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Choices Based on the Self-Perception of University Applicants in their Decisions on Applying to Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of self-concept and perceptions of academic performance in shaping university students' choice of educational institutions, as well as the factors that influence these decisions. Various empirical studies have examined this topic, identified key determinants and reflected the aspects and expectations that students prioritize when making decisions about their academic future. In this study, we utilized scientific databases to filter through thousands of papers, ultimately selecting 225 articles that were directly related to decision-making processes in education. Out of these, we have cited 60 publications that offer significant insights relevant to our research. Moreover, we identified 20 empirical studies that specifically analyse the factors that influence students' decision-making processes, based on data gathered through questionnaires and interviews. To further explore students' career aspirations and understand the factors influencing their choices, we focus on several key variables. These include students' self-perception, self-confidence, and personal development. We also assess how external factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, family expectations, and educational environment, may impact these decisions. By examining these elements, we aim to uncover how such influences contribute to students' educational and professional trajectories. This study seeks to clarify how diverse influences, particularly those experienced during adolescence, shape individuals' personal growth and career pathways. In addition, it aims to identify any gaps in existing research, especially with regard to international practices and trends, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of student decision-making in higher education.

1. Introduction

This article investigates the role of self-perception, encompassing self-conception, self-efficacy, and the self-evaluation of academic performance, along with the various factors that influence these elements in university students' choice of institution. A significant body of empirical research has

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examined these issues, identifying key determinants and expectations that students perceive as important when making decisions about their academic pathways. Our study begins with the premise that many students may experience uncertainty regarding their readiness for higher education, particularly during the transition from high school or in their initial year at university. Additionally, we consider whether students have genuinely enrolled in programs aligned with their interests and whether they have fully assessed the factors influencing their decisions. To understand the complex decision-making processes of students, it is essential to explore the underlying factors that shape their self-perception. This includes the effects of social comparisons, which are intrinsically linked to students' self-concept and self-efficacy.

By thoroughly examining students' personalities in terms of these attributes, we aim to map their life paths more accurately and gain a deeper understanding of the origins of their academic and career decisions. Both positive and negative influences play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's personal development, which, in turn, affects their career choices. Students' preferences are closely tied to these developmental influences. However, their decisions are not solely based on values, rational interests, or pragmatic considerations. This underscores the importance of self-evaluation and self-efficacy, which are likely to be critical indicators in our research. Personality traits such as anxiety and distorted self-perception whether under- or over-valued are significant empirical factors relevant to this investigation. Although these psychological traits are crucial, they alone are insufficient to draw conclusive insights into the consequences of students' academic decisions. Educational administrators need a deeper understanding of student behaviour to help maximize their abilities and improve their educational experience.

This study, therefore, aims to offer a more holistic and pragmatic framework for understanding the factors influencing students' decisions, incorporating not only psychological aspects but also the institutional management and marketing environments that have substantial influence. Our long-term objective is to model the higher education admissions process, which is significantly shaped by marketing strategies, and to propose actionable indicators that educational researchers and administrators can use to optimize their recruitment and retention efforts. By doing so, we seek to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application in higher education. Taking an international perspective, this paper identifies and systematizes the key factors that researchers worldwide have found to be influential in students' decisions about higher education. Through this analysis, we aim to develop reliable measurement tools that integrate proven elements from different contexts and provide actionable data for both educators and policymakers.

Additionally, a crucial aspect of our research involves focusing on students' self-reflections, enabling us to gain insights not only into the consequences of their choices but also into the decision-making moments themselves. These include the socio-psychological context, past and present narratives, and the students' needs and self-management strategies. This approach allows us to examine the critical factors that led to students' decisions and, in turn, draw broader cross-sectoral conclusions. Although the dynamics of university admissions and the psychological aspects of students' perceptions and realities present compelling research topics, it is also essential to consider the interests of educational institutions. These interests have both social and economic implications, influencing not only the students' academic success but also the institution and the broader community. Through this study, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these multifaceted relationships, ultimately offering insights that can benefit students, institutions, and society as a whole.

2. Methodology

2.1 Purpose and Methodology of the Literature Review

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the factors that influence university applicants' decisions, establish a structured framework for understanding these factors, and identify gaps in existing research. To accomplish this, we will conduct a detailed review of the international literature and analyse relevant studies included in our investigation. As noted by Snyder [53] literature reviews are an effective tool for evaluating the state of knowledge on a specific topic. They are particularly useful when the aim is to assess a research problem, create a research agenda, identify gaps in existing studies, or engage in a focused discussion on a particular question. In this context, reviewing the available literature is essential for identifying and evaluating the number of studies on a given subject, as well as for defining the goals, scope, and specific criteria for inclusion. These steps are critical for the construction of a meaningful and robust literature review. In our research, the initial stages involve identifying the factors influencing students' decision-making mechanisms and incorporating these into our empirical study. By comparing the findings from our questionnaire-based research with existing empirical literature, we will be able to systematize the current knowledge on this topic and uncover potential gaps in understanding how students make decisions regarding university selection. Our aim is to build on existing research while also identifying less-explored factors to ensure that our analysis is both comprehensive and valuable.

