

Determinants Driving the Student's Decision Making to Opt Institution for Higher Education in India: An Exploratory Factor Analysis

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This study intends to build up a thorough understanding of the determinants that largely influence student's decision-making to opt institution for higher education empirically from the Indian perspective. It also attempts to develop the rank of importance of the determinants influencing their institution selection decision. Prior research has various constructs that influence the design of the student's career path, but this is the first time, "uncertainty" a new construct has been introduced which made this study relevant. The factor analysis was conducted to analyze the data of 558 students of Delhi NCR, India, and identified seven determinants namely Holistic institutional environment, Conformity influence, Human intelligence, Institutional prominence, Geographic characteristics, Student residential life, and Financial viability that impact student's decision-making to opt institution for higher education. The findings of the study can guide educational institutions by empowering them to set objectives to draw the interest of students to pursue higher studies.

Keywords: decision-making, higher education, college choice, factor analysis

INTRODUCTION

Enrolling in an academic discipline or selecting an institution for higher education is a very crucial process in the student's life. This process of opting institutions for higher education has been recognized as an anxious ridden and daunting task (Poock & Love, 2001). The decision-making process in choosing the institution is in fact a lifetime decision for the students. On the other hand, higher education institutions are confronting challenges in drawing the attention of students because of an increase in competition for enrollment (Von Hoof, Luorong, & Lu, 2014). It is a big challenge to formulate better strategies to attract students for admissions. Various studies across the globe have pointed out the determinants which influence student's choice of institution for higher education. Nine constructs were identified from the literature which are as follows:

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics are one of the crucial factors influencing the student's choice of institution (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Various studies unearth that the choice of students may differ across demographic variables. Characteristics of demographic variables embrace student's gender, ethnicity, and social stratum

(Lei & Chuang, 2010). Landing the career decision is onerous for a student so it has to sail through expectations at an individual level, scholastic, and career objectives (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Students with different demographic characteristics have a different impact on their admission decisions. The first demographic factor of influence is gender. Different gender has been considered a relevant determinant factor (Paulsen, 1990; McDonough, 1997). As per the study of Baharun et al.,(2011) female considers safety as of prime importance, and Hayes, Walker, and Trebbi, (1995) affirm that females prefer security, diversity, and variety in academic programs as significant in selecting the institution for higher education. The other factor of influence assessed is ethnicity. If a student has an ethnicity associated with the minority population then there are fewer chances of pursuing a graduation (Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009) due to a lack of awareness and knowledge. The family background of the student is also vital which drives decision-making of career choice. Heller (1997) found that parental income or socioeconomic position is also the primary determinant of admission choice. Even Mullen et al. (2003) intended to discover the relationship between parent's education, and the academic achievement of students, with the graduate school enrollment decision. It is accepted that educated parents proffer better guidance, encouragement, and support systems to their offspring in their studies.

Institutional Prominence

The human capital theory stated that higher education is the impetus for better income. Investment in education has lifetime returns. It is said that prospects of getting high pay jobs can only be through institution enrolment for higher education. Consequently, the decision-making process of admission to higher education is crucial in planning more prominent returns in the future. Career opportunities upon completion are one of the strong determinants of choice (Keskinen et al., 2008; Sidin, et al., 2003; Soutar & Turner, 2002) for which an institution's placement history is being reviewed by the prospective students. Placement-rooted courses empower institutions for student choice. Kusumwati et al. (2010) also recommended that the institution of good repute has a great influence on the student's decisions such as institution placements. The reputation of an institute in terms of its ranking has a strong impact on student's inclination toward their institute of choice. Ciriaci and Muscio (2011) have the same opinion that "good" universities/institutes may attract good brains. The most important to students in their choice also include academic reputation, collaboration along with national and international recognition and prestige. Bersola et al.,(2014) ranked its key influencing factors in the following order; quality of faculty, quality of research, course design, reputation, recognition or collaborations, and additional exposure opportunities for students to choose the institute. The design and duration of the course program also fascinate many students. Many institutions develop a niche to catch the attention of new students with help of the high-profile alumni and academic staff in specialized areas. Reputed institutions recruit faculties who have a blend of industry and academic experience to bring student learning more relevant and up to date. Another element is academic staff along with their quality and qualification (Tang, Tang &Tang, 2004). An earlier quantitative study by Shah and Brown (2009) endowed there is a positive influence of quality and qualification of faculty on student enrolment decisions.

