

Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Choose an Economics-Specialized University: A Study in Thai Nguyen City, Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the factors influencing high school students' university selection decisions in Thái Nguyên City during the 2023–2024 period using a quantitative research approach. Data were collected from 500 twelfth-grade students at four major high schools in Thai Nguyen City, Viet Nam. A convenient sampling method was employed to ensure a proportionate representation of respondents. A probability regression model was used as an analytical tool for data analysis. The research findings indicate that five factors (academic performance, tuition fees, opinions of surrounding individuals, students' perceptions of the field of study, and job opportunities) positively influence students' university selection decisions, while one factor (perceived risk) has a negative impact. Additionally, student characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity also affect their university choice. The study's results serve as a foundation for recommendations to universities and government authorities to enhance the effectiveness of university enrollment strategies.

Keywords: Decision to choose a university, university, student, high school.

INTRODUCTION

Research on behavioral intentions and influencing factors is a topic of interest among many economic researchers. Studies have been conducted across various fields, each offering different managerial implications. The results vary widely and depend on the research context, including the study domain, research aspects, and specific fields. Notable studies include those by Thuy and Hoa (2017), Quang et al. (2021), Chi (2018), Toan (2011), and Ha et al. (2011). However, research on the decision-making process of medical students when choosing a university remains underexplored in Vietnam [13, 28].

Higher education is rapidly evolving with leading trends such as massification, marketization, privatization, and digitalization. Businesses, universities, and colleges have adapted to an increasingly competitive environment by improving educational services and corporate governance [25]. Some institutions have restructured or enhanced their operations to maintain efficiency and responsiveness despite increasingly scarce resources [2]. As service providers, universities and colleges must enhance their competitive advantage by better addressing the growing interests and needs of stakeholders, including high school students, current students, parents, and employers.

In recent years, university and college enrollment in Vietnam has faced significant challenges due to intense competition, particularly among institutions in the economic sector. Many universities and colleges have struggled to meet their enrollment targets. The emergence of multidisciplinary universities has provided students with more career options, thereby diverting enrollment resources from colleges. Additionally, the financial autonomy of public universities has led to increased enrollment quotas, lowered admission standards, and expanded training scales, creating fierce competition among institutions.

Moreover, universities have allocated more resources to communication campaigns to provide prospective students with essential information and enhance their social standing. However, not all recruitment efforts have been effectively implemented. In Thái Nguyên, economic universities and colleges have failed to meet their enrollment targets in recent years, achieving only around 40% of their goals. Meanwhile, technical universities

and colleges have reported better enrollment outcomes, with higher student numbers compared to economic institutions. This indicates that economic universities in Thái Nguyên City face significant enrollment challenges.

Therefore, research is necessary to identify the factors influencing students' university choices. This will provide administrators with valuable data for managing and improving university admissions, particularly in developing effective communication strategies and student recruitment counseling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decision – Making

The term “choice” emphasizes the necessity of considering and calculating the optimal methods and approaches to achieve a goal under conditions of limited resources. According to Huu (2016), Decision-making is a process that begins with identifying and diagnosing a problem, followed by selecting a solution, and concluding with monitoring and controlling to evaluate the implementation of the decision. “Choice” highlights the need for careful consideration and calculation to determine whether or not to perform a specific action (activity), the means or methods of execution, and the necessary resources.

The terms “decision” and “choice” are often used together, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between the two. In practice, “choice” reflects the process (comparison, deliberation, calculation), while “decision” represents the outcome of that process (selecting an option).

Within the scope of this study, decision-making is understood as the result of a conscious selection process (weighing options and calculations) from available alternatives to achieve specific goals.

The concept of university choice is defined as “a complex process consisting of multiple stages in which an individual develops aspirations to pursue formal education after high school, ultimately leading to a decision to enroll in a specific university, college, or advanced vocational training institution” [16].

University choice is the process by which students decide whether to attend university and where to enroll [3]. Chi (2018) describes university selection decisions as “the ability or intention to make a decision about choosing a university, considering the level of commitment to a specific institution for enrollment” [11]. Similarly, Huong (2020) states that “a high school student's university selection decision is the result of choosing an educational institution that meets their requirements after careful evaluation of information from various sources” [18].

Factors Influencing the Decision to Choose an University

Gender

The research model by Ruth E. Kallio (1995) indicates that gender also influences university selection decisions. The impact level of different factor groups is significantly affected by students' gender characteristics. King (1999) argued that the increasing enrollment rate based on gender has led to a greater need for studying the university selection process, particularly in comparing gender differences among students [22]. Institutional characteristics, such as location and choice of major, are influenced by gender in university selection decisions [4].

