

Factors Influencing Students' Choice of University: Evidence from a Selected Faculty of Management at a State University in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Students are selected for state universities from the General Certificate of Examination (Advanced Level) in Sri Lanka based on a merit-based quota system that uses the Z-score obtained at the examination. University admission depends on the Z-score, students' order of preference, and district quotas. Despite the Z-score-based admission system, recent trends indicate a noticeable shift in students' preferences when selecting universities. However, there is a dearth of empirical evidence explaining the reasons behind this changing pattern within state universities in Sri Lanka. This study investigates the key factors influencing students' choice of a state university for higher education. Using quantitative research methods, the study selected a management faculty of a leading state university in Sri Lanka. A sample of 132 first-year undergraduates from the 2024/2025 batch was selected from a population of 1,320 students enrolled in the selected management faculty. Data were collected through an online survey using a structured questionnaire, and both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that university reputation and facilities are the most crucial factors influencing students' university selection. The results are beneficial for students in making decisions regarding their higher education. The findings are also valuable for policymakers and university administrators in designing and planning higher education strategies. This study represents an initial attempt to explain why students' preferences are changing in the selection of state universities within the context of the free education system in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Higher Education, Sri Lanka, State Universities, University Choice

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Study and the Problem Identification

Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' career paths, social mobility, and personal development. It not only improves employability but also

contributes to innovation, civic engagement, and national economic growth (Perna, 2006, as cited in UNESCO, 2023).

The Sri Lankan education structure consists of five stages: primary, junior secondary, senior secondary, collegiate, and higher education. Primary education spans five years, from Grade 1 to Grade 5. Junior secondary education covers Grades 6 to 9, while senior secondary education includes Grades 10 and 11, which prepare students for the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) [G.C.E. (O/L)] examination. Students who wish to pursue higher education must pass the G.C.E. (O/L) to enter the collegiate level, where they study for two additional years (Grades 12 and 13) before sitting for the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) [G.C.E. (A/L)] examination. Based on their performance in this examination, students may then progress to higher education.

Higher education in state universities is free of charge and highly competitive in Sri Lanka. Admission to state universities is based on the Z-Score, a standardized score derived from students' results in the G.C.E. (A/L) examination. The Z-Score determines university entrance eligibility across districts (UGC, 2023), with priority given to top scorers from each district. Among the seventeen state universities in Sri Lanka students select specific universities due to numerous factors in addition to the Z-score criteria. Students can apply to their preferred university as per the instructions of the University Grant Commission.

This study examines the significant factors affecting students' choice of a university among undergraduates studying in the Faculty of Management at a selected state university. First-year undergraduates were selected because they are the most recent cohort to have completed the university selection process and therefore possess the most accurate and relevant insights into the factors influencing their decision-making. Although the Z-Score is the official basis for university admission, students also consider several other factors when expressing their university preferences, such as institutional reputation, facilities available at the institution, career prospects, influence from family and friends, and the communication efforts undertaken by universities (Emon et al., 2023; Agrey & Lampadan, 2014).

In the Sri Lankan state university system, eleven universities offer degree programmes in Management. Among them, the selected university, hereafter referred to as State University A, is reputed as a center of excellence in management education. In the past, students who obtained the highest marks at the G.C.E. (A/L) examination tended to apply to State University A. The degree programmes offered by the Faculty of Management of State University A are among the most reputed programmes recommended for students who have completed the G.C.E. Advanced

Level examination in the Commerce stream. Accordingly, over the years, State University A has consistently been ranked as a leading university in the field of Management studies in Sri Lanka. Therefore, a large number of students who completed the G.C.E. (A/L) examination in the Commerce stream have selected State University A as their first preference for higher education

Another state university, hereafter referred to as State University B, which is reputed as a higher education institution for engineering, has established a Faculty of Management in 2017 for students who have excelled in the Commerce stream of the Advanced Level examination.

In 2023 and 2024, students who received the highest marks at the G.C.E. (A/L) examination selected this management faculty as their first preference, rather than the faculty that had usually received this preference, as shown in Table 01.

The following statistics indicate the percentage of students selecting State University A, State University B, and other state universities. Accordingly, out of the top 400 ranked students in the G.C.E. (A/L) examination, 55 students selected State University B (Dean of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC), State University A, 2024).