Financial Capability

To pursue higher education, students require more money to cover the cost of education which includes tuition fees and other expenses related to the course along with food and accommodation. Due to limited financial resources and the rising cost of education, students are struggling with financial constraints in their choice of college/university. Financial capability is a basic consideration for a student's decisions on admission. The inadequate financial resources are burdensome for students and these disparities can be attributed in large part to a lack of college affordability due to which choice of selecting an institution got impacted. With increasing tuition fees, student's expectation of educational quality, standards, and value for money for higher education also increases (Shah and Nair, 2011). Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) and Foskett, Maringe, and Roberts (2006) discovered in their study that there is the existence of a positive relationship between affordable tuition fees and the enrolment of students in the institute. Various studies also endorse that there is a higher level of price sensitivity in the case of private universities than

government universities (Bezmen & Depken, 1998) and Heller (1997) indicated that low socio-economic students are more susceptible to the cost of education than high socio-economic students. Long (2004) illustrated in his study that the education expenses are apparent to the financial resources and academic quality of the student. It is most influential in the case of low-income group students in their process of determining their choice (Kim, 2004). Drewes & Michael, 2006 argue that the rationale behind designing a career is financial challenges but it is irrelevant to the students with lesser grades. Academically lower grades students do not have many choices available to apply for higher education. The literature is inundated with the fact that financial aid offers support to pursue higher studies.

Geographic Proximity

University/college location is an influential driving force for students in their choice. Montgomery (2002) came up with the fact that students have less willingness to opt for the institute which is away from their geographic region. Drewes (2006) specified that distance from home to the selected institution matters. Hence geographic proximity is one of the concomitant factors with finance in includes distance from the selected institution to the home and its distance from the city center. Students prefer education institutions near to their homes as the additional cost of living makes institutions less attractive. A study by Gibbons and Vignoles (2009) stated that traveling or relocation expenses are the overhead cost of education for low socio-economic students and may hinder their decision of attending college/university by any means. Although the same study also reveals that there is a higher rate of attendance when students are closer to institutions. Underprivileged students consider institutional proximity to home as the only feasible option for higher education instead of bearing the expense of accommodation. When the institution is near to public transport and has accessibility within the city, it adds to student choice. Transportation facilities encourage students to feel more comfortable attending an institution. Chapman (1981) and Briggs (2006) found that location has a crucial role in enrolment decisions.

Learning Environment

Wisdom-laden trees often grow in a holistic environment. According to Chen, (2007), academic factors of importance include academic quality which ensures appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment, and learning opportunities for students. The learning environment provides a proper atmosphere for the excellent growth of students that opens the door for indefinite learning opportunities and drives them to aspire for something big. Sternberg (1985) delineated analytical, creative, and practical aspects to offer interesting cognizance for designing core curriculum and knowledge delivery in educational institutions. Other inventive tools of instructional delivery including the flipped classroom; hybrid (online and face-to-face) courses; online courses; experiential and hands-on learning; and massively open online courses (MOOCs) enlighten the learning experience of students. Some other distinctive learning pedagogy to serve individual intellectual development are vocationally orientated learning for students, staff expertise, appropriate class size, and personalized academic support services for student satisfaction. It is quite evident that educational delivery methodology and communications technological dynamics have given even more opportunities for reconfiguration of the learning environment both inside and outside the classroom. The learning environment generates intellectual stimulation for learning. An upgraded classroom is the place that provides the wings of wisdom to students to fly in the competitive world. These days smart classroom models are being followed to assist education through advanced tools and techniques. Fully air-conditioned classrooms with smart learning tools like smart boards, overhead projectors, etc. add to the beauty of the overall learning process. The essence of learning depends on the atmosphere surrounding the campus and the communication achieved through facilities like study halls, a library equipped with quality books and reference materials, well-stocked laboratories, auditorium, games room, organized computer labs, latest equipment, capacious seminar rooms, centralized student printing, availability of course material, availability of the online program, creativity zone and bookstore at the campus, etc. These are considerable during the visit process of prospective students and convey the feeling of satisfaction to their parents (Boyer, 1987) as it influences the final decision to attend a particular institution. The learning environment facilitates the students and their parents to gain insights into the quality of education and the quality of the

institution. Furthermore, orientation programs along with extra- and co-curricular activities at institutions encourage the transition of students to assume leadership roles and other skills. The provision of online study is a new platform for the education system. The emergence of online learning in higher education certainly ameliorates the access and involvement of many students.