A significant focus of this study is on how researchers around the world have examined the factors that shape students' choices of higher education institutions. The questionnaire we have designed takes into account several key elements identified in the literature. These factors include the perceived benefits of earning a degree, the importance of university reputation, students' self-assessment of their abilities, the advantages of university life, and the influence of parents, peers, and societal expectations, as well as students' personal goals and aspirations. Throughout the literature review, we will present findings from international studies and reflect on how these insights contribute to our understanding of students' decision-making processes. Additionally, we will highlight factors that may have been overlooked in previous research but are crucial for a more in-depth examination of the mechanisms behind students' choices. This approach will allow us to offer a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the influences that guide students in their selection of higher education institutions, ultimately contributing to the broader body of knowledge on this topic. In summary, this paper aims not only to analyse existing research but also to expand on it by incorporating underexplored factors and providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding students' decision-making processes in higher education.

2.2 Selection of Relevant Scientific Literature

To prepare the literature review, we began by identifying a set of keywords to guide our search for relevant studies. Initially, the use of highly specific keyword combinations significantly narrowed the range of search results, limiting the scope of the literature available for review. However, in order to fully cover the breadth of our topic, it was necessary to include studies that offered a broader institutional context and addressed concepts related to decision-making processes in higher education. As a solution, we merged our initial set of highly specific keywords with a compilation of broader search results, combining more general studies with exact matches. This approach enabled us to capture a more comprehensive view of the relevant literature. Although this search process was both lengthy and complex, involving multiple phases of categorization and additional filtering to eliminate redundant sources, it proved highly effective in identifying key studies. The extensive effort involved in refining the search allowed us to gather a substantial

amount of relevant information, ensuring that our literature review would adequately reflect the diverse factors influencing university applicants' decision-making mechanisms. This strategic search process thus laid the groundwork for a thorough and balanced literature review, enabling us to integrate both detailed and broader perspectives on the topic while addressing gaps in previous research.

2.3 Keyword-based Journal Article Searches

By employing specific and structured search strategies, such as focusing on articles with titles containing relevant terms (e.g., [title: "career"] AND [title: "students"] OR [title: "applicants"]), we were able to identify a significantly higher proportion of relevant literature compared to broader, more general keyword searches like "student decision-making variables" or "career decision-making difficulties." General keyword searches often yielded thousands of results, but only a small number of these articles were pertinent to our topic. In contrast, more targeted searches generated lists of hundreds of relevant articles. To manage these results effectively, we implemented a ranking system based on relevance. For the extensive lists generated from popular keyword combinations, this ranking system allowed us to focus on the most applicable sources. For the more focused keyword searches, we found that the top 50% of the results (when sorted by relevance) typically consisted of high-quality sources that were either directly relevant to the research topic or held potential for future studies.

Table 1

Journal Article Search Keywords (Combined Words with Broad and Exact Matches, Using 'AND' / 'OR' Logic)

Academic Achievement	Perception
Academic Motivation	Personal, Socio-Economical, and Psychological Experiences
Academic Success	Pisa
Applicants	Psychosocial Withdrawal
Applying To Higher Education	Relative Risk Aversion
Avoidance Behaviour	Self-Assessment
Career Adaptability	Self-Concept
Career Decision-Making	Self-Development
Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy	Self-Efficacy
Career Indecision	Self-Evaluation
Career Students Or Applicants	Self-Perception
Career Uncertainty	Shyness
Cognitive Bias	Social Adaptation
Compensatory Advantage Model	Social Adjustment
Controlled Study	Social Differentials
Decision-Making Process	Social Inequality
Educational Expectations	Social Isolation
Educational Status	Social Withdrawal
Emerging Adulthood	Student Decision-Making Variables
Factors	Students Applying To Universities (Application Process)
GPA	Test Anxiety
Human Relation	University Applicants
Influence	University Students
Interpersonal Relations	Young Adult

Throughout the search process, we experimented with various keyword combinations, ultimately determining that terms directly related to the decision-making and self-perception of

university students and applicants were the most significant. These keyword combinations yielded the most relevant results, which we examined thoroughly. As a result, we compiled a list of 48 specific word connections that are crucial for both the current and future stages of our research. This list is presented in Table 1. Additionally, we identified the most critical related literature using what we refer to as the 'TOP 10' keyword combinations, which were the most closely aligned with our research focus. Table 2 presents the total number of hits we received for each keyword combination across the most important academic journal search engines. This data helped us refine our understanding of the scope of existing literature and guided the selection of key studies for further analysis and inclusion in the review.

2.4 Conditions for Using Scientific Databases

We used online databases such as Emerald Insight, Scopus, Springer, Research Gate, Science Direct, APA PsycNet, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, JSTOR, ERIC, Frontiers, and Project MUSE for our search. We selected papers published between 2012 and 2024 in the first filtering step. Given that some search engines return a large number of matches, we then prioritized keyword combinations with fewer results. When examining the decision-making mechanism of students, we prioritized relatively recent research, focusing especially on studies from the last five years. An important part of setting up the filters was the use of the already mentioned “AND” and “OR” logical conditions, and the other part was specifying conditions such as defining scientific fields or focusing on journal articles with open access, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The TOP 10 Keyword Combinations Used to Select the Literature Using Major Engines (Time Range: 2012-2024, Sorted by Relevance)

