-making abilities and psychological factors influencing their choices. Its quantitative nature limits its ability to explore deeper context-specific issues. Future research could use a mixed-methods approach to understand factors shaping university and course selection and compare decision-making processes between private and public university students for policy recommendations.

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