Table 01: Distribution of the Top Four Hundred Ranked Students to Universities

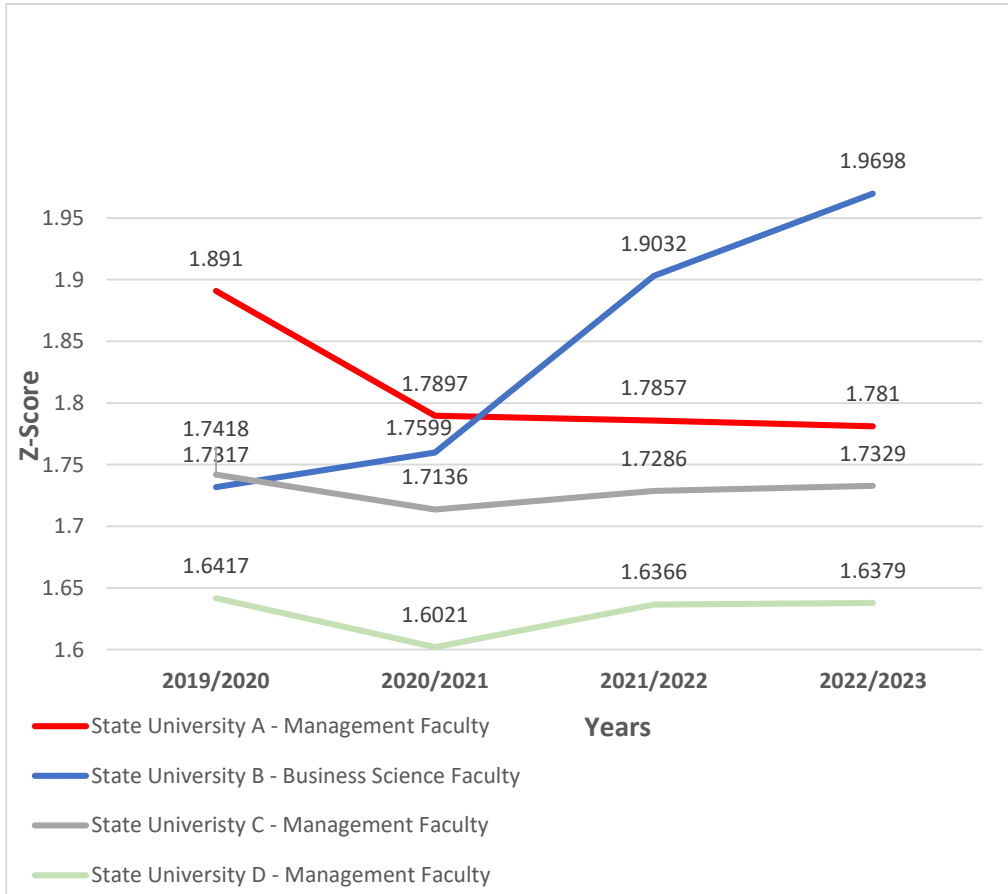
Top-ranked students from the GCE Advanced Level Examination	Selected State University (A)	State University (B)	Other Universities
1-100	70	22	8
101-200	85	08	7
201-300	79	14	7
301-400	80	11	9
Total	314	55	31

Source: Dean of FMSC, State University A (2024)

Further, according to the statistics of the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Z-score required for admission to State University A has decreased, while the Z-score required for the Business Science degree at State University B has increased considerably. According to *University Admissions – Academic Year 2022/2023* (2023), the minimum Z-score required for the Management degree at State University A was 1.7810, while the minimum Z-score for the Business Science degree at State University B was 1.9698 in the 2022/2023 academic year. In comparison, during the 2019/2020 academic year, the minimum Z-score for State University A was 1.8391,

whereas it was 1.7317 for State University B. For comparison purposes, the Z-scores of State University C and State University D are also presented in Figure 01.