Keyword Combinations	Number Of Pre-Filtered Articles Identified By Search Engines					
	Emerald Insight	Scopus	Springer Link	Science Direct	ERIC	JSTOR
Career AND Decision-Making AND Difficulties	572	83	226	295	89	95
Student AND Career AND Uncertainty OR Indecision	561	25	254	150	121	89
Career AND Decision-Making AND Self-Efficacy	304	120	148	110	186	44
Student AND Self-Perception AND Decision-Making	88	1	438	4725	126	105
Student AND Career AND Decision-Making	807	143	684	316	847	209
University AND Student AND Career AND Choice	999	31	681	2600	725	234
Students AND Applying AND To AND Universities	4526	38	868	12304	1061	175
University AND Student AND Career AND Self-Assessment OR Self-Concept OR Self-Development OR Self-Efficacy OR Self-Evaluation OR Self-Perception	1991	17	2436	39060	63	344
Student AND Career AND Self-Assessment OR Self-Concept OR Self-Development OR Self-Efficacy OR Self-Evaluation OR Self-Perception	1991	199	2436	39060	210	351
University AND Student AND Decision AND Self-Assessment OR Self-Concept OR Self-Development OR Self-Efficacy OR Self-Evaluation OR Self-Perception	2058	12	2440	39075	52	415

We prioritized articles containing empirical research that directly examined current university admissions conditions and processes. To refine the search results, we applied a series of exclusion criteria. Articles that were either too distantly related to our topic or largely irrelevant were entirely

excluded. We also eliminated studies that, although related to our area of research, employed significantly different methodologies, such as those focused on primary education or postgraduate training. This filtering process ensured that only the most relevant and applicable studies were considered for our review. In addition, numerous publications examined the internal operations of companies, which are outside the scope of our focus on secondary and higher education. Some papers merely addressed broad theoretical frameworks regarding students' perceptions of the institutional environment, without providing substantial empirical data. While we encountered several studies that may be of value in future research particularly when comparing the perspectives of our sample with students from other countries these were not deemed immediately relevant to the current study. It is worth noting that the number of such studies that passed the pre-screening stage was relatively small. Our selection process began with the identification of relevant keywords, followed by the application of a series of filtering stages. The first stage of filtering involved a preliminary screening based solely on the titles of the articles. In contrast, the second and third stages of filtering involved a more thorough review of the substance of the abstracts and the presence of relevant keywords. This process allowed us to determine whether an article should be included in the current study or considered for future research. Through this systematic approach, we successfully narrowed down the initial pool of thousands of articles to 225 studies. From this subset, we identified 60 papers that were deemed significant for immediate review, as shown in Table 3. Furthermore, we selected 20 empirical studies, based on questionnaires and interviews that specifically investigated students' decision-making processes in relation to university admissions. These studies form the core of the current analysis. As new research emerges and generates additional questions, we anticipate that the number of relevant scientific articles will increase. Consequently, we will continue to gather new publications and expand our search parameters as needed for follow-up investigations. This ongoing process will ensure that our research remains comprehensive and up-to-date, contributing to a more complete understanding of students' decision-making mechanisms in higher education.

Table 3
 Number of Resources Processed For the Study after the Second and Third Screening

	Included After the Second Filter	Included After the Third Filter	Article Was Not Included After Filtering
Number of Journals	132	59	73
Number of Articles	225	60	161

3. Results

3.1 The Context of Students' Choices in the International Literature

Several key factors significantly influence the career choices of university applicants, affecting both their intellectual and emotional decision-making processes. Beyond personal experiences, attitudes formed during early adulthood are shaped by narratives and commentary from others. As Festinger [26] observed, in the absence of objective, non-social instruments, people evaluate their abilities and views in comparison to those around them. This idea has been substantiated by numerous subsequent studies. Scholars like Bandura [6], Bong and Clark [9], Hogg and Cooper [31], Drewes and Michael [22], Fenning and May [25], Guay et al. [29], Herrera et al. [30], and Schunk and Pajares [47] have demonstrated that self-concept and self-perception, which are shaped by various influences, play a critical role in academic performance. In turn, academic performance affects university applicants' choice of institution. Several empirical studies have explored the

relationship between self-perception and life choices, identifying key factors that reflect students' considerations when making school choice decisions. These findings will be discussed later in the paper.

This research holds substantial relevance for education scholars, system administrators, and policymakers for two main reasons. First, understanding students' mind-sets and choices offers a comprehensive view of why university admissions processes have evolved in their current forms. Recent global empirical studies provide crucial insights in this regard, highlighting how self-concept and self-perception shape students' decision-making processes. Second, as Shiller [49] suggests, delving beyond large-scale sociological studies into psychological research can offer stakeholders critical insights into the emotions, experiences, and external influences that shape human behavior. By contextualizing and processing individual life stories, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of students' decision-making processes, which is difficult to achieve through statistics alone. A key issue examined in this research is the limited understanding of how students prepare for university and how young students with little work experience make significant decisions about their future careers.

When selecting a bachelor's degree major, students are influenced by a range of factors, including their beliefs, interests, and values, as well as environmental stimuli and influences present from an early age. Scholars like [2; 24; 47; 49-51; 54] have emphasized how these factors shape students' career aspirations and decision-making processes. The primary objective of this study is to uncover the underlying motivations behind students' interest in choosing a specific career or academic major. This involves an in-depth examination of the narratives and psychological processes that guide their decision-making. Understanding the factors that contribute to students' self-concept and influence their decisions particularly the factors that connect them to specific organizations or institutions is essential. For higher education institutions, this understanding is vital in determining what services and support systems should be offered to students.

Furthermore, in conducting a literature review, it is critical to clarify the unique conditions that different institutions offer and to assess the impact these conditions have on students' decisions. This study compares centralized and decentralized approaches to academic management to evaluate how these operational models influence career selection and student engagement. Scholars like Amanchukwu et al. [4], Androniceanu and Ristea [5], Brown and Thornborrow [11], Bulkley [12], Bush [13], Compagnucci and Spigarelli [18], Kocher et al. [33], and Green and Green [28] have contributed valuable insights into these operational frameworks, which will be incorporated into our comparative analysis.

