

# **Factors Affecting Bangladeshi Private University Students' Choice of Institutions for Undergraduate Study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In a highly populated country like Bangladesh where standards of living are rising steadily, more and more students are pursuing studies at university level. With only a few publicly funded universities, private universities are now the main avenue for pursuing undergraduate studies. Competition is growing among these universities operating in a heavily regulated sector. Substantial amounts are often being spent on attracting potential students. However, without proper research into the area and understanding how students choose their universities, resources may end up being used ineffectively. This conceptual paper aims to identify the factors that students consider when choosing their universities.

**KEYWORDS:** *Private Universities, University Choice, Bangladesh, Education*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, a densely populated country of 165 million people, which gained independence in 1971, is now on its way to officially leaving its less developed country (LDC) status and be recognised as a developing country (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). With development has come growing incomes of the populace. University education is now almost a must for much of the youth of Bangladesh, but also to find much needed jobs as noted in the Bangladesh Tertiary Education Sector Review (World Bank, 2019)

To serve these growing needs, many private universities have started operating around the country. According to the University Grants Commission, (UGC), the supervisory government body in charge of universities, Bangladesh now has 103 private universities operating mostly in the capital city, Dhaka, but also in the other major cities. These universities are strictly monitored by the University Grants Commission or the UGC. The industry is also very competitive: costs are high as the government has given an ultimatum to these universities to locate in (at least) 1-acre campuses of their own land (termed permanent campuses). Land is quite expensive in this small but densely populated country, especially in Dhaka. According to Islam, Mitra, Shohag and Rahman (2007), the value of land in Dhaka City has increased at a rate higher than the rate of any other commodity. Between 1990 and 2000, land values increased by an average of 22.26% per year, and the next decade saw about 74% of yearly increase in Dhaka (Alam, 2018). Alam (2018) cites various studies that compare cities of some neighboring South Asian countries showing that the average percentage increase in land value per year was the highest in Dhaka (74%), followed by Karachi (70%), and Kolkata and Kathmandu (50% for both).

In the year 2017, the ultimatum was given from the UGC to shift to permanent campuses by December 30 of that year, or action was to be taken against non-compliant universities (Iraj, 2017).

All universities want good quality students. But meritorious students are arguably in short supply. Private universities are not thought to generally attract the most meritorious students as public universities tend to be the first choice by admission seekers. (Alam, Haque, & Siddique, 2007). Also, because the private universities are all relatively new, alumni donations are almost non-existent. These universities must therefore look for better marketing strategies to attract more of the small pool of meritorious students to their universities. Thus, it is very important to understand how the students are choosing their universities.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There does not seem to have been much research into this area in the Bangladeshi context; this research is thought to be a pioneering one. Hence, the literature review has mainly been limited to a study of the international sphere.

Bangladesh is well on its way to being recognised as a developing country. A report released by HSBC Global research has suggested that Bangladesh will become the 26<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world by 2030 (Rahman, 2018). According to the report Bangladesh will grow to a \$700 billion economy by 2030. The report based its projections on 6 main types of economic indicators which include human capital (consisting of education and healthcare).

Evidently, the education sector has a crucial role to play in the development of Bangladesh and there has been a fast growth in the private university education sector (Alam, Haque & Siddique, 2007). From the first private university being set up in 1992, 52 had sprung up by 2003 (Alam, Haque & Siddique, 2007). The number at present is 103 (UGC, 2019). In a very competitive and dynamic environment, universities are thus vying for the relatively small pool of more meritorious students as it is only by having the best students that academic standards can be maintained; university reputation is usually tied to the future careers of the graduates (National Centre for Universities and Business, 2014). Obviously, good students have higher chances of being hired by reputable organisations (Sarwar, 2016).

Marketing strategies are thus crucial to success. To adopt the right strategies however, one must understand the decision-making process of the students in choosing their universities. Institutional factors that affect students' choices in higher education become pertinent to the marketing strategy for students' recruitment of higher educational institutions (Ming, 2010). of all, one must address the question as to whether the university student can be thought of as a "consumer" of a "product". There is much disagreement on this. Brennan (2001) noted: Institutional services such as universities, hospitals and government services are in a unique position, as the decision to attend may not be made by the 'consumer.' For example, the decision to attend a particular university is not only dependent on the student's choice, but also may be informally made by the student's antecedent subject selection." Furthermore, the university will 'select' students who are likely to succeed within the study environment, and who meet selection criteria within a competitive context. (p. 7) Brennan meant that first of all the student is choosing what he/she wants to study, and then chooses the university. Secondly, the student just doesn't select a university, but the university also chooses to admit or not admit the student. Thus, it is even more crucial to look at the decision-making process to attend a university carefully, as it is quite different from a usual market decision made by a consumer of other freely available products and services where buyers are not restricted from accessing the product. There is also the fact that students in most cases do not usually pay for their

education – their parents do. So, questions arise as to who the ultimate consumer is who should be targeted, the student, or the parents.