Figure 01: Z-score distribution in State University A, State University B, State University C, and State University D



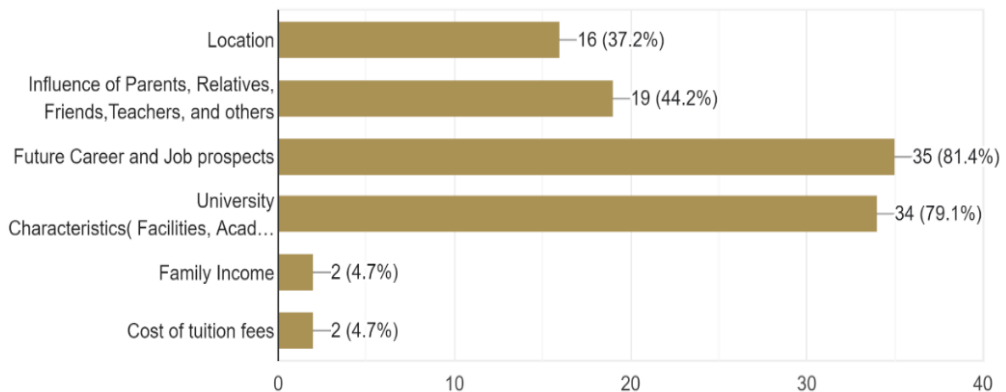
Source: University Admission - Academic Year 2022/2023

Further, a pilot study was conducted on 28 February 2024 using an online questionnaire to identify factors beyond the Z-score that influenced students' selection of State University B. The pilot study involved forty-three first-year undergraduates from the Faculty of Business at State University B. The results indicated that the two reputed universities considered by the respondents were State University A and State University B. Out of the forty-three participants, thirty-eight identified State University B as their first choice, while five selected State University A

Figure 02: Most Influential Factors Affecting Selection of State University B
Source: Preliminary Investigation (28/02/2024)

5) Which factors influences the most when selecting University of Moratuwa for your tertiary education other than your z-score? (you can select 2 or more factors)

43 responses



The results further indicated that, apart from the Z-score, the most influential factors affecting the choice of State University B were future career and job prospects, university reputation, facilities, influence of others, and location. Family income and tuition-related costs were found to be less significant. Overall, future career and job prospects emerged as the greatest influencing factor in the preliminary investigation. Figure 2 illustrates this information.

Due to the lack of research on students' choices for higher education, specifically regarding state universities and management faculties, this study will examine the key factors influencing students' decisions in selecting a state university for higher education in Sri Lanka.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the key factors influencing students' choice of a management faculty for higher education?
2. Which factors have the greatest influence on students' choice of university for higher education in Sri Lanka?

1.3. Significance of the Study

The novelty of this study lies in identifying the determinants that influence university choice within the context of free education. This study contributes to the higher education literature in Sri Lanka by integrating socio-psychological and institutional perspectives, as prior empirical research in this area has been limited. The findings will be useful to educational policymakers, students and parents, teachers, and career advisors in making informed decisions. University administrators can also use the findings to improve facilities and optimize resource allocation. At the policy level, the study supports education policymakers in developing strategies that better address students' needs and enhance both access to and the quality of higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Higher Education

Higher education, also known as tertiary education, refers to the level of education that comes after secondary (high school) education and usually consists of colleges, universities, and technical institution (UNESCO, 2023). Higher education refers to education at a college or university where subjects are studied in great detail and at an advanced level (Cambridge Dictionary).

2.2. State Universities in Sri Lanka

State universities are higher education institutions established, funded, and primarily governed by the Government of Sri Lanka to provide public access to tertiary education. They are formally defined by the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978, which outlines their nature and governs them under specified academic responsibilities. The University Grants Commission (UGC) oversees these institutions, allocating resources and ensuring quality across universities. State universities, as public institutions, play a central role in developing the country's human capital through undergraduate and postgraduate education, research, and contributions to social and economic development.

2.3. Theories Related to Student University Choice

There are several theories explaining the choice of state universities, including Chapman's theory of student college choice and the combined model theory by Hossler et al.

2.3.1. Chapman's Theory of Student College Choice

Chapman's (1981) model of student college choice provides a systematic account of how students make decisions regarding university selection. The model classifies the volitional constructs influencing university choice into two groups: student characteristics, which include socio-economic status, high school performance,

ability, and educational aspirations; and external influences, which are further divided into three categories: (a) the influence of key individuals (family, friends, teachers), (b) the static characteristics of a university (e.g., reputation, location, course offerings), and (c) the communication efforts made by the university. Research by Alston et al. (2019) and Clayton (2013) has examined university selection decisions using this framework with different student groups. Since these researchers have applied this theory in their studies, Chapman's model serves as a fundamental framework for this study.