Beyond Academic Facilities

Colleges are doing extravagant spending on building equipped facilities to allure students to their campuses, feeding their expectation to upgrade luxury living. “Build it so they will come” is a new slogan in the academic market to draw student’s attention and thus has become a popular strategy for recruiting students. One of the researches presented the fact that academically good students make enrollment decisions on the quality of academic programs and on the contrary students with lesser academic credentials are attracted to the campus amenities including attractive living and recreational facilities. Many colleges when incapable of competing with the elite institution on academic quality grounds, challenge them by investing in living amenities rather than academic learning up-gradation. Expenditure on campus amenities strengthens the conviction that students are customers and they are intended to be catered to or will take their business somewhere else. It is important to appeal to students with the college infrastructure and ambiance. All cost of campus amenities is covered under the college tuition fees of students. Well build and proper infrastructure is one of the necessary components in increasing the tangibility of an institution’s offerings, particularly with the concept that there is not generally a lot to be assessed before becoming a part of it (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Such some of the best infrastructure facilities that can bring life to educational institutions include buildings, interior and exterior decorations, offices, indoor, and outdoor structures. Hayes (2009) points out that an immediate clue that provides assurance to parents and students about the quality of the education is only the institution’s physical environment. The other factors imperative to improve student outcomes and reduce dropout rates are living accommodations/housing, a safe and attractive campus, student services, and a friendly environment. The educational institution is now focusing on hostel architecture, healthcare support systems, cafeteria, gymnasium, swimming pool, air-conditioned stadium, and playgrounds / proper courts for volleyball, basketball, cricket, tennis, badminton, and others to encourage students to make their career in sports.

Social Influence

Social influencing factor includes parental influence, relatives, friends, school seniors, college/university alumnus, current studying institutional students, advice from school teachers, admission representatives, and counselors, and information from institution website, advertisement, and social media. Parental influence is beyond guidance and information which includes expectation, motivation, and arrangements for living away from home with financial assistance (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). At the secondary level, relatives, friends, school seniors, alumni, teachers, admission representatives, and counselors have a significant role in influencing the decision-making of students on enrollment. Hossler, et al. (1999) claim that a friend’s suggestion, and Rosen, Curren, and Greenlee (1996) propound that guidance from counselors are having more responsibility in molding a student’s decision-making process of enrolment initially and then parents come into the picture. Many institutions depend upon career counselors to target potential students and to make them aware of the benefits of attending it. Some institutions strategize to connect to prospective students and parents through advertisements on television, radio, newspapers, and the internet. Hodkinson (1998) disagrees that students make better career decisions with the help of any information and suggestion. It has been found students prefer informally acquired information from friends, family, the media, and others. The reliance on informal information develops students’ own intuition which is a disadvantage associated with effective decision-making and is the characteristic of the working-class (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Hutchings, 2003). In the present scenario student attracting strategies has extended beyond fundamental techniques of marketing, now outsourced research corporations are using market-based research models. It reflects well-known the face of social influences (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) and is used to identify the students to receive specific promotional material (Rentz,1996). Students consider a variety of messages coming from persuasive sources while

finalizing the college/university (McDonough, 1997) which may create a favorable image for an institution (Armstrong & Lumsden, 1999). In the similar context, Hite and Yearwood (2001), refer to promotional materials as a means to portray student life at the institution. Higher education institutions are investing in the development and refinement of their websites and utilizing social media forums to communicate with approaching students (Adams & Eveland, 2007) and even colleges/universities have developed their own marketing and advertising units to convey a plethora of information to achieve the ultimate goal of enrolment (Anctil, 2008). It is important for the institution to advance the quality and accessibility of information on their websites by ensuring open and continuous communication to all.