A study conducted of Malaysian universities on institutional factors that influence students' decision with regard to university education concluded that they include location, academic programme, college reputation, educational facilities, cost, availability of financial aid, employment opportunities, advertising and university representatives making visits to high schools and campus visits (Ming, 2010).

Another study conducted in the US identified as important in the decision of choosing a university the institution's reputation (judged as reputable if known intelligent students from same school attended that institution), friendliness and personal attention directed by admissions staff, siblings' opinion and letters specially designed and sent to parents (Hayes, 1989). Other factors identified by Hayes included the cost and the influence of school guidance counsellors. One of the things that Hayes emphasised was the importance of recruiting top students from different schools as it seems to have a trickle-down effect of improved perception of the university's reputation attended by them. Another thing that is emphasised is to use language in promotional material directed specifically at parents and make marketing efforts especially to them as they may be looking at other factors than the students themselves.

According to Hayes (1989), the campus tour is the most important component of the selection process for the students. He mentions that "it must be well planned, provide access to high interest elements on campus, be directed by highly energetic and knowledgeable guides and be designed to make the recruit feel welcome and at home".

A study conducted in Italy suggests that changes in socio-demographic features are important to students' choice and are one of the key challenges that universities face (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010).

Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, (2010) first define the university "product" which can be seen as a bundle of university related attributes and include the following:

- a) physical goods which include physical facilities, recreational amenities, etc.
- b) the sensual service basically provided by the teaching ability of faculty
- c) the psychological service which consists of knowledge, courtesy and ability to inspire trust, confidence, providing help and attention, etc.

In their study, Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, (2010) point out the significance of advertising techniques and say that students "expect them to advertise and create an awareness of their offerings". According to these researchers, word-of-mouth and the web site are key influencers, with much less importance being attached to other print literature given to the target market. They urge that universities need to be clear about their positioning and the image they want to convey to their public.

A study conducted in the UK by Mangan, Hughes, Davies and Slack (2010), tested if there is an association between social class and students' choice of university. According to them, social class does not directly affect choice of university. However, they note that students from working-class backgrounds are more likely to restrict their choice to a nearby university so that they can live at home during the period of their undergraduate study.

A similar study conducted in Bangladesh looked at the influence of cultural capital (non-economic social assets – educational/ intellectual, that may promote social mobility beyond economic means) on higher education in Bangladesh. This study (conducted on only two universities: one public and one private) found that parents' education and cultural capital influenced choice of university - public/ private, but not the student's own cultural capital. (Lata, 2013). Lata also concluded that male students were more likely to choose public university over private university choices than female ones. This study also found a link between parents' level of education and admission of students in public/ private universities. It found that a bigger percentage of private university students had parents with post graduate degrees. This stands to reason, as private university education is markedly more expensive so less educated parents are unlikely to be able to afford it. The study also reported a higher percentage of students believed their university to be the best for public university as opposed to the private university (Lata, 2013).

Brennan (2001) noted in her study conducted in Australia that there are students who are not active searchers in the decision-making process. This means institutions cannot rely on all prospective students having access to and/or understanding the information provided by the various bodies. Neither can they rely on high performing students being better informed than others (Brennan, 2001). According to Brennan, the most important source of information to prospective students is interpersonal sources. However, few students rely on formal sources of interpersonal information (such as people from universities and career-related contacts).

This seems to suggest that word-of mouth or reputation of a university is of paramount importance, and universities should not just rely on advertising or admissions related marketing activities which are not necessarily thought of as objective sources of information.

Another study conducted in the USA examined factors influencing the pursuit of higher education in first-generation college students. These factors include family influence, secondary school support, peer influence, preparation for college, awareness and access to financial aid, and relative functionalism (Coy-Ogan, 2009). Most of the factors are self-explanatory. The ones that may be a bit ambiguous are preparation for college which referred to working on high school grades, passing entrance requirements like SATs etc. Relative functionalism referred to the long-term benefits and impact of a university education. The study concluded that first-year, first-generation college students perceived family influence and preparation for college to be less powerful factors affecting their pursuit of higher education than students from college-educated families.