2.3.2. Theory of Combined Model by Hossler et al. (1989)

Hossler and colleagues' econometric-sociological model explains students' higher education choices by integrating economic expectations, personal aspirations, and sociocultural influences, such as parental guidance and peer pressure. This model is particularly useful for the present study because it supports the inclusion of variables such as career prospects, university reputation, facilities, and social influence. It will guide the conceptual framework and help interpret how both individual and social factors shape students' selection of universities. The model provides a holistic understanding of decision-making by capturing both economic and social dimensions.

2.4. Empirical Research

Several factors identified by previous scholars in this regard are discussed in the following sections.

2.4.1. University Reputation

University reputation and institutional image have consistently emerged as among the most influential determinants of students' university choice in both international higher education and developing-country contexts. Institutional reputation serves as a signal of academic quality, credibility, and future returns, influencing students' perceptions of a university's prestige, value, and graduate employability (Spence, 1973). Universities with strong reputations for academic quality, qualified academic staff, and positive public perception tend to attract more applicants and rank higher on students' lists of preferred institutions (Chapman, 1981). Moreover, a university's reputation affects students' expectations regarding the recognition of their degrees in the labor market. In competitive higher education systems, reputation remains a critical non-academic factor considered by prospective students when choosing where to study (Veloutsou et al., 2004; Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2017; Wijesinghe et al., 2023).

2.4.2. University Facilities

Modern lecture theatres, library and laboratory facilities, technological infrastructure, and sports and recreational amenities are important considerations for students, as they enhance both the quality of education and overall student life. A safe and conducive learning environment, supported by adequate technology, improves the student experience and facilitates effective teacher–student interaction by enabling efficient teaching and learning processes (Temple et al., 2014). Research further indicates that students associate the quality of infrastructure with both academic and personal development. It has been identified as a significant factor influencing university choice, particularly within public university systems (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014; Ming, 2010; Weerasinghe & Dedunu, 2017).

2.4.3. Future Career and Job Prospects

Future career prospects rank highly in students' decision-making processes, with many preferring universities that enhance graduate employability through strong industry connections, internship opportunities, and career guidance services. Universities are often favored based on employment-related outcomes, reflecting the importance of their ability to support graduates' career development (Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). Institutions with higher graduate employability rates and stronger links to the labor market tend to receive more positive evaluations from prospective students (Emon et al., 2023; Sarkodie et al., 2020).

2.4.4. Influence of Others

Parents, friends, teachers, or other career influences, have a contributing but rather inconsistent part in the process of higher educational choice (Hossler et al., 1989). Unofficial communication, or 'word-of-mouth,' is involved in the formation of an individual's perception regarding quality, life, and educational credibility associated with a chosen institution (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Though these other influences are less likely to finally influence decision-making, they tend to support, undermine, or suggest alternatives to some choices through guidance, endorsement, or experiential knowledge (Shanka, & Taylor, 2005; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

2.4.5. College Efforts to Communicate with Students

Institutional communication and marketing activities impact the image of universities as presented to prospective students. Communications through Open Days, institutional websites, leaflets, and social networks are key in informing potential students about the offerings of the institution (Ivy, 2008). Communication is useful in projecting an institution's visibility and shaping students' first impressions in an institution. However, its significance is generally less pronounced compared to other

core characteristics such as institutional reputation, infrastructure, and job placement. Marketing is more successful if it strengthens an existing positive image of an institution rather than being the deciding factor itself (Pampaloni, 2010; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Sidin et al., 2003).

2.4.6. Cost

Tuition, availability of scholarships, and affordability constitute key factors when selecting a university across all education systems, although their interrelationship varies notably in those systems that do not fully subsidize tertiary education. However, even in systems with partial or full public funding, indirect costs and financial support mechanisms may still affect students' decisions (Perna, 2006). Empirical studies indicate that affordability and access to financial aid contribute to students' ability to pursue higher education, although their relative importance may be lower in countries with free public university systems (Ming, 2010; Emon et al., 2023). Cost is not related to this study in the context of, the free educational system.

Overall, empirical literature indicates that the choices available to students in higher education are influenced by a range of factors, including reputation and facilities, career opportunities, economic considerations, social influences, and communication (Emon et al., 2023). While international literature highlights reputation, employment prospects, and infrastructure as key determinants, studies in the Sri Lankan context also emphasize student satisfaction and the quality of academic staff (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018). Although the primary criterion for university admission in Sri Lanka is the Z- Score system, the literature suggests that non-academic factors also play a significant role in shaping student preferences. However, there is a lack of empirical research examining the relative impact of these factors within management faculties of state universities operating under a free education system.