Student's Acquaintance

A student's academic records pre-graduation, future career orientation, education aspiration, attitudes, knowledge and aptitude, and awareness about the university /college are the attributes that influence the enrollment process. Braxton (1990) signifies that the grades based on academic achievement in school and standardized examination performance at the time of admission are important to determine the enrollment decision. Most university/college insists on certain basic academic parameters for admission. According to Beatty, Greenwood & Linn (1999), admission tests are used for the standardization of students, bringing efficiency to the admission process, and empowering equality among the students. It is the door for students to enter the selected institution with their talent and knowledge, even if academic grades are not that strong. Drewes et al. (2006) stipulate that students with lower grades may not apply to elite universities/colleges so make different choices than those with higher grades. Sometimes students have some psychological aspects such as commitment to the goal, education aspiration, or attitude to study in a good college or university. Likewise, Bowman et al. (2005) assert all suggestions and recommendations on careers must be student-based and their personal circumstances, values, and aspirations. The knowledge and awareness of the institution for the best fit are very important for the student. Elliott and Healy (2001) verify that the "prestigious university" does not face any challenge in enrolling students because of the image of the institution. At the same time, the student's traits and aptitude are significant barriers in the admission-taking process for technical students (Navrátilová, 2013).

Uncertainty

Uncertainty is defined as "the state of being uncertain" or "indeterminacy of the future". Life is full of uncertainty and concerns about the future. While many factors are outside of our control, our perspective is critical to coping with challenging situations and approaching the unknown with confidence (Anderson et al., 2019). Uncertainty is all around us, and it has never been more prevalent than right now. Much of what lies ahead in life remains unpredictable (Wright et al., 2013) whether it concerns a pandemic, economic instability, social unrest, finances, health, and relationships. Uncertainty often gives rise to fear. Fear and uncertainty may exert pressure, and create apprehensions, and helplessness in decision-making courses, especially for students as it is a one-time process (Bai et al., 2021). It may emotionally deplete and trap in countless questions "what-ifs" and worst-case scenarios about what the future may hold. It is very much relevant after the covid 19. Students changed their decisions of career choices considering the uncertainty in near future.

From the literature, an issue has been identified, "Basis of decision making" and the importance of "what is decided" by students related to their admission to the institution. This issue is pertinent in the current context of higher education in India albeit very few studies have examined this aspect. Identification and analysis of factors that influence a student's enrolment decisions in the Indian context are also scarcely available. This paper makes an attempt to fill this gap by developing a comprehensive study integrating various multidimensional driving factors from the literature into concrete factors which influence the student's decision-making process of enrolment and explains the relevance of factors that determine where to pursue higher education in India. It may serve as a guide in designing student-centric strategies for improving their academic excellence.

As novelty is a very important aspect of research, prior researches have various constructs that influence the design of the student's career path, but this is the first time, "uncertainty" a new construct has been

introduced which includes “economic recession”, “pandemic” and “social unrest”. To the best of the knowledge, this is the first time such an extensive comprehensive study has been done empirically in the Indian context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has been carried out in two successive phases: In phase 1, focus group interviews were done in order to find the unexplored elements and to validate the constructs that had been previously found through an extensive literature review. Seven admission management experts with more than 15 years of expertise in developing and implementing admission guidelines participated in two focus groups. The semi-structured interviews included questions that were relevant to the variables that affect student’s decision-making. As a consequence, a research framework was built from the literature and focus group discussions. The focus group identified the key role and recommended the addition of one more factor “Uncertainty”. The experts recommended “Economic crisis, Pandemic, and Social upheaval” under uncertainty. While in phase 2, The self-administered questionnaire approach is used for empirical research of variables. The instrument is made up of 8 latent constructs with 47 items excluding the “Demographic” factor. As English is widely spoken and understood so was chosen for the questionnaire. There are two sections to the questionnaire (Part A and Part B). Part A of the questionnaire deals with the student’s profile. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements on a five-point Likert scale in Part B of the questionnaire, which has a scale with 47 items. “1” signifies “Strongly disagree” while “5” signifies “Strongly agree.”

A total of 558 students from Delhi NCR, India, participated in the study. About 60.6 percent of the population was male, and 39.4 percent was female. Among all students, 56.8% of students are from metropolitan localities, while 19.2% are from rural ones. 73.8 percent belonged to the General group, 22.9 percent to the OBC, and so on, according to social position. Furthermore, 66.8% of students attended private universities, 11.6 % attended public universities, 4.8 % attended a private college that was linked with a private university, and the balance of students attended government-affiliated institutions. The parents educational background was taken into account in order to have a better understanding of the youngsters. Both father and mother had the highest level of education as graduation with 42.5 percent and 35.8 percent, respectively. 77.6% of mothers were homemakers and 54.3% of fathers were self-employed. In addition, 38.4% of families had yearly incomes under 2 lakhs, followed by 29.9% with incomes between 2 and 5 lakhs, 20.4% with incomes between 5 and 10 lakhs, and just 11.3% with incomes beyond 10 lakhs.