A Malaysian study on influencing factors while selecting a university and programmed of study concluded that suitability of the field with the internal values of individuals, a good reputation of the university and career opportunities are the main factors that influence students (Misran, et al., 2012).

### **3. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE**

The study aims to identify and explore the factors that affect Bangladeshi students' choice of private universities for undergraduate study through literature review and focus group discussion. Most of the private universities are in the capital city Dhaka (UGC, 2019), and the study included undergraduate students of different private universities of Dhaka only.

### **4. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

This paper is timely as more and more attention is targeted towards the quality and effectiveness of tertiary education in Bangladesh as it is key to its further economic development. At present, in the highly competitive private sector, substantial amounts are often being spent on attracting potential students. But without proper research into the area, a waste of resources may be occurring without being effective, that is not resulting in the attraction of the right quality students.

### **5. METHODOLOGY**

This preliminary study is exploratory in nature and qualitative in method. Literature on the relevant issues of the study were reviewed from different sources e.g. journal articles, books, reports, theses/dissertation and various other sources found on the internet. A broad conceptual idea of the issue has been developed through literature review in the first phase of the study. In conjunction, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method has been used with participants (undergraduate students) from different private universities of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The participants were first / second year undergraduate students of different disciplines e.g. business, science and humanities. The outcomes of the FGD were used to refine the initial concepts developed in the first phase and come up with a conceptual framework. This is to later form the basis of further quantitative studies.

### **6. FINDINGS:**

The findings of the study are given below.

#### *6.1 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION*

The Focus Group Discussion, (FGD) was held on 25 October 2018, with 11 undergraduate students from 4 different private universities of Dhaka. The participants came from BRAC University, International University of Business Information & Technology (IUBAT), State University of Bangladesh (SUB) and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). They were asked mostly open-ended questions where they were probed on different issues about how they chose their own universities and what some of the influencing factors were. The discussion lasted 2.5 hours.

The students were chosen from a variety of backgrounds and universities. Several individuals reached out to their contacts to help recruit students for the FGD to reduce selection bias. The ideal size of a focus group for this kind of topic is small (some suggest about five to ten participants) as large groups are difficult to control and they limit each person's opportunity to share insights and observations.

The purpose of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Thus, this FGD was also not arranged to generalize about the population but to gather insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation.

The sampling was not random but purposive/selective. The findings, though not generalizable at this stage, can be used to gather trends and develop a stronger understanding of the topic before a more in-depth quantitative study is undertaken later.

Some of the qualitative data that emerged are described here.

Most female students were restricted in their choices by their parents (usually the father). Their parents greatly influenced where they ended up studying. One female student was married, and her university was chosen by her husband.

Older cousins and siblings were also another important source of influence. So were friends.

A trend that emerged was that the private university students in the vast majority of cases (with rare exceptions) had not chosen their current institution as their first choice. Public universities were generally their first choice because of low cost and higher reputation. They targeted those first, didn't qualify, and then chose their current university. Only one male and two female students chose to study in their current institute without considering public universities. The male student gave up a University of Dhaka (considered by many to be the best university in the country) offer as he preferred the CSE program of his current university - BRAC; one of the female students from ULAB was just very impressed and trusted the good things she heard from relatives already studying here. The other female student wanted to do a professional degree like ACCA with another institute and is doing a BBA with ULAB as a "backup".

Outdoor open space and greenery was everyone's idea of a proper campus. Many liked their university (e.g. IUBAT) for having one, loved the fresh air and views afforded by having an out-door open area (many private universities started out in city campuses without fields/greenery). Those students who didn't have it, saw it as a negative for their current university for not having one yet (BRAC University which operated mainly from the city campus at the time of writing this paper). The BRAC University students did get to experience open air and space during one term only (located off campus in Rajendrapur) and thought it was the

highlight of their university life. They strongly regretted that it was only for a single term. ULAB students preferred their permanent campus for the open spaces and outdoor greenery to their city campuses in Dhanmondi. ULAB students currently have classes in both the city campus and the permanent campus.

The students opined that they would find marketing material such as advertisements more impressive if they had pictures of fields and greenery as this was something, they did not have the privilege of having in day-to-day urban life. About half the students still read newspapers. Social media marketing through Facebook etc., was looked at by about a quarter of the students present.