3. Methodology

3.1. Conceptual Framework

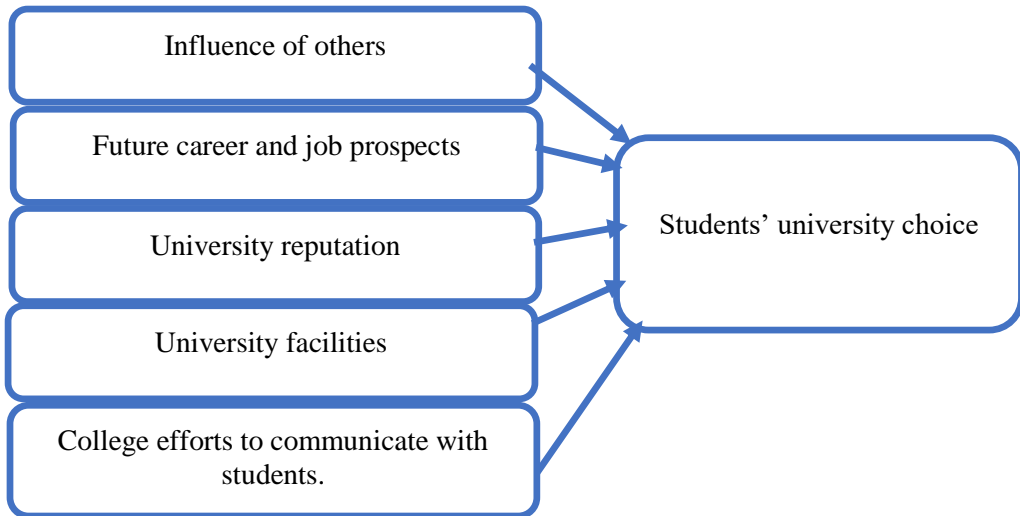
The theoretical framework for this study is developed based on the combined model proposed by Hossler et al. (1989) and Chapman's (1981) model of student college choice, along with empirical research on university choice. It also draws on additional sources such as Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Joseph and Joseph (2000), Harvey et al. (1992), Veloutsou et al. (2004), Aydin (2015), and Le et al. (2022).

In this study, university reputation, facilities, influence of others, future career and job prospects, and communication efforts are treated as independent variables, while university choice is considered the dependent variable. All variables were operationalized using validated indicators adapted from previous literature and

measured using a seven-point Likert scale to capture respondents' levels of agreement.

Thus, the factors included in the framework are theoretically substantiated and appropriate for quantitative analysis.

Figure 03: Conceptual Framework



3.2. Hypotheses Development

H1: The influence of others has a significant positive impact on students' university choice.

H2: Future career and job prospects have a significant positive impact on students' university choice.

H3: University reputation has a significant positive impact on students' university choice.

H4: University facilities have a significant positive impact on students' university choice.

H5: College communication efforts have a significant positive impact on students' university choice.

3.3. Research Approach

This study adopts a deductive approach using quantitative research methods. The target population consisted of 1,320 first-year undergraduates (2024/25 batch) from the Faculty of Management at the selected State University A, which is the top-ranked university in the field of management. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 10% of the population (132 students). First-year undergraduates were chosen because they are the most recent cohort to have made university choice decisions.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms (Google, n.d.), employing a seven-point Likert scale. In addition, SPSS version 22 was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models were applied to assess the relationships among variables and their significance in influencing university choice.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Analysis

The research sample for this study consists of a diverse and representative cross-section of first-year undergraduates at the selected State University A. The sample includes 132 students. Efforts were made to ensure that responses were collected without bias related to gender, race, income, or educational background. To achieve balanced representation, a random sampling method was employed.

Most of the first-year undergraduates who sat for the G.C.E. (A/L) examination in the Commerce stream are female students who chose to enroll in a state university. Out of the 132 students, 127 selected State University A, while the remaining students chose other universities. There are no missing values in this study.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

The descriptive statistics indicate that student university choice, university facilities, future career and job prospects, and university reputation all have mean values close to six, suggesting that respondents generally agreed with the statements related to these variables. In contrast, the influence of others and college efforts to communicate with students have mean values closer to five, indicating a moderately positive level of agreement. Overall, the results show stronger agreement for factors related to institutional quality and career prospects compared to social influence and communication efforts.