Seven domain experts along with a thorough literature study were employed to assess the content validity. Furthermore, the questionnaire’s face validity was established considering drafting, word clarity, and its approach. In order to make the proposed questionnaire design more comprehensible for the students, pilot research was carried out. The questionnaire was developed for college-bound students between the ages of 16 and 22 years. Data of the students were collected from various government and non-government institutions in Delhi NCR, India from reliable sources. A total of 869 surveys in the form of google forms were sent out and distributed via WhatsApp groups, and 558 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 64.21 percent. No identifying personal information was requested in order to safeguard the confidentiality of the students. Exploratory factor analysis and reliability assessment were used to analyze the responses with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

FINDINGS

This study helps in understanding the concept of the factors impacting the decision-making process of students in selecting institution for higher education. This study aims to discover influential factors so that admission management could have a better understanding to attract student enrolment in institutes.

Factor analysis was chosen for the analysis to assist in identifying individual factors that when combined, form more representative factors (Kachigan, 1991). In order to identify which individual factors when combined can create significant factor in influencing the students’ admission choice, this quantitative

technique was used. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was determined to be 0.954. When the correlation matrix as a whole was evaluated using Bartlett’s test, it was discovered to be significant at the 0.000 level overall (Mertler and Vannatta, 2002). Consequently, there is enough data to perform a factor analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996). To determine how many factors account for the majority of the variance in the data, principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax was used. To extract the fewest possible factors, this study uses a multiple-criteria approach based on eigenvalue and percentage of variance. As a result, seven factors managed to show eigenvalues greater than 1. The factors that accounted for 57.242 percent of the variance among all 47 items were retained using the percentage of variance criterion. Analysis was conducted with the exception of one variable, “LEARNING ENVIRONMENT 1,” (0.385) while all other communalities were greater than >.4. As a result, the first item was eliminated, which caused the explained variance to ascend from 56.780 percent to 57.242 percent.

The factor analysis tool was utilized until there were no communalities that fell below the 0.04 threshold (Costello and Osborne, 2005). The criteria were refined by deleting 1 item with poor communality. Once more, PCA was used to examine the factor loading trends and pinpoint variables with cross-loadings. It has been deduced that factor 1, which includes the 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 23rd, 24th, 25th, 27th, 28th, and 29th items, accounts for 12.457 percent of the variance (eigenvalue: 15.731), factor 2, which includes the 30th, 31st, 32nd, 33rd, 34th, 35th, and 36th items, accounts for 10.828 percent of the variance (eigenvalue: 3.579). Likewise, factor 3 consists of the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 16th items, which account for 10.104 percent of the variance (eigenvalue 1.757), factor 4 has items 3rd, 5th, and 6th items, which account for 7.640 percent of the variance (eigenvalue 1.662), factor 5 is in charge of 7.259 percent of the variance (eigenvalue 1.363), factor 6 has items that account for 5.841 percent of the variance (eigenvalue 1.156) while factor 7 with 3.113% of the variance (eigenvalue 1.083). Cross-loadings, on the other hand, occur simultaneously in the 4th item (factor 1 and factor 4), the 5th item (factor 1 and factor 4), 23rd item (factor 1 and factor 6), 27th item (factor 1 and factor 6), 40th item (factor 2 and factor 3), 42nd item (factor 1 and factor 3), 43rd item (factor 1 and factor 3), 45th item (factor 3 and factor 7), and lastly in 47th item (factor 2 and factor 7). Varimax factor loading matrix and total variation explained is shown in Table 1.

The Reliability analysis was conducted for the factors identified in the factor analysis with the help of Cronbach alpha. The extracted seven factors namely Holistic institutional environment, Conformity influence, Human intelligence, Institutional prominence, Geographic characteristics, Student residential life, and Financial viability are having Cronbach alpha values .893, .862, .899, .795, .775, .751, and .706 respectively. As all values are above 0.7 so considered acceptable and reliable.