Literature in this field presents conflicting information regarding the university choices of male and female students. Hayes, Walker, and Trebbi (1995) reported that women place higher importance on safety, diversity, and academic dedication when selecting a university compared to men [14]. Additionally, women value academic reputation more than men when making their university enrollment decisions [5]. Researchers have also found that men prioritize sports and social aspects more than women [5, 14].

Ethnicity

Higher education in the United States has an uneven proportion of White students compared to minority

enrollments (Radford, Tasoff, & Weko, 2009). Although access to higher education has increased for minority students (Kim, 2004), the decision-making process for university enrollment differs significantly between minority students and White students [27]. These differences become even more pronounced when comparing different minority groups. Each minority group has distinct cultural factors that influence their university selection process compared to their peers, including: (a) proximity to home, (b) willingness to take on loans, and (c) other group-specific characteristics [33].

Financial needs and availability are among the most significant factors for all prospective university students, but they are even more prevalent among ethnic minority students, often determining their final university choice [21].

High School Academic Performance

Chapman (1981), along with Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), identified student-influenced factors in university selection decisions, emphasizing the importance of academic performance [9, 10]. Higher academic achievement increases the likelihood of university enrollment. In Borus's (1993) study, academic performance was found to have a significant impact on university choice, as students tend to select institutions with admission standards aligned with their abilities. The author suggests that high school academic results serve as an indicator of a student's potential for university admission, thereby influencing their school choice.

The academic factor plays a crucial role; students with high academic achievements have a greater chance of being accepted into universities, while those with lower performance face more limitations. Elizabeth Ng (2003) proposed that different academic results shape different perceptions of university choice. High academic achievement in high school increases the likelihood of attending preparatory classes and selecting a university for future studies. Sohail and Saseed (2003) found that in the Malaysian context, students who take preparatory courses tend to have the academic capacity required for university education. Elizabeth Ng (2003) also believes that different scholars hold varying perspectives on how academic performance influences university selection.

Students' Perceptions

In a recent study, Mehboob, Shah, and Bhutto (2012) highlighted that career interests and goals are key factors influencing students' university selection. Furthermore, students' perceptions of their abilities aligning with the requirements of their chosen major and institution have been proven to play a crucial role in their decision-making process [8]. In practice, assessing personal interests and abilities before selecting a university significantly impacts student retention rates and leads many students to choose more competitive private universities with longer training durations [27].

Career Opportunities

Paulsen (1990) examined the impact of job opportunities on university selection decisions and emphasized that employment prospects are a strong predictor of college enrollment decisions. Students are often drawn to higher education because of the career opportunities it provides. Research has shown that among all Asian American groups, "students believe that being able to secure a good job or gain admission to a prestigious graduate program is an important consideration when choosing a university" [34].

All students aspire to secure better employment after graduation. As a result, they tend to focus on job market trends to identify fields with high demand. Therefore, post-graduation employment prospects are considered one of the key selection criteria (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Paulsen (1990) included "job availability" among the ten most frequently cited attributes influencing students' university enrollment decisions based on his review of research on institutional characteristics [27]. Sevier (1986, 1994) suggested that students are often attracted to universities based on post-graduation career opportunities, paying close attention to job prospects and the success of alumni, as well as the institution's contributions to society [31, 32].

Tuition fees

Cost refers to the sacrifice or trade-off required to obtain a particular good or service. In higher education, costs

can be understood as the total amount that customers (students, parents, and employers) must pay for academic training. From the perspective of high school students, Kotler & Fox (1995) identified cost components as financial expenses, labor costs, time costs, and psychological costs (stress from studying away from home).

The availability of options may be influenced by socioeconomic conditions [19]. High school students often encounter this issue when narrowing down their university choices and deciding where to apply [8]. Once students identify potential institutions, they estimate the financial costs associated with attending those schools. At this stage, the required financial investment becomes a major factor influencing students' final decisions [21]. The ability to afford tuition is a crucial determinant in students' choices.

A press release from NatWest (2004) suggested that students are becoming more pragmatic about university expenses, with 84% willing to take on part-time jobs to cover costs. Tuition fees and their financial impact play an increasingly significant role in students' university selection process [24].

