INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN SELECTING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE FROM PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES IN SRI LANKA: A STUDY BASED ON UNDERGRADUATES OF INTERNATIONAL DEGREE PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

National University intake in Sri Lanka has become progressively competitive over the years and a small percentage of the student population is eligible for state-funded higher education. Therefore, a majority of the students who fail to enter National Universities and students who complete advanced level in British curriculum have been increasingly seeking alternative educational options in the domestic market due to the high cost in overseas education. As a result, international degree programmes (IDPs) have emerged through private higher educational institutes (PHEIs) to cater to the demand for university-level education in Sri Lanka. The main objective of this study is to uncover the influential factors in selecting a bachelor's degree (BD) from IDPs which have emerged recently. Due to the flexibility and optionality in IDPs offered in Sri Lanka, the decision-making process in selecting a BD has become complex and multifactorial, which is evident through research studies carried out by critics including Sia (2011), Kusumawati, Yanamandram & Perera (2010) and Briggs (2006). Data for this study were collected from 420 first-year students of IDPs at randomly selected 7 PHEIs, where a

questionnaire was administered with 59 predefined variables. Of those, 39 variables were identified as most influential variables by factor analysis and those were further grouped into 7 main factors namely, university characteristics, the source of information, programme evaluation, cost, marketing strategy, infrastructure facilities and peer influence. According to the research findings, the infrastructure facilities of the PHEIs have been rated as the most influential factor with 9 different variables. The contribution of the marketing strategy, university characteristics, costs, programme evaluation and source of information are also discovered and rated to be more influential than 'peer' influence. However, it was observed that the variables categorised under peer influence are with the highest factor loadings. The results of this study can be beneficial in optimising the enrolment strategies of PHEIs in Sri Lanka and in guiding prospective students on their choices in higher education.

1. Introduction

Access to higher education is the final dream of many youths who ultimately cater to the demands of the present knowledge-based economy. The main body responsible for selection and allocation of students for state-funded National universities in Sri Lanka is the University Grants Commission (UGC) which was established under the University Act No 16 of 1978. Essentially, the selection of the students for National universities in Sri Lanka is determined by the student's performance at the GCE Advanced level examination and it depends on the Z score of the student and the 'cut off' mark calculated by the Commissioner General of Examination (UGC, 2017). State-funded University education in Sri Lanka has become progressively competitive over the years where only a small proportion of students are eligible for a state-funded higher education (Fernando, 2017). Of the 149,489 students who were eligible for state-funded university admission from GCE Advanced level examination in 2014/2015, only 17% were admitted to National universities (UGC, 2016). According to the population census in 2012, only 4% of the age 25 years and above population have an undergraduate level qualification in Sri Lanka. Further, according to UGC review report (2015), many students who pass out from international schools completing advanced level examinations in British curriculum are not able to find a place in National universities. However, UGC statistics in 2016 highlighted that around

12,000 Sri Lankan students are estimated to go overseas for higher educational opportunities. Therefore, within the existing context, it has been observed that getting admission in National universities in Sri Lanka to pursue a Bachelor's degree (BD) to fulfill the requirement of the future job market has become challenging for Sri Lankan students.

It has been identified that many students who fail to enter National universities and students who complete advanced level examinations in British curriculum pursue university-level education (ULE) overseas (UGC, 2017). However, foreign university education is very costly due to university fees and higher cost of living and it could be beyond the spending limit of most of the parents (Sunday times, 2011). Further, the students have to live away from their families and study in a novel and challenging environment which causes various adverse effects for some students due to issues stemming from cultural and climate changes (Sunday times, 2011). Additionally, due to natural disasters taking place in several parts of the world, terrorism, and political instability in many countries, parents are concerned about their children's safety when sending them abroad for studies (Sunday times, 2011). As a result, most of the students have been increasingly searching the domestic market for affordable alternative options (Daily mirror, 2017). These circumstances in ULE have caused an emergence of International Degree Programmes (IDPs) in Sri Lanka affiliated with private higher educational institutes (PHEIs) to cater to the rising demand of ULE (Daily mirror, 2017).

The university education in Sri Lanka began formally in 1921 with the establishment of Ceylon University College as an affiliated college to University of London (Fernando, 2017). The Ceylon University College, the first public university in Sri Lanka, did not award degrees under its own name but prepared students to sit for the external examinations of University of London (Breckenridge, 1998). In 1942 the University of Ceylon was established, enabling the facility to award fully-fledged degrees, which automatically terminated the affiliation with the University of London (Breckenridge, 1998).

At present, selecting a BD has become strategically complicated in