

STUDENTS' DECISION MAKING ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

The presented research is part of the research project "The Student Journey." The aim is to identify the motives and decision-making practices; the key factors influencing the decision to study in university; and potential differences between the students with preferences of private or public higher education institutions. The research was conducted in period 2021-2022 among students of public and private higher education institutions in the Czech Republic. The literature review focuses on students' decision making process in higher education institution choice. The models of classification of students reasoning including multiple influences are presented. The methodology of the qualitative research investigation is based on the semi-structured face to face interviews. The research sample was selected by purposive sampling method. To achieve data systematization for qualitative analysis, open coding was implemented. The findings show differences in study motives and the decision-making processes between public and private university students. Differences were also identified between respondents in the same category of public and private university students. Certain elements also emerge across categories. Since study decision making is also similarly used in decision making at secondary school, the findings may also be useful to compare with practice in decision making at this level of study.

Key words: decision-making process; Czech students; education; studying at university; qualitative research

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Introduction

In today's world of globalization, rapidly evolving technological advancements as well as increasing volume of jobs demanding post-secondary education and training, completed further education is now considered a requirement to gainful employment. Moreover, the educational industry has become highly competitive and colleges and universities are facing increased competition. Many students make the wrong decisions due to receiving poor advice

and conflicting opinions or because of the lack of accurate and relevant information. Therefore, we aimed our research activities on identifying the main motives for studying at university in the Czech Republic. Along with this area, we also focused on the implementation of the decision-making process in the selection of higher education (HE) institutions.

As of September 2022, there are a total of 30 public and private universities in the Czech Republic with an economic and managerial focus. These include universities of technical focus but offering economics and management study programs in the field of economics and management. Out of a total of 26 public HE institutions in the Czech Republic, there are 17 universities that offer study programs of the aforementioned specialization at some of their faculties (MEYS, 2022).

The aim of the presented qualitative research was to identify the main students' motives and decision-making practices both public and private universities of economics and management. For the qualitative research, a set of the following research questions (RQ) was established: RQ1: What is the main factor/motive in making a decision to go to college? RQ2: What is the factor influencing the decision to study higher education? RQ3: What are the differences between students who prefer private higher education institutions as compared to public higher education institutions in their decision to study.

1 Theoretical background

HE is classified as a service from a marketing perspective, with the characteristics of intangibility, perishability, simultaneity, and variability (Simões and Soares, 2010). HE choice is usually a one-time decision which results in an extended consumption experience of three to four years. Difficulty of evaluation even after purchase and consumption process is done is another attribute (Walsh et al., 2015). The decision-making process starts from the time when prospective students recognise the need to pursue HE and finishes with their major conclusion in a form of college/university selection (purchase) while involving many risks, such as financial, psychological, functional, social and other. In general, the HE admissions decision-making process can be divided into three main stages (Le et al, 2019): (i) predisposition/problem recognition: the decision to enter college or to choose other activities (e.g. entering the workforce); (ii) search - seeking and assessing information about specific institutions; (iii) choice - selecting a particular programme of study, institution or mode of study. As the previous research findings show, during the whole decision-making process, multiple

influences affect student choice. There is an increasing need for recognition and understanding the factors. Despite two dominant categories of choice models that are identified as an attempt to classify students reasoning of particular HE institutions choice, due to the complexness, the categorization into three models is used (Hladchenko and Vossensteyn, 2019): an economic model, a sociological model, and information-process model.

Sociological models (Status attainment models) are based on theory that students make decisions based on what they think is expected of them. The "logic of appropriateness" is used for association of students with norms, reasons, coded rights and responsibilities, procedures, methods, practices and techniques of a particular social group. They are usually members of different social groups and voluntarily or involuntarily conform to what social groups expect of them. Sociological models usually do not consider financial factors, the analyzed variables are in particular (Krezel and Krezel, 2017): (i) student behavioral variables: students' academic performance, students' aspirations, leisure time, motivation (Mustafa et al, 2018); (ii) institutional and cultural factors: institution's image and academic reputation, especially in terms of overall quality, availability of financial aid, library resources, accessible location, advertising (Nuseir and El Refae, 2021); (iii) background variables of greater social environment: characteristics of family background (parental support, parental income, parental education, parental occupation), gender, ethnicity, peer influence (e.g. friends, teachers) (Eldegwy, 2022).

Economic models are based on the assumptions that students are confronted with resource scarcity in terms of their total resources and the amount of education available, and rationally maximize their chosen utility function. As rational decision makers undertake actions only if the marginal utility of the action is greater than the marginal cost, from students' buyer behavior they choose a specific college/university when the perceived benefits of the option outweigh the benefits of other alternatives (Walsh et al, 2015). Although economic models also consider sociological variables, the major focus is on financial incentives, monetary costs and benefits of HE. The most commonly used variables are (i) monetary variables, such as net tuition (excluding financial aid), other costs of study (e.g. scripts, books, equipment), housing costs, anticipated future earnings, grants, scholarships; and (ii) intervening non-financial factors, such as family background characteristics (income parents, employment), institutional characteristics including drop-out rates, requirements for admissions, or acceptance rates (Marcucci and Johnstone, 2007).