Table 02: Descriptive Statistics

	Student University Choice	University Facilities	Influence of Others	Future Career and Job Prospects	University Reputation	College Efforts to Communicate with Students
Mean	6.28	5.88	4.77	5.87	6.34	5.29
Median	6.88	6.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	5.0
Std. Deviation	1.06	.97	1.13	1.02	.94	.98

Source: Survey Data

Note: 7-point Likert scale fixed at ‘strongly disagree’ (1) and ‘strongly agree’ (7) has been used

According to Table 02, the variable *Influence of Others* has the highest standard deviation (1.13), indicating that it shows greater variability from the mean compared to the other variables. In contrast, *University Reputation* has the lowest standard deviation (0.94), suggesting that responses for this variable are comparatively less variable.

4.3 Reliability Analysis

For the reliability analysis, Cronbach's Alpha was used in this study to examine the internal consistency and reliability of the summed-up scales.

Table 03: Cronbach’s Alpha – Reliability Tests

Variable	Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of Items
Student University Choice	.912	4
University facilities	.827	4
Influence of others	.791	6
University reputation	.907	4
College efforts to communicate with students.	.731	5
Future career and job prospects	.940	5

Source: Survey Data

Student university choice, which is the dependent variable, has a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.912. According to George and Mallery (2003), this indicates excellent internal consistency for that scale. Each of the independent variables has a

Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. Therefore, all scales used in this study exceeded the 0.7 threshold, and no items were eliminated.

4.4. Validity

In this study, content validity was established through a thorough review of existing literature. The measurement items were developed based on multiple dimensions identified in prior studies. A seven-point Likert scale was used as the survey instrument to capture a full range of responses. Face validity was ensured by developing the items for each variable based on well-established studies, including Joseph and Joseph (2000), who identified key determinants of student choice in higher education, and Le et al. (2022), who provided updated empirical measures relevant to the study context. Additionally, the questionnaire was reviewed by a diverse group of potential respondents to ensure that the items were clear, relevant, and appropriate.

To ensure the adequacy of the sample for the constructs and the suitability of the data for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test were employed. A KMO value above 0.50 is considered the minimum for conducting factor analysis, while values above 0.70 are regarded as good, and values above 0.80 indicate very good sampling adequacy (Hair et al., 2019). Bartlett's test, on the other hand, assesses whether the correlation matrix significantly differs from an identity matrix (Bartlett, 1954). A result is considered significant when $p < 0.05$, indicating that the variables are sufficiently correlated to justify factor analysis. In this study, the KMO values for all variables exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, demonstrating adequate sampling adequacy for each construct. Furthermore, Bartlett's test was highly significant for all variables ($p < 0.001$), confirming the presence of significant intercorrelations among them. These validity assessments strengthen confidence in the reliability and interpretability of the research results.

4.5 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between each independent variable and students' university choice. This relationship is easily identifiable as it is represented by the symbol r and typically expressed as a unitless value ranging between -1 and +1.

Table 04 presents the correlation between students' university choice and the variables that influence undergraduates' decisions. The independent variables of university reputation and university facilities exhibit a significant moderate positive relationship, whereas influence of others, future career and job prospects, and college efforts to communicate with students show a low positive correlation.

Table 04: Correlation Analysis

		1	2	3	4	5	6
Student_University_ Choice (1)	Pearson	1					
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N	132					
University Facilities (2)	Pearson	.531**	1				
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	N	132	132				
Influence_of_Others (3)	Pearson	.254**	.369**	1			
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.000				
	N	132	132	132			
Future_Career_and_ Job_Prospect (4)	Pearson	.493**	.491**	.338**	1		
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
	N	132	132	132	132		
University_Reputati on(5)	Pearson	.579**	.532**	.253**	.683**	1	
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.003	.000		
	N	132	132	132	132	132	
College_efforts_to_ communicate_with_ students(6)	Pearson	.378**	.456**	.470**	.370**	.399**	1
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	132	132	132	132	132	132