3.2 The Influence of Personality on Student Decision-Making Mechanisms

Circumstances, personality traits, attitudes, and temporary mental states all significantly impact decision-making processes. Consequently, this paper explores how individual characteristics and behaviours shape learners' preferences in academic and career choices. The study of personality has a long and rich history. Throughout the 20th century, influential psychological research sought to describe human beings as complex organic systems that could be modelled and understood. Festinger's social comparison theory Festinger [26], Watson's early work in behaviourism [58], Skinner's operant conditioning [52], and Allport's trait theory [3] were central to this endeavour. These theories gained prominence largely due to political and economic interests beyond individual cognition, as there was a broader desire to develop tools for influencing and even manipulating behaviour for political purposes. Among these, behaviourism emerged as a dominant school of thought, although it faced significant criticism for its reductionist terminology, aggressive dissemination, and its tendency to present its findings as isolated rather than part of the larger body

of psychological research.

Despite this, Willis and Giles [60] argue that the contributions of early behaviourist research to the development of modern psychology cannot be overlooked. The pragmatic nature of these studies helped make psychology more accessible and applicable, especially in pedagogical sciences, where their insights informed decision-making within public and higher education institutions. Allport [3] opposed the reductionism of behaviourism, advocating for practical observation in scientific inquiry. By focusing on observable traits, Allport was able to identify over 4,000 distinct character traits in individuals, a finding later corroborated by [31]. Over time, these traits were streamlined into a more manageable framework. Raymond Cattell reduced them to 16 core personality factors, which were eventually narrowed down even further, giving rise to the widely recognized Big Five (OCEAN) model.

This model, first articulated by Norman [40] in 1963, remains a cornerstone of contemporary personality psychology, categorizing human personality into five dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The practical implications of these personality studies are far-reaching. In educational contexts, the Big Five model is particularly relevant for understanding how personality traits affect decision-making, especially regarding career choices and university selection. By investigating these individual differences, educational institutions can better align their services and programs with the diverse preferences and needs of their students. This paper draws on these foundational theories to explore how personality traits shape academic preferences and decision-making processes in learners, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers alike.

This theory identifies five key factors, typically labelled as follows:

- 1) Openness to experience (inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious);
- 2) Conscientiousness (efficient/organized vs. extravagant/careless);
- 3) Extraversion (outgoing/energetic vs. solitary/reserved);
- 4) Agreeableness (friendly/compassionate vs. critical/rational); and
- 5) Neuroticism (sensitive/nervous vs. resilient/confident).

From another perspective, Ackerman and Heggstad [1] introduced a framework identifying four primary trait complexes: social, clerical/conventional, science/math, and intellectual/cultural factors. They posited that intelligence, viewed as typical performance within a specific domain, is essential for understanding the relationships between intelligence, personality, and interests. This perspective is echoed by Kornhaber [34], who discussed Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, introduced in 1983. Gardner's hypothesis suggests that every individual possesses several intelligences that function independently and can be applied in various combinations to solve problems or create valued products within one or more cultural contexts. These intelligences enable people to fulfil diverse adult roles, ensuring the functionality of complex societies by allowing for specialization in different areas of expertise. Despite the evolution of psychological theories and the rise of competing ideas, Allport's contributions remain highly influential, particularly in the realm of social psychology. Allport is closely associated with the "doctrine of attitudes," which significantly shaped the field.

Even today, empirical methods grounded in Allport's work continue to play a key role in pedagogical research and studies of human behaviour. Allport [3] argued that although attitudes are inferred rather than directly observed, they are crucial components of human nature. Without acknowledging attitudes, we cannot satisfactorily explain the consistency of individual behaviour or the stability of societies. Research exploring the relationship between personality traits and decision-making supports the continued relevance of these foundational theories. For instance, Schröder et al. [46] studied career decision intentions among teenagers from family business

backgrounds, considering both adolescent and parental influences. They found that personality traits such as openness and agreeableness, as well as factors like gender, identification with the family business, perceived parental job rewards, and parental succession preferences, all significantly influenced adolescents' career choices. Lounsbury et al. [36] also examined the Big Five personality traits in relation to career decidedness among middle and high school students, highlighting that conscientiousness was strongly and positively correlated with career decisiveness. Roccas et al. [45] explored the correlation between values, personality traits, religiosity, and positive affect.

Their findings indicated that certain personality traits align with specific value systems: agreeableness with benevolence and tradition; openness with self-direction and universalism; extraversion with achievement and stimulation; and conscientiousness with achievement and conformity. This research suggests that the influence of values on behaviour is often stronger when mediated by cognitive control rather than by personality traits alone. In other words, individuals with high conscientiousness are more likely to consciously apply their values to guide their behaviour, which results in these values having a greater impact than inherent personality traits. This emphasis on cognitive influences highlights the importance of self-management and its psychological approach. Personality traits, combined with life and career experiences, contribute to shaping an individual's decision-making process. However, this process is neither linear nor entirely predictable. Accurately describing and modelling decision-making requires a comprehensive approach that integrates multiple, often interdependent, factors. The complexity of this process underscores the need for ongoing research into the interactions between personality, values, and decision-making in academic and career contexts.