Information-process models combine approaches of sociological and economic models. They arose because neither economic nor sociological models of students' decisions about entering college did not provide a satisfactory explanation of decision making because of the limited range of explanatory variables. The combined models explain HE choice as a cyclical process of uncertainty reduction in which potential students make successive decisions based on incomplete information while using the outputs of each sub-process as input into the next. In these models, HE selection is seen as a process that begins earlier than the decision point itself and requires different types of information at different points in time. Social characteristics stand at the beginning for students (Coleman, 1990), after that the influence of long-term dynamic roles of parents, peers and schools in the collection and use of information about schools. In addition, the following variables are classified as: environment, family circumstances, values and attitudes transmitted to children, and the way parents motivate their children, e.g. to encourage reading, critical thinking and college attendance.

2 Methodology

The research sample was divided into two groups. Group 1 - Students of public HE institutions and group 2 - Students of private HE institutions in the country. The research sample was selected using a purposive sampling method and we also decided to select the cases according to the rule of theoretical replication in the case studies. In total, 6 respondents were approached, 3 from group 1 (public university students) and 3 from group 2 (private university students). All of them were the students of economics and management programs. We prepared a semi-structured interview that included 13 open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted during 2021 and 2022, and the authors conducted the interviews with the respondents in person at their places of study or online using Google Meet. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. The interview structure included 13 questions. For each question, sub-questions were prepared according to the answers of the respondents. For each interview, the respondent's identification criterias features, such as: gender, age range, school studied - private/public, whether it is a bachelor or master, year, form - full-time/combined and place of study, were included. Data were recorded in the form of written notes during the interviews, subsequently transcribed into fluent text. The output thus already had the form of text after first-order reduction. Thus, these were not the verbatim statements of the respondents (due to not being recorded on a recording

regulation), but a transcription of the data into a form suitable for analytical work. Six case studies were produced in this way, 3 case studies for Group 1 and 3 case studies for Group 2.

In order to achieve a systematisation of the data for qualitative analysis, the resulting text was coded. Specifically, open coding, which can be characterised as a process of analysing, exploring, comparing, conceptualising and categorising the data, was implemented. This is the part of the analysis that deals with labelling and categorising concepts through careful study of the data collected (Blair, 2015). We were looking for similarities and differences in the data and constantly asking questions about the phenomena represented in the data.

3 Motives for university study and factors influencing study decisions

The sample consisted of 5 women and 1 man in the age range of 21-30 years. 2 respondents were students of bachelor's degree program and 4 were studying a follow-up master's degree.

Motives for attending college were explored in the first interview question. The answers from group 1 (public university student) were mainly related to the possibility of improving their employment in the labour market. They included an emphasis on personal development of professional competences that will bring a competitive advantage on the labour market. The respondents stated that after studying at the grammar school they wanted to continue their studies in a specialised economic and managerial field. They also mentioned the influence of their parents, with at least one of them having a university degree. For group 2 (student of a private university), the answers differed and were in two categories. 1 respondent also mentioned a motive from the category of improving the possibility of employment on the labour market, and the other 2 respondents expressed gaining an overview in the economic-managerial field as the main motive for studying, as they had studied a narrowly focused field of technical specialization at secondary school. All of the private college students were studying a vocational high school.

Next questions asked about related factors influencing the college selection decision-making process. Questions 2 to 5 focused on identifying the information sources that prospective students use in making their decisions about studying. For the first group, the respondents used the World School Roster, recommendations from friends and family, and then attendance at the Gaudeamus student fair that mainly promotes HE in the Czech Republic and Slovakia; and open day as reference sources in their decision making. The second group used a survey of universities via their websites as a source of information about

studying. Respondents were also asked about the opinions of those already studying on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram.

The approach to students' decision-making when choosing a university was clarified by the answers to interview question 6. It was crucial to find out whether prospective students approach their decision-making intuitively or analytically, i.e. rationally. Group 1 respondents answered that they did not use any analytical methods to evaluate the options. They used a list of advantages and disadvantages of the schools under consideration to evaluate the possible solutions (schools). For the sub-question whether the prospective students had also considered the alternative of a private HE institution, they all indicated that they had not. The main reasons given were the financial cost of studying at a private school and the reputation of private schools, respectively the prestige of studying at a public HE institution. For the second group, the answers were also the same. All respondents said that they made their decision purely on the basis of their feelings and used the pros and cons of the possible study options to clarify their ideas. The private university students interviewed were all considering alternatives to studying at a public university, precisely because of the funding (there is no fee for the public university).

Questions 7 to 9 were related to identifying expectations from HE study, their fulfilment, and possible changes. Group 1 expected a higher level of study than in the HE institutions, but with it more freedom in the organization of study and in the choice of subjects. All these expectations were met and did not change during the study. Only 1 expectation was not fulfilled, namely that the respondents expected more practice in their studies. For group 2, the expectations about studying were related to the development of general overview, personal approach of lecturers and friendly atmosphere at the university. Students' expectations are being met and have not yet been changed.