TABLE 1
FACTOR LOADING MATRIX (VARIMAX) AND TOTAL VARIATION EXPLAINED

Factors	Item No.	Items	Cronbach Alpha	Factor Loadings	commonalities	Variance explained
Holistic institutional environment	16	Timely assessment and result declaration are essential to me	0.893	0.485	.544	12.457%
	17	Experiential learning opportunities through live projects/internships appeal me		0.581	.611	
	18	Academic support system Like smart classrooms, Library, Laboratories, Auditoriums are vital		0.718	.645	
	19	I contemplate infrastructure of institution		0.545	.528	

	22	Recreational facilities add to my interest in institution		0.539	.602	
	23	Health care and support system should be sound		0.622	.635	
	24	Presence of cafeteria captivates me		0.563	.575	
	26	I love sports so attracted by the presence of sports grounds/ Stadiums and support system		0.489	.535	
	27	Availability of proper safety system in institution is worth considerable for me.		0.672	.607	
Conformity influence	28	I consider my Parent's advice while selecting institution for admission	0.862	0.631	.577	10.828%
	29	Inputs of my relatives play major role in admission decision making		0.662	.573	
	30	I think my neighbors have strong influence on my admission decision		0.691	.656	
	31	Before finalizing my admission, I discuss with my friends		0.75	.609	
	32	I am in touch with my school seniors for their suggestion on my admission decision		0.77	.644	
	33	I also consider the feedback of institution's alumnus during my admission decision.		0.629	.630	
	34	Talking to current students is important for me in my enrollment decision making.		0.546	.543	
	35	I take guidance from my school teachers before landing to my career decision.		0.647	.565	
Human intelligence	36	Healthy interaction with senior faculty of institution for better understanding.	0.899	0.495	.538	10.104%
	37	I give due weightage to admission representative for overall understanding of the institution.		0.542	.613	

	38	I prefer the career counseling by experts for my crafting my career path.		0.608	.571	
	39	I adhere to social media for making way to institutional choice for career.		0.513	.573	
	40	Matching of institutes eligibility criteria with my academic credential is vital.		0.614	.590	
	41	A proper synchronization between overall learning during studies with my career goal is a must.		0.548	.604	
	42	I believe that quality standards of institution should match with my level of knowledge and wisdom.		0.605	.639	
	43	My awareness about the brand value of institution is essential.		0.59	.570	
	44	I deduce fear of economic instability important in my decision making		0.575	.680	
	45	I am afraid of pandemic so impacts my choice		0.488	.527	
	46	I comply with the fear of social unrest factor for decision making		0.485	.509	
Institutional prominence	1	For me the reputation of educational institution matters a lot	0.795	0.611	.535	7.640%
	2	I do consider institutional ranking for admission		0.665	.591	
	3	I make note of Institutional accreditations and collaborations		0.574	.496	
	4	Desired course /program availability and its duration is important for me		0.463	.535	
	5	Quality of faculty is significant factor for me		0.547	.573	
	7	Previous placement records of institution place an important role to foresee my job prospects		0.591	.507	

Geographic characteristics	6	I am inclined for admission with presence of foreign students in institution.	0.775	0.489	.508	7.259%
	10	Scholarship or discount by institution affirms my admission decision		0.532	.468	
	11	I do consider geographic proximity of institution from place of my residence.		0.671	.654	
	12	Institutional distance from city centre is also crucial decision maker		0.721	.646	
	13	Availability of transportation facility to the institution eases my decision		0.476	.434	
	14	I presume that presence of known or relative in the city or institution can provide me support.		0.563	.461	
Student residential life	21	I am driven by attractive hostels	0.751	0.707	.638	5.841%
	22	Food quality in hostel mess influences me		0.770	.708	
	26	The availability of gym fascinates me		0.507	.570	
Financial viability	8	Affordability of fees is one of my concern.	0.706	0.463	.525	3.113%
	9	Financial aid availability is distinctive feature in decision making		0.439	.530	

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the present study are concomitant with past research but show some discrepancies. The present study found a different result, factor analysis revealed that effecting teaching and advanced learning are not significant among the participants. Students could look for other aspects which may have a greater impact on them.

The study explored various factors influencing the student's decision-making to opt the institution for higher studies in India. Originally there were eight dimensions namely institutional prominence, financial capability, geography proximity, learning environment, beyond academic facilities, social influence, student acquaintance, and uncertainty. However, our results corroborate which posits that there are seven factors which include Holistic institutional environment, Conformity influence, Human intelligence, Institutional prominence, Geographic characteristics, Student residential life, and Financial viability. The core seven factors are ranked according to their importance in influencing the student's decision-making to opt the institution for higher education in India.