3.3 Institutional Factors: Meeting of Organizational and Individual Career Management

The career path of individuals and the operating principles of organizations are crucial in shaping career management strategies. Career management encompasses both the personal and institutional efforts to enhance career sustainability. These efforts are influenced by the values of individuals and the broader institutional culture. This culture, in turn, is shaped by the organization's structural functioning its systems, processes, and traditions and its management style, which impacts the decisions and experiences of the people within it, including managers, employees, and external stakeholders like students. In this context, Canaj et al. [14] explored the relationship between organizational and individual career management and their influence on career sustainability, including well-being, health, and efficiency, which are vital for long-term career success. Organizational career management refers to company-driven strategies and policies designed to support employee success, while individual career management includes personal efforts like setting goals, planning, networking, and job searching critical activities for advancing one's career, as detailed by [44], [27], [41], and [56]. Canaj et al. [14] found that while both organizational and individual efforts contribute to career sustainability, organizational initiatives generally have a more significant impact. Delaney and Huselid [21] expanded this discussion by analysing data from nearly 600 organizations and found a strong correlation between human resource management strategies, such as selective staffing and training, and improved organizational performance.

These findings suggest that institutions, including those in education, benefit from systematic career management and personnel development practices. This has important implications for managing careers within educational systems, where the balance between centralization and decentralization remains a critical issue. Centralized systems, where decision-making power is concentrated, are often politically motivated to centralize authority or redistribute power through

decentralization. Administratively driven reforms aim to streamline bureaucracy for efficiency, but Bray [10] noted that reducing regional disparities is generally easier in centralized systems, as they maintain uniform control over processes. Conversely, decentralization advocates argue for devolving power to local or regional authorities to foster more autonomy and effectiveness at the school or institutional level, as [28] and Wong [62] explains. However, despite frequent discussion in global educational reforms, decentralization is not universally adopted, and evidence of its impact is mixed. Centralization allows for greater control and consistency, but this concentration of power can also be seen as autocratic. Kocher et al. [33] argue that leaders focused solely on efficiency often adopt a dictatorial management style, overlooking team preferences and autonomy.

Such a system limits individual decision-making and imposes organizational norms over personal aspirations, influencing career choices in educational institutions. This autocratic approach contrasts with decentralized, democratic models of management, where stakeholders are empowered to participate in decision-making processes. Democratic educational management, as described by [13], distributes authority and control, allowing for greater stakeholder involvement, which is essential for healthy educational development. Brown and Thornborrow [11] argue that improving followership skills is as important as leadership in these systems, highlighting the role of collaboration and shared decision-making. Decentralized systems encourage creativity and staff autonomy, aligning with Amanchukwu et al. [4] who suggest that freedom in management, when exercised responsibly, leads to more effective educational programs. Moreover, the modern educational landscape increasingly mirrors corporate management styles. According to Compagnucci and Spigarelli [18], universities today are tasked not only with teaching and research but also with contributing to the socio-economic integration of students and faculty, a role known as the Third Mission. This shift requires institutions to adopt management strategies similar to corporations, emphasizing efficiency, innovation, and stakeholder engagement. This approach raises important questions about how these corporate practices influence the career choices of university applicants and how students acquire management skills within these institutions, which will ultimately shape the future of higher education management.

3.4 Consideration of Student Needs as a Factor Creation Option

As higher education systems evolve, research on the relationship between prospective and current students and their chosen institutions has expanded significantly. A noteworthy study by Sipos et al. [51] examines the factors influencing students' decisions when selecting university courses. This research focuses primarily on the outcomes of these decisions rather than the cognitive processes that lead to them. The findings aim to assist university decision-makers in crafting effective marketing strategies that resonate with secondary school students, highlighting the importance of understanding desired outcomes rather than delving into students' attitudes. The study utilizes an online questionnaire and employs reliability, exploratory, and confirmatory factor analyses to evaluate data. It identifies information as the most critical factor in students' decision-making processes. Once students have access to relevant information and evaluate their options, they can make informed choices about which institution best meets their needs. Key criteria for evaluation include university programs, costs (tuition fees, scholarships, and grants), facilities, processes, instructors, and campus locations, all of which vary in their significance to prospective students.

Complementing this research, Al-Dajani and Alsamydai [2] conducted a study in Jordanian universities, focusing on various elements that influence the appeal of higher education institutions. Their research highlights factors such as institutional characteristics, economic and geographical

variables, reference groups, marketing communication, and a university's reputation. Similarly, Echchabi et al. [24] explored determinants affecting students' choices of higher education establishments in Oman, concluding that while academic and financial advantages are primary factors, the quality and reputation of universities are secondary considerations. Kovács et al. [35] further support Sipos et al.'s findings by studying the attractiveness of Hungary's University of Szeged from a geographical-demographic perspective. Their empirical analysis indicates that localism remains a significant factor in students' choices, with many preferring institutions close to home despite the university's national and international reputation. This preference is also observed in Canada, where Drewes and Michael [22] noted that applicants favour institutions that are geographically closer, offer generous scholarship programs, and provide extensive non-academic student services. Factors influencing prospective students also include admission processes, such as the significance of entrance thresholds and the availability of alternative admissions options.