Location was a very strong common thread in how the choice was made. Students chose the university that was close by generally to reduce commuting hassles (as traffic and safety was a big problem to many students). One student was actually admitted to a public university in Barisal (another district of Bangladesh), as he didn't manage to pass the admission tests to University of Dhaka and was very unhappy with the choice (chosen by father) and rebelled there (drugs/violence). Finally, saw the light through influence of older brother who put him into a private university chosen for being out of the way and secluded (IUBAT) which was in Dhaka (which he liked much better than Barisal).

The students from State University did not look forward to their university relocating on the outskirts of Dhaka City. They felt that many students would take transfers to other universities when this happens in future.

Only a couple of students chose their university for their programme (the BRAC University student enrolled in CSE programme mentioned earlier). The student who had chosen to do ACCA also chose the programme first, then the institute.

One student had an interesting source of influence. His father wanted him to be a doctor but he himself had no interest in this profession. Upon one day meeting a doctor, the father shared his aspirations for his son with the doctor and the doctor surprisingly suggested to the father to let him study what he wanted. As the father respected the doctor he went along with the son's wishes finally.

Though most preferred public universities, two of the students mentioned they were put off by violent/ disruptive student political activities in public universities.

A well-known top private university (one of the pioneers in the private sector) no longer seemed a top choice of students - for being located far from the city and secondly, for the bad image caused by perceived terrorist links.

Another interesting finding (or lack thereof) was the complete lack of mention of accreditation by foreign bodies as a factor by the students attending the FGD. This is pertinent as significant efforts (financial and otherwise) are being made in getting accredited by foreign



bodies by many private universities. Perhaps it is related to the fact that these students see their future in Bangladesh, and employers here don't require foreign accreditation of the candidate's university as a condition for employment. This needs to be the subject of further studies and separate research on why this is so.

Almost none of the students regretted their current choice of university though they did negatively perceive such elements such as lack of outdoor campus or lack of efforts to improve public/ employers' perception or reputation of their own universities.

## 6.2 Conceptual Model

From the FGD, some of the key factors that appear to influence choice are given in the form of a model.

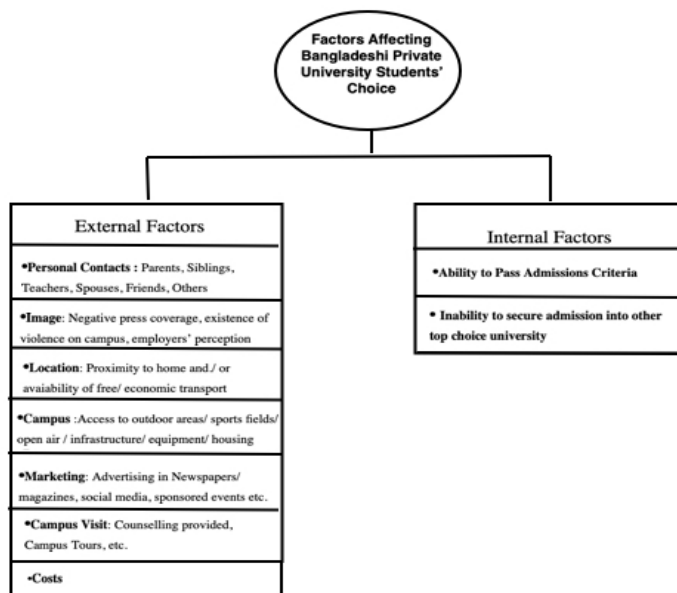


Figure 1: Factors Affecting Bangladeshi Private University Students' Choice of Institution

## 7. FINAL THOUGHTS

This paper has looked into Bangladeshi private university undergraduate students' process of choosing their university and which factors affect the final decision. In this paper, a first phase of this research has been presented i.e. the literature review, FGD, conceptual framework etc. With the conceptual framework of factors developed, the kinds of factors to be taken into account by universities when they market themselves to potential students have been identified. These have to be later studied statistically.

This paper is timely as more and more attention is targeted towards the quality and effectiveness of tertiary education in Bangladesh as it is key to its further economic

development. At present, in the highly competitive private sector, substantial amounts are often being spent on attracting potential students. But without further research into the area, resources may end up being used without being effective, that is not resulting in the attraction of the right students. A case in point is the foreign accreditation effort by private universities, expensive endeavors, which surprisingly don't appear to affect students' choices greatly, but which would perhaps result in increasing the future fees students end up paying.

This paper is a starting point to what does actually matter. A further quantitative follow-up study should be conducted (so that the findings can be generalized) based on the factors already identified to see which of the factors influence to what extent the choice of university of private university students; and also, to find out which factors have no influence at all, but universities may be spending substantial efforts on at present.

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