According to the variance, the first strongest factor is the Holistic institutional environment. This factor has the highest ranking which included: (a) Timely assessment and result declaration, (b) Experiential learning opportunities, (c) Academic support system, (d) Infrastructure, (e) Recreational facilities, (f)

Health care, (g) Presence of cafeteria, (h) Sports ground/stadium, and (i) Safety system. This factor is accountable for 12.457% of the total variance explained. The current educational framework in higher education attempts to make students active and aware participants in their learning process, with the lecturer serving mostly as a facilitator. The relevance of student learning techniques and excellent practices are growing like cross-functional learning, case analysis / applied problem solving, tutorials, and student mentoring. There is now a paradigm shift in providing learning to the students. Institutions can focus on the usage of effective practices to deliver quality equitable education and should design course curricula with employment alignment. In a similar vein, it can be suggested that transforming the institution with the latest technology and equipment improves the learning experience for students which can make the teaching process worthwhile. An eco-friendly environment with the latest initiatives of solar electricity, rainwater harvesting, paper recycling, and other green initiatives creates the best minds and proves highly beneficial in improving the overall personality of the students for tomorrow along with other campus amenities. Such characteristics provide assurance to parents and also help in the development of perception about the quality of education.

The factor analysis speculated that the second strongest factor is Conformity influence which comprised of: (a) Parent's advice (b) Relatives, (c) Neighbors, (d) Friends, (e) School seniors, (f) Institutional alumni, (g) Current studying students of the institute, and (h) School teachers. This factor is accountable for 10.828% of the total variance explained. As per social contagion theory, significant social groups can influence others and can spread information among their networks. Therefore, it is of great importance for universities and colleges to use their influence in order to shape the attitudes of the students. It involves behaviour, emotions, or conditions spreading spontaneously through a group or network. Spread of the word of mouth through social contagion can be instrumental in spreading the message and can nudge the student in the selection of institution. It can alter student beliefs, attitudes, actions, or perceptions to more closely match those held by groups to which they belong or want to belong or by groups whose approval they desire. It is sometimes based on heuristics whereby students automatically decide the institution for higher education.

The third strongest factor is Human intelligence which recapitulates the items (a) Influence of senior faculty of institution, (b) Influence of admission representative, (c) Influence of career counselor, (d) influence of social media forums, (e) Academic credential of student, (f) Future orientation of student, (g) Students' level of knowledge and wisdom, (h) Student awareness about brand value of the institution, (i) Economic instability, (j) Pandemic, (k) Social unrest. The current study elucidates that the mental quality of students drives the decision-making process for college selection for higher studies. Mental quality consists of the abilities to think logically, learn from experience, adapt to new situations, understand and handle abstract concepts, and use knowledge to manipulate one's environment. The understanding of career advisors influence on students can guide the institution to plan and design a structure of their admission strategies by considering the role of professors of the institutions, career counselors, and admission representatives. This may optimize their expense on admissions and human resources. Similarly, social media have progressively played a dual role in the admissions process of institutions. As students are searching for prospective colleges on different social platforms, the admission management of institutes is also checking up on the social media profiles of prospective students. Therefore, social platforms can be considered a valuable tool for students to search for colleges of their choice and also for colleges to attract students by furnishing their details on their websites. Social media is becoming indispensable. Students use social media channels for extracting information about the college and decision-making on final admission. Therefore, institutions must consider social platforms not only a discovery engine but also student driver which leads to their decision-making process as students follow different social platforms to get the complete feel of the campus. Social media can be used to align branding and marketing strategies by the institutions. This factor clusters the student's awareness of their own attributes and orientation which should match with the prospective institution. The research work argues that it is impossible to eliminate the uncertainty but assessing the uncertainty can be a viable option available with help of the ability to behave in the situation. Human intelligence suggests that taking uncertainty into consideration is thoughtful while taking career-related decisions.