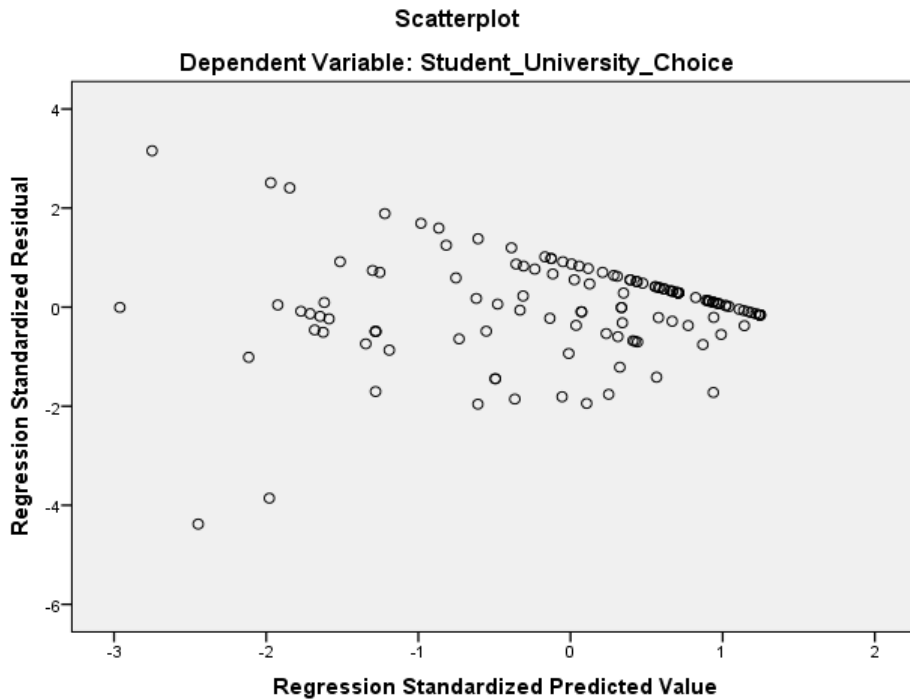
Source: Survey Data

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 04 above shows that the factors were determined to be significant in relation to first-year undergraduates' university choice at a 95% confidence level. Since the significance values of the above-mentioned parameters are less than 0.05, the correlations are considered statistically significant.

All positive correlation coefficients of the significant variables indicate a positive and meaningful relationship between each variable and students' university choice. University reputation and university facilities exhibit the highest moderate positive significant relationships with students' university choice, while the other variables also show positive significant relationships.

Figure 04: Residuals' Behavior



Source: Survey Data

According to the scatterplot diagram, standardized residuals are plotted against standardized predicted values. The residuals are randomly distributed without any systematic pattern, and there is no funnel shape present. Therefore, the variance of the residuals is constant, indicating an equal spread of residuals and homoscedasticity (Field, 2018).

Table 05: Collinearity Statistics

	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
University facilities	.613	1.632
Influence of others	.728	1.374
Future career and job prospects	.493	2.028
University reputation	.471	2.123
College efforts to communicate with students	.660	1.515

Source: Survey Data

Since all of the VIFs (Variance Inflation Factors) are less than 10, the collinearity statistics show that there is no multicollinearity issue and that the independent

variables are not perfectly or highly correlated (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, tolerance values add up to at least 0.1, confirming once more that there is no multicollinearity issue (Hair et al., 2019).

4.6 Regression Analysis

The Multiple Linear Regression model was used to examine the impact of individual factors on students' university choice.

Table 06: Individual Effects

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
University facilities	.288	.095	.263	3.032	.003
Influence of others	-.004	.074	-.005	-.058	.954
Future career and job prospects	.108	.100	.104	1.077	.284
University reputation	.376	.112	.334	3.367	.001
College efforts to communicate with students	.094	.089	.089	1.060	.291

Source: Survey Data

According to Table 06, university reputation ($\beta = 0.334$, $p = .001$) and university facilities ($\beta = 0.263$, $p = .003$) made significant positive contributions. Based on the standardized coefficients (beta values), the other factors; namely, influence of others, future career prospects, and college communication efforts, were not significant. University reputation is the most influential factor, as it has the highest absolute beta value.

Table 07: Model Summaries

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.646 ^a	.417	.394	.82358	1.803

Source: Survey Data

This shows an adjusted R^2 value of 0.394, indicating that 39.4% of the variance in student university choice is explained by the independent variables. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.803 confirms that the residuals are independent, and the ANOVA significance level ($p = 0.000$) indicates that the overall regression model is

statistically significant. Thus, the model is robust and explains a meaningful portion of students' university choice.