Influence of Peers and Family

Social influence plays a powerful role in high school students' university decision-making process. Creating a favorable institutional image is challenging, given the overwhelming amount of information that each student receives (Armstrong & Lumsden, 1999). According to Cabrera & La Nasa (2000), the impact of influential individuals in students' lives is the most critical factor in their decision-making process. While making university choices, students receive numerous messages from persuasive sources (McDonough, 1997). The primary social influences include: (a) family, (b) high school influence, (c) college admissions competition, and (d) university reputation.

Parents play a crucial role in the decision-making process. Their encouragement and support significantly impact students' tendencies to explore and choose higher education institutions [7]. Evidence suggests that high school students initially rely heavily on "internal sources of information (parents and other family members) at the start of their college selection process but gradually shift toward external sources, such as friends, teachers, and mentors, during their final years" [15].

According to Chapman (1981), students are strongly influenced by their friends and family's advice in three ways during the university selection process: (1) Their opinions about a particular university; (2) Their direct recommendations on which university to apply to; (3) The influence of close friends—students often choose universities based on where their best friends are applying [10].

Hossler & Gallagher (1987) reaffirmed that, aside from parental influence, peer influence is also a powerful factor in university choice. Additionally, they suggested that beyond parents, siblings, and friends, school personnel also play a significant role in students' decisions.

If most or all of a student's friends plan to attend college, the likelihood of that student enrolling in higher education is four times higher than if none of their friends were going [12]. Rowe (2002) found that peer groups significantly influence the university selection process [30]. Hossler & Foley (1995) supported the idea that friends serve as important reference sources during the college search and decision-making stages. Social factors such as friends, parents, and teachers rank as the third most important criterion, having a substantial impact on students' university decisions [15].

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The respondents of this study consisted of a random sample of 500 twelfth-grade students from four high schools in Thai Nguyen City, Viet Nam. A convenience sampling method was used due to financial, time, and accessibility constraints. The students were contacted and asked to complete a survey questionnaire. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 489 fully completed responses were collected ($N = 489$), resulting in a response rate of 97.8%. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The sample included 306

female respondents and 183 male respondents. The majority of respondents (82%) were 18 years old, and most (67%) belonged to the Kinh ethnic group.

Table 1. Description of the Research Sample

Indicators	Group	Quantity	%
Gender	Male	183	37.40%
	Female	306	62.60%
Age	Under 18	89	28.00%
	From 18 years and up	352	72.00%
Ethnicity	Kinh	327	66.80%
	Other	162	33.20%

Source: Calculated from the author's survey data

Scales

The study utilized a multi-scale questionnaire to measure the research variables. The variable “Opinions of Surrounding People” was assessed using six indicators based on Hossler and Gallagher (1987). These indicators were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

The variable “Students' Perception” refers to students' awareness of their chosen academic field, the career they aspire to after graduation, and whether the training program provides the necessary knowledge and skills for their preferred job. This factor aligns with the aspiration/expectation element in Chapman's theory (1981) [9]. The study adopted the scale for “Students' Perception” from the research by Quang et al. (2021), which was assessed using three indicators. These indicators were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

The variable “Students' Academic Performance in High School” was categorized according to the current standards set by the Ministry of Education to evaluate students' academic results. In Vietnam, academic performance is divided into four levels: weak, average, good, and excellent. The study inherited and applied the academic performance measurement scale from Chi (2018), specifically evaluating student performance at four levels: 1 – Poor; 2 – Average; 3 – Good; 4 – Excellent.

The measurement scale for the variable “Job Opportunities” was assigned values as follows:

- 2 if students have high job opportunities after graduation,
- 1 if job opportunities after graduation are moderate,
- if job opportunities after graduation are very low.

The variable “Opinions of Surrounding People” was also assessed using five indicators based on D.W. Chapman (1981), measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

The dependent variable “Students' Decision to Choose a University” was measured using binary values: Decision to choose a university = 1 if the student selects a university in the economics field; Decision to choose a university = 0 if the student chooses a different field of study.

FINDINGS

The reliability test

According to the reliability test results using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, all factors have coefficients greater than 0.7 and less than 0.95. This indicates that the reliability of the factors is highly satisfactory. Therefore, the

measurement scales of the factors are sufficiently reliable for further analysis, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of reliability test

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
Tuition fees	0.9546	5
Opinion of surrounding people	0.9298	6
Students' Perceptions	0.9037	3

Source: Calculated from the author's survey data

Correlation Testing Between Indicators and Representative Factors

The KMO coefficient = $0.936 > 0.5$; according to Kaiser (1974), the use of this dataset for factor analysis is appropriate. The Bartlett's test also has a significance value (Sig) of $0.000 < 0.5$, indicating that the observed variables are correlated and meet the conditions for factor analysis using EFA. Additionally, the Bartlett's correlation test result shows Sig = $0.0000 < 0.01$, confirming that the indicators have a linear correlation with the representative factors, and the data is fully suitable for factor analysis (Table 3).