While the fourth-strongest factor as per analysis is Institutional prominence. The factor encompassed (a) Reputation of the institute, (b) Ranking of the institute, (c) Accreditation and collaboration of the institution, (d) Availability of the program and its duration, (e) Quality of faculty (f) Placement records of the institution. In the light of findings, the high quality of an educational institution is in fact prerequisite for achieving academic excellence. An institute of repute is valued by both students and parents in the decision-making process of college choice. Institutions should make efforts to be at par in terms of their rankings, accreditations and collaboration, and quality of staff. The practical nature of the course program or the exposure provided by the institution should be based on internships, visits, and workshops. The institutions must orient towards the more practical exposure / global exposure of students to be job-ready graduates by enhancing their employability abilities preceding the course completion. Student exchange programs offered by institutions will attract students very much. Career prospects are measured by the institutional placement history therefore this study suggests the educational institution to focus more on the placements of students along with quality education.

The analysis states that the fifth-strongest factor is Geographical characteristics. It includes (a) Presence of foreign students, (b) Scholarship or discount offered by the institute, (c) Geographic proximity of the institution, (d) Institutional distance from the city center, (e) Availability of transportation facilities, (f) Presence of known or relative in the city or institution. This study reveals that strong socioeconomic life is important for the student in their institution selection process. It has been found that the students want eminent educational institutes which can provide global quality education and should be affordable and easily approachable.

The sixth factor namely Student residential life has (a) Attractive hostel, (b) Food quality in the hostel mess, and (c) Availability of gym. 5.841% variation of a dependent variable is explained by this factor. One of the most interesting and significant decisions will a student makes at university is deciding where to live. Residence life is an important part of the student experience in higher education. Overall, Residence Life aspires to make the residence more than just a place to eat and sleep, but also a place to explore identity and personal philosophies via living away from home experiences. Living in hostels allows students to be near to academic courses, teachers, and other campus amenities. The quality of food in the hostel mess is equally important for maintaining good health. Good quality is a matter of satisfaction for parents. The study uncovers that the availability of gym may increase the interest to stay in a hostel or choose the campus.

The last factor found is very important for the students in their decision-making process of choosing an institution for higher studies. This factor is known as Financial viability. It consists of (a) affordability of fees and (b) Availability of financial aid. Financial capability and availability are crucial for all students in the decision of selecting an educational institution. Therefore, financial support and strategic pricing models should be adopted by private colleges and universities to catch the attention of lower-income students.

IMPLICATIONS

Changing the trajectory of the academic career of a student is a very important decision to sustain their transition from school to college. This decision will reproduce student's expected outcomes for their future career path and will also have repercussions on their academic performance throughout their studies. This study identified factors contributing to the decision-making of students to opt for the institute for higher education. The in-depth analysis has considered seven factors to establish the concrete model to analyze the importance of various determinants of the student's decision making the process of admission to the institution for higher education.

It also contributes to the current literature on the student's admission decision-making. It advances in developing the perception of the pedagogical issues concerning student admissions and access to higher education in India. It reformed the magnitude of acknowledging the student's educational needs and expectations. It adds insights to the challenges and the impediments of higher education institutes on student admissions by examining the admission barriers and the limitations.

This study will help students to determine and interpret how well the institute fits them with regard to their academic and personal learning. From the university administrator's perspective, admission

management is very critical for planning offerings to enhance students' teaching and learning experience and only a proper understanding of the factors influencing student's choices can improve it. This study will empower institutions to set their own objectives. This paper extends important implications for managing student enrolment in the institute. Results shed light on resources (Strongest factor-Holistic learning environment) that should be given attention to draw the interest of students to pursue higher studies. It provides interesting insights into strategizing the admission management process by aligning with the factors discussed in the paper. The policymakers of higher education institutions need to support students by providing financial assistance in the form of scholarships or education loans to increase their access to education and ensure their academic success. Efforts can be made to strengthen the accreditation, collaboration, and regulation to ensure its reputation building along with the development of confidence of students in it. This study can aid in collaborative strategic planning processes of higher education institutes to increase student enrolments.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations apply to this study also. First of all, this research is retrospective as respondents were asked to recall past events and think back on their choices. Second, this study is based on opportunity sampling, further research can be done using a probability sampling method to strengthen its validity. Thirdly, this research study is exclusive to the data garnered from students solely in Delhi NCR, India. Future researchers are advised to include students from throughout India for a better understanding. Last but not least, because the study was carried out during the Covid 19 period and no students were personally visited, therefore there is a probability of some errors.

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