Questions 10 and 11 related to the perceived advantages and disadvantages of studying at a given type of school, i.e. public versus private HEI. Respondents commented on the advantages and disadvantages of the type of school they were studying. Thus, Group 1 defined the advantages and disadvantages of studying at a public HE institution and Group 2 defined the advantages and disadvantages of studying at a private HE institution. The students of Group 1 perceive the advantages of studying at a public HE institution as a greater diversity of students, higher quality of teachers, less financial burden and higher prestige. On the other hand, they cite weaker links with practice, more students, no close relationship with the teacher as the main disadvantages of studying at this type of school. Respondents of group 2 see as advantages of studying in a private college the individual approach to students

by teachers, where they are basically in the position of a clerk and that the study is without entrance exams. They also positively evaluate the practical orientation of the studied school. Among the disadvantages of studying at a private school, they rank the financial demands. Furthermore, the fact that studying at a private HE institution does not have a tradition in the Czech Republic (private HE institutions started to emerge in the 1990s in the Czech Republic), therefore there are prejudices of some people that they study at a private HE institution.

The 12th question asked about possible recommendation of studying at a given institution to friends. Both groups strongly recommended their institutions. Group 1 respondents supported their reference by a worse reputation of private HE institutions among public.

The last question gave respondents the opportunity to freely express a preference for studying at university that they had not yet indicated and considered important. Respondents from Group 1 did not take the opportunity to add. For Group 2 respondents indicated that they mainly considered the support of family and friends to be important for studying at a private HE institution. Only one respondent emphasised the importance of setting a goal and the steps to achieve it and going for it.

4 Discussion

Some characteristics of students in public and private HE institutions are the same. Specifically, the approach to decision making, where both groups used intuition to make decisions and a list of advantages and disadvantages of each alternative to evaluate the options. From a different perspective, both groups agreed on the advantages and disadvantages of studying. What one group saw as an advantage, the other group listed as a disadvantage and vice versa. Specifically, these were the so-called "massiveness" of study and little practice in public HE institutions and the closer relationship with teachers in private HE institutions, the prejudices and reputation of private schools and vice practice. However, a number of factors is different for students in the two groups, such as the motive to study, the information sources used in making decisions about studying and expectations about studying. From the interviews with the two student groups, we obtained the following responses to the research questions.

RQ1: What is the main motive in deciding to go to university? The main motive for group 1 is to improve their employability in the labour market. This motive was also mentioned by one respondent from Group 2. Another respondent from group 2 mentioned the

main motive as gaining an overview in the economic and managerial field, as they were studying a secondary school of a completely different specialisation.

RQ2: What are the factories influencing the decision to study at university? In terms of their approach to decision making, both groups indiscriminately use intuition in their decision making and do not use analytical methods to evaluate study options. On the contrary, the groups behave quite differently in their information gathering behaviour when making study decisions. Group 1 representing public university students is more proactive by using university ranking, open days, student conferences. Group 2 works more with secondary sources of data that are published on the university website. Both groups use social networks as a source of references in addition to friends. The groups differed in their expectations. Group 1's expectations related more to the implementation of the study. In contrast, Group 2's expectations included expectations of general personal development in the field of study.

RQ3: What are the differences between students who prefer private HE versus public HE when deciding to study? The differences between groups 1 and 2 are shown in Table 1. The main differences between groups 1 and 2 relate to motives for studying, information sources for decision-making and expectations about studying.

Tab. 1: Differences between applicants to public and private universities

Differences between applicants to public and private universities			
	<i>Motives to study</i>	<i>Information sources for decision-making</i>	<i>Expectations about study</i>
<i>Group 1</i>	Better access to the labour market	University rating	More demanding studies
<i>Group 2</i>	Change of specialization to the economic - managerial direction and better application on the labour market	University website	Extension of the general overview and friendly approach of the teachers

Source: Own proceedings

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to identify the key factors influencing the decision to study in university; and if there are any differences between the students who prefer private as opposed to public HE institutions in their choice. The literature review focused on students' decision making process in choice of HE institution. The methodology of the qualitative research investigation was based on the semi-structured deep interviews with six respondents.

The main differences between Group 1 and 2 relate to motives for studying, information sources for decision-making and expectations about studying. In contrast, the approach to decision making that is primarily based on intuition and not using analytical evaluation methods for decision making is consistent between public and private HE students. Respondents agreed on the advantages and disadvantages of studying at a given type of school, albeit from different perspectives. Similarly, the students of both groups agree on the recommendation to study in a given type of HE institution. Given that all respondents in both groups perceive the reputation and problematic public perception of private schools as one of the main disadvantages of studying at a private higher education institution, it is appropriate to address this topic in follow-up research. One of the presumed reasons for this situation is the lack of historical context of private HE in the Czech Republic since local HE institutions started to emerge here only in the 1990s after the fall of the communist regime.

As part of further research, it is worthwhile to find out what are the similarities and differences between public and private HE students in the European context.

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