For instance, the impact of high school performance as a determinant for university admission and the pursuit of advanced degrees are also relevant considerations (see [35; 51]). However, some research, such as that conducted by Collins et al. [17], highlights a contrasting trend, with students intending to pursue further education abroad. In their study, they found that 42.6% of international students selected universities aligned with their professional profiles, while only 18.3% regarded the host country's location as a significant factor. The research conducted by Hordosy and Szanyi [32] emphasizes the role of students' migration plans in their choice of institution. They note persistent inequalities within the Hungarian education system, revealing a strong correlation between students' socio-economic backgrounds and educational outcomes. These disparities affect career trajectories, as international student mobility often remains accessible only to more privileged students. Quinn [43] highlights that part-time students and men face the highest risks of dropout, indicating a need for higher education programs to address the diverse needs of their student populations through more student-centered approaches. In Angola, Soares [54] assessed the factors influencing students' institutional choices through focus group discussions. They identified several key areas: student characteristics, external factors, institutional factors, and marketing efforts. Students expressed their opinions on the importance of academic performance, influential individuals in their lives, financial support, institutional reputation, educational quality, tuition fees, scholarships, and job opportunities post-graduation. Interestingly, the students' rankings of higher education institutions did not always align with their actual choices, revealing differences in preferences among various age groups. Moreover, Singh's empirical study in Asia [17] explored international students' institutional choice patterns, concluding that socio-economic, environmental, and personal factors are pivotal. Many international students pursue education abroad not only for academic reasons but also for the experience and the aspiration to assume leadership roles upon returning home.

3.5 Role of Factors in Student Choice-Oriented Research and the Appearance of Marketing

The studies reviewed reveal that students' choices reflect the sociological values and interests commonly found in empirical research on higher education admissions. It is evident that institutional functioning strongly influences students' immediate ambitions. This norm-following, adaptive behaviour is apparent in career planning and university degree selection. Sipos et al. [51] identified five complex factors composed of several items influencing students' choices:

Goals and Commitment:

- 1) Influence of friends' behaviour
- 2) Compliance with parental expectations

- 3) Participant's motivation
- 4) Likelihood of successful admission and graduation
- 5) Proximity of residence.

Labour Market Expectations:

- 1) Availability of various study programs
- 2) Career development opportunities
- 3) Talent management services
- 4) Gaining experience in the labour market

Expenses and Costs:

- 1) Tuition fees
- 2) Daily living expenses
- 3) University life
- 4) Planning a life in the town

Attractiveness of Environment:

- 1) Quality of university life
- 2) Liveability of the university town

1. Institutional Quality:

- 1) Measures of the institution's objective quality as determined by various elements describing the institutional image

A study conducted by Torres and Hernández [55] in Colombia investigated the relationship between consumer-based brand equity viewing the university as a brand and students' intentions to persist in their educational institutions. This descriptive correlational study included 453 participants and assessed various factors related to persistence, as outlined by government education measures, alongside variables tied to the brand equity model. The findings revealed a positive correlation between internationalization processes and students' intentions to continue their education at the institution, suggesting that factors related to the university's global engagement can significantly influence student retention. Similarly, Palmer et al. [42] examined how a university's brand value is shaped by its location, social environment, cultural characteristics, and historical context. They posited that because each institution's social environment and culture are unique, brand value studies should be conducted in various contexts to achieve more nuanced insights. Consequently, the generalizability of results can be limited, as different institutions may yield diverse outcomes regarding brand value. Their study indicates that universities offering exceptional academic experiences are more likely to develop a strong brand identity, which fosters greater brand loyalty and support among students. Wilkins and Huisman [59] conducted research involving 407 students from nine international schools in the United Arab Emirates. Their findings highlighted the significance of personal relationships in shaping students' perceptions of institutions. Specifically, recommendations and feedback from peers emerged as the most influential factors in constructing institutional images. The study also found that elite institutions benefit from a positive image based on heritage and prestige, which extends to their international branch campuses. This suggests that the reputation and historical context of an institution play a crucial role in shaping student perceptions and preferences, especially for those considering studying at branch campuses abroad.

3.6 Getting into University: Psychological Aspects of the Meeting of Ideas and Reality

Students transitioning to university often have markedly different expectations compared to their high school experiences, which can lead to challenges in navigating the new environment. Lowe and Cook [37] supports this observation, revealing that the learning habits students develop

in secondary school persist throughout their first semester in university. They concluded that students struggle to bridge the gap between the two educational settings effectively. However, the study also indicated that the majority of students managed the transition without significant difficulties, suggesting that support structures may be in place for many. Nonetheless, a notable minority of students (20-30%) encountered persistent academic and personal challenges, making their university experience negative. Lowe & Cook emphasize that simply measuring dropout rates does not fully encapsulate the range of issues faced by first-year students. They argue that a lack of interest in academic work, often linked to feelings of disconnection from both educational and social processes, is a more telling indicator of struggle.

This disconnect suggests that universities' expectations may not align with students' preparation, which often relies on stereotypical assumptions of higher education, such as manageable academic demands and an engaging social life. Various motivations for attending university, including societal status, escape from home, previous academic performance, and job avoidance, can further complicate students' experiences. The researchers conducted two empirical surveys involving 2,519 university students in the first and 1,556 in the second, with 691 completing both questionnaires. Their findings highlighted that over one-third of students did not perceive teaching staff as helpful or friendly, and 41% found staff unsympathetic. These results underscore the need for universities to provide comprehensive academic, attitudinal, and social support for incoming students. Instead of viewing induction as a one-time event, it should be approached as an ongoing process that facilitates interaction among peer groups and staff. Implementing proactive engagement strategies and mentoring programs is crucial for easing this transition.

Experiential deficiencies can significantly impact students, particularly regarding social withdrawal, which may be influenced by factors like longstanding shyness, conflict avoidance, and antisocial behavior. McVarnock and Closson [39] complicates the narrative, revealing a negative effect of social withdrawal on motivation among university students but no strong link between shyness and academic performance. Shyness often correlates with anxiety stemming from negative self-evaluation, which in turn affects social adaptability and career self-management. According to Sette et al. [48], shy emerging adults may desire social interaction but often experience significant discomfort in social settings, particularly with unfamiliar peers. This discomfort can prevent them from seizing opportunities to develop their social and emotional skills, potentially exacerbating their anxiety and hindering their adjustment to the university environment.