4.7 Discussion

The research found that university reputation and infrastructure/facilities are the two most influential drivers. These findings are supported by previous studies (Veloutsou et al., 2004; Ming, 2010). Specifically, these drivers align with the emphasis placed by Soutar and Turner (2002) on reputation as a critical determinant. Overall, the findings support several existing frameworks, such as Hossler et al.'s model, while also providing region-specific evidence. This alignment with earlier literature underscores the relevance of the study for policy formulation and for institutional strategy development. The lack of significance for other variables, according to the existing literature, may be due to the method of admitting students based on Z-Scores. However, future research with a larger sample is needed to confirm this phenomenon.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

The study examined the most significant factors affecting students' decisions when selecting a university. The findings revealed that students tend to be influenced by a university's reputation, preferring institutions with strong academic standards, renowned faculty, and widespread recognition of their brand. Another critical factor shaping students' university choices is the quality and availability of facilities. Modern infrastructure, well-equipped libraries, and recreational amenities are among the aspects that students consider important for enhancing their academic experience.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The study extends Chapman's Theory of Student College Choice (1981), which posits that both student characteristics and external influences impact college decisions. In the Sri Lankan context, the findings emphasize the central role of institutional reputation and facilities in the decision-making process. This suggests that university culture and context may be more influential than individual or social factors in determining student choice.

Additionally, the study partially confirms the combined model proposed by Hossler et al. (1989), which integrates economic and sociological perspectives to explain university choice. Among the economic factors, only university reputation aligns with the outcome-based decision-making emphasized in the economic model, while other significant influences, such as social factors and communication sources, reflect the sociological dimension of the framework. This indicates that the model is applicable in this context in a limited and selective manner rather than in its entirety.

Furthermore, the study contributes significantly to the literature on higher education in developing countries. Unlike most research on university choice, which has been conducted in developed countries with distinct educational infrastructures and decision-making processes, this study provides critical insights into how students in Sri Lanka make university decisions. It offers a valuable basis for comparison with future studies in similar developing nations.

5.3. Practical Implications

Based on the identified factors, university management should prioritize strategic reputation management as a core institutional function. Universities should actively invest in strengthening and maintaining their public image by systematically highlighting academic achievements, research outputs, accreditations, and national or international rankings through structured communication strategies.

A strong academic reputation is generally directly related to the quality of programs offered by an institution. Therefore, top management should continuously improve programs that are in high demand, aligning them with industry needs and anticipating market dynamics. This process enhances institutional reputation and effectively attracts students at a lower cost than other recruitment methods. Moreover, during recruitment efforts, a strong academic reputation provides a competitive advantage, as many students are drawn primarily by academic credentials, thereby improving the institution's perception within its immediate environment and beyond.

Investment in university facilities and infrastructure is also essential. Modern classrooms, well-equipped libraries, state-of-the-art laboratories, and attractive leisure spaces are important factors in student selection. Management should ensure these amenities are up to date and provide a rich and supportive academic environment. Upgrading technological resources is equally critical. Advanced IT infrastructure and modern learning management systems can significantly enhance the attractiveness of programs that rely on specialized equipment.

Beyond academic facilities, universities must address students' holistic needs. High-quality hostels, health centers, and recreational areas enhance the overall student experience, making the institution more appealing. Integrating sustainability and innovation into university administration, particularly in the management of facilities, can further increase appeal, especially among environmentally conscious students. Green initiatives and sustainable practices demonstrate the university's commitment to responsible management and forward-looking strategies.

By addressing these factors and effectively communicating the status and quality of amenities, university management can positively influence students' decisions and maintain a competitive position in the evolving higher education sector.

6. Limitations and Further Research

6.1. Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing students' choice of public universities in Sri Lanka, there are some limitations that affect the generalizability of its findings. The sample consisted of first-year management students from a single state university, excluding representation from other faculties and institutions. Another limitation is that the data were collected at a single point in time, whereas students' perceptions of reputation or career prospects may change during their studies; therefore, longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights. Additionally, factors such as government policies, economic conditions, and societal changes were not incorporated into this study, although they may significantly impact university choice.

6.2. Avenues for Future Research

Considering the findings and limitations of the current study, several directions for future research are recommended to gain further insight into the factors affecting students' university choice in Sri Lanka and beyond. Expanding the study to include students from all academic streams and multiple public universities would provide a larger, more representative dataset, thereby enabling the generalization of findings across different contexts.

Acknowledgement

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2024 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Management (Public) (Special) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Snr. Prof. R. Lalitha S. Fernando, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

Artificial Intelligence policy: For this research, ChatGPT developed by OpenAI. (2025) was used for language enhancement.

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