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.936
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	19548.115
	df	741
	Sig.	.000

Source: Calculated from the author's survey data

Regression Results

Before conducting the regression model analysis, the study performed a multicollinearity test using the Pearson correlation matrix to ensure no multicollinearity among the independent variables. The calculation results show that all correlation coefficients are less than 0.5. This indicates that there is no strong correlation between the independent variables, confirming that they are exogenous and suitable for use in the subsequent regression analysis.

To determine the impact of various factors on students' university choice decisions, the study conducted a probit regression analysis. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Regression Results

Independent Variables	Coef	Std.Err	P_value
Gender	-0.3467396	0.05277	0.000
Age	0.0810206	0.03838	0.035
Ethnicity	0.1851142	0.06671	0.006
Academic Performance	-0.1448256	0.05469	0.008
Job Opportunities	0.1198115	0.04192	0.004
Tuition fees	-0.1451497	0.05062	0.004

Students' Perception	0.0112152	0.04026	0.781
Opinions of surrounding people	0.112866	0.04335	0.010
_cons	-4.041804	1.994263	0.043
Numbers of obs	489		
LR chi2	125.77		
Prob > chi2	0.0000		
Pseudo R2	72,58		

Source: Calculated from the author's survey data

The value of $\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = 0.0000$ rejects the null hypothesis (H_0) that the regression model is not suitable, confirming that the current probit model is appropriate.

Table 4 shows that the model has $R^2 = 0.7258$, meaning that the model's goodness of fit is 72.58%. In other words, 72.58% of the variation in students' university choice decisions is explained by the five influencing factors, while the remaining 27.42% is accounted for by variables outside the model that have not been included.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings identified five key factors influencing high school students' university selection in Thai Nguyen City: Academic Performance, Admission Scores, Employment Opportunities, Tuition Costs, Perceived Suitability of the Chosen Major, and Personal Characteristics of Students.

Personal Characteristics of Students

The study results indicate that students' university selection decisions are influenced by personal characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity. The probability of choosing a university is higher for female students. According to Table 4, if the student is female, the probability of choosing a university increases by 34.67% at a 1% statistical significance level. Additionally, for every additional year in age, the probability of selecting a university increases by 8.1% at a 5% statistical significance level. Furthermore, if the student belongs to the Kinh ethnic group, the probability of choosing a university rises by 18.51%, also at a 1% statistical significance level.

Academic Performance

The estimation results also show that students with lower academic performance tend to choose economics-related majors more frequently. Specifically, for each student whose academic performance is below the average, the probability of selecting an economics-related university major increases by 14.48%. Conversely, students with higher academic performance are less likely to choose an economics major.

Opinions of Surrounding People (Family, Friends, Teachers)

Family, friends, and teachers significantly influence students' decisions when choosing a university. The probability of selecting an economics-related university major increases by **11.28% (at a 1% statistical significance level)** for students who receive advice from family members, friends, or current and former university students. Therefore, marketing policies should pay more attention to the key influencers in students' decision-making processes.

Job Opportunities

Employment opportunities have a statistically significant impact on students' university selection. If job opportunities increase by one unit above the average level, the probability of choosing an economics-related

university major rises by 11.98% (at a 1% statistical significance level). This finding suggests that students' decisions to pursue an economics degree are closely tied to their perceived ability to secure employment after graduation. Given the relatively low employment rate among graduates and the challenges in finding jobs aligned with their fields of study, this factor is a crucial consideration for students. Consequently, economics universities should strengthen connections with businesses, allowing students to gain practical experience and earn income while studying. Moreover, such partnerships can enhance job accessibility for graduates, making it easier for them to secure employment.

Tuition fees

In addition to admission scores, students also consider tuition fees when selecting a university. Beyond standard tuition costs, additional university expenses can be quite high. Not all students can afford tuition at certain universities, making financial aid, scholarships, and student loan programs essential. Estimation results show that when students perceive tuition policies as reasonable, the probability of selecting a university increases by 14.51% (at a 1% statistical significance level). Therefore, to attract more students, universities should reassess their tuition and additional fees. Additionally, universities should expand their partnerships with domestic and international enterprises to enhance financial support programs, diversify scholarship options, and provide broader assistance for students.

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