3.7 The Importance of the Role of Self-Perception in University Student Life

The study by Herrera et al. [30] investigates the relationship between academic achievement and various psychological constructs, including self-concept, personality, and emotional intelligence, among 407 primary school students. The participants had an almost equal gender ratio, with 192 boys and 215 girls, and a majority of 265 students (65.1%) identified as Amazigh (Berber) origin. The research highlights significant variations in academic performance in Spanish language and literature, influenced by gender differences in self-concept, personality, and emotional intelligence. Among these, academic self-concept was found to have the most predictive power regarding subject performance. Bong and Clark [9] emphasize the importance of both self-efficacy and self-concept in evaluating academic performance. While self-efficacy pertains to task-specific performance assessments, self-concept encompasses a broader understanding of an individual's academic identity and social interactions. Schunk and Pajares [47] further differentiate between academic self-concept, relating to school performance, and social self-concept, which focuses on interpersonal relationships. Guay et al. [29] note that self-concept significantly impacts students' self-efficacy, making it an important area of study across all educational stages.

The five-factor model (OCEAN) of personality, articulated by McCrae and Costa [38], serves as a foundation for understanding how psychological traits such as emotional stability (neuroticism), extraversion, and openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness can influence academic outcomes. Herrera et al. [30] found that women scored higher in emotional intelligence, particularly in areas like managing and understanding emotions, which are crucial for academic success. Fenning and May [25] explored the distinct effects of self-efficacy and self-concept on first-year college students' academic performance. Their research revealed that general self-efficacy was the best predictor of students' overall performance, while specific academic competence was more closely related to current academic outcomes. They posited that school competence and output factors, rather than inherent abilities, predominantly determine academic performance. Chevalier et al. [16] examined how misperceptions about abilities affect students' educational aspirations.

Their study highlighted that students with positive self-assessments were more likely to pursue further education, while those who underestimated their abilities tended to enrol less frequently. This phenomenon is critical for understanding how cognitive biases can influence decision-making regarding higher education and career paths. Connor et al. [19] provided insights into the risks associated with overconfidence among students. Their qualitative analysis indicated that excessive self-assurance could lead students to pursue programs that may not align with their skills, potentially displacing more qualified candidates. This mismatch underscores the importance of realistic self-assessment in making informed educational choices. Chemers et al. [15] found little discrepancy between first-year college students' self-assessments and their instructors' evaluations, suggesting that the factors influencing student attitudes remain consistent from high school to college. The study points out that the educational environment plays a crucial role in shaping self-perception; for instance, students in better schools may receive more accurate feedback. Additionally, social class background can influence self-perception due to varying parental expectations, although it does not significantly affect the impact of self-perception on educational outcomes.

3.8 The Role of Self and Social Comparisons in Adaptation Strategies

The concept of the self plays a crucial role in individual decision-making, particularly in terms of survival and adaptation strategies. The self is shaped through interactions with the external world and by observing the strategies of others. According to Bernardi and Valdés [7], this is evident in the concept of "stickiness in expectations," which suggests that students from higher social positions often have elevated educational expectations. This phenomenon occurs particularly in societies where advancing to higher education is closely tied to maintaining social status. Valdés [57] elaborates on this by referencing Rational Action Theory, where students form their expectations based on information gathering, cost-benefit analysis, and the perceived risks of academic failure, which often correlate with their social background. Peer comparison emerges as a significant factor influencing personality development and self-esteem. This psychological mechanism affects individuals' judgments and behaviours, particularly when assessing their traits, abilities, and accomplishments relative to others. Dunning and Hayes [23] note that individuals tend to frame social qualities and categories to their advantage, focusing on behaviours and attributes that favourably depict their self-concepts. This inclination leads individuals to continuously compare themselves to their social environment, which in turn impacts their decision-making and characteristics.

Motivational reasons drive social comparisons, as individuals seek feedback on their traits and abilities, even when objective measures are available. They aim to create and maintain a positive self-image while pursuing self-improvement and avoiding failures, as noted by [20]. Festinger's

original theory from the 1950s has inspired numerous studies that examine how contemporary models validate or diverge from his concepts. Corcoran et al. explain that the utility of social comparisons can be limited, particularly when individuals draw comparisons with dissimilar others, as this may yield ambiguous or less informative insights. Wills [61] introduced the theory of downward comparisons, suggesting that individuals often seek standards lower than themselves to enhance their self-perception. Such comparisons, whether with peers or with one's past self, can serve to bolster a threatened self-view. This tendency is particularly relevant for university applicants; for instance, if a secondary school student aims only to marginally outperform classmates, it may hinder their overall performance and aspirations for the future. Social comparisons significantly shape cognition, motivation, and behaviour, and they are influenced by various cognitive, affective, and motivational factors. The existing research has primarily examined these influences in isolation, underscoring the need for a comprehensive perspective on the ubiquitous nature of social comparison. Blanton and Stapel [8] identify a third element in social comparison outcomes: the potential self.

This concept encapsulates all that a person may become at any moment, independent of their current attributes. Higher self-efficacy enables individuals to consider a broader range of career options and prepares them for future endeavours. Bong and Clark [9] emphasize that students' self-efficacy within the learning environment directly impacts their academic performance and career aspirations. The potential self plays a vital role in shaping self-efficacy; university students are more likely to perceive their career choices as attainable when they possess confidence in their academic and job search capabilities. According to Bandura [6], self-improvement is most effectively pursued by comparing oneself to higher standards. Corcoran et al. [20] argue that upward comparisons can serve as motivation and provide valuable insights into personal progress. Consequently, role models and positive examples become critical components of students' career development. By integrating the concepts of self-perception, social comparison, and the potential self, a more nuanced understanding of individual motivations and aspirations in the context of education and career choices emerges. This comprehensive approach can inform strategies for enhancing student self-efficacy, ultimately guiding them toward successful educational and career trajectories.

4 Conclusions and Limitations

This paper has established that understanding students' career choices necessitates a multifaceted approach that examines their characteristics and motivations. By exploring dimensions such as self-concept, self-efficacy, self-development, and the personal-social-potential self, we can more accurately map students' life paths and the underlying reasons for their decisions, as highlighted by research from [9], [25], [29], [30], [47], and [8]. While traditional research on higher education has often concentrated on achievement and success metrics, there is a growing emphasis on the socio-psychological factors influencing career choices, as noted by [51], [37], [19], and [15]. This perspective not only sheds light on the experiences that have shaped students' decisions but also highlights the necessity for new methodologies in empirical research concerning self, self-efficacy, and self-development. Moving beyond conventional sociological frameworks, integrating psychological insights and narrative analysis where personal experiences and social stimuli are interpreted will enrich this emerging field. As Shiller [49] asserts, narratives are inherently complex and challenging to analyse scientifically, yet quantitative methods may help illuminate their impact.

International literature extensively examines the motivations behind students' educational decisions, with diverse methodologies. Some studies adopt an institutional lens, treating universities as service providers and marketing entities (see [2; 18; 24]), while others investigate

the interplay between career management and psychological factors influencing decision-making and institutional dynamics (see [14; 21; 27; 41; 44; 56]). The implications of centralized versus decentralized systems are significant, with traditional administrative structures shaping students' institutional choices, particularly in contexts where socialization is pivotal for prospective university students. Research indicates that career goal formulation, planning, networking, and mobility orientation are crucial elements, yet often overlook students' behaviours and reactions. Despite this gap, insights into institutional management strategies to optimize student enrolment and retention remain valuable. A substantial body of work also focuses on student behaviour and decision-making, offering insights into attitudes and needs while revealing critical background factors (see [2; 22; 24; 32; 37; 42; 50; 55]).

Interestingly, when students select a university, the importance of educational and research qualifications often diminishes. Instead, local factors frequently emerge as pivotal determinants in career planning, sometimes overshadowing other considerations. Factors such as the new training and admission systems (e.g., variable entrance thresholds), limited admission alternatives, and plans for pursuing advanced degrees significantly influence students' perspectives (see [35; 51]). Moreover, psychological approaches highlight how self-image, self-efficacy, and issues like anxiety and self-esteem play critical roles in shaping career choices and dropout rates (see [7-9; 25; 29; 30; 47]). A multidisciplinary approach is vital for comprehensively understanding students' motivations and mind-sets. This complexity is further underscored by the need to ensure that the components of this investigation remain consistent and do not contradict one another. Continued research into self-image among anxious secondary school students may facilitate increased applications to higher education institutions (HEIs), suggesting a direct benefit for HEIs that understand how to alleviate social anxiety. The tendency for behaviour driven by risk avoidance and relative utility (often termed compensatory advantage) is prevalent (see [7; 23]). Yet, in certain contexts, social origin can significantly influence this behaviour. Parents of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds frequently set ambitious expectations, thereby shifting the responsibility of career planning to themselves and limiting the child's agency.

This dynamic might reflect a broader risk-avoidance strategy aimed at preserving family status. Peer influence, particularly from age-mates, plays a significant role in shaping students' personalities and self-assessments. The absence of effective coordination in external decision-making can lead to internal conflicts. Comparisons, a vital aspect of self-assessment, often occur later and can skew self-evaluation outcomes. The act of comparing oneself to the surrounding social environment is critical in shaping an individual's capabilities and decision-making processes (see [6; 20; 26]). Wills [61] theory of downward comparisons, discussed earlier, suggests that individuals can enhance their self-image by contrasting their achievements with those of others in less favourable situations. However, questions remain about the long-term implications of initial career decisions made under this framework, particularly concerning professional satisfaction, talent development, motivation-related challenges, mental balance, and potential burnout (see [8; 9]).

Our review indicates that institutional systems often adhere to traditional, static frameworks that do not fully accommodate individual self-determination and emerging needs. This challenge is partly rooted in institutional politics and a lack of clarity regarding students' intentions. By the time students enrol, they often make significant educational and career choices, complicating institutions' efforts to investigate the social, psychological, or sociological underpinnings of these decisions. Whether students are pursuing paths aligned with their talents and motivations may remain unclear throughout their university experience and potentially beyond. Given the various pressures associated with adulthood, such as family planning and the pursuit of stability, significant shifts in career paths are less likely to occur during university and may instead happen afterward.

Even with systems like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) facilitating academic transfers, the labour market increasingly values a general degree over specific qualifications. This flexibility necessitates a deeper understanding of students' evolving needs and aspirations among HEIs, which invest considerable resources in shaping stakeholder perceptions, primarily targeting potential students and their support networks. The holistic perspective of university applicants' decisions, primarily focusing on self-assessment, serves as a foundation for the next phase of research. This subsequent inquiry will involve detailed regional analyses that systematically consider sociocultural, economic, institutional, and management dimensions, as well as critical career guidance questions. This comprehensive methodology will enhance our ability to characterize national specificities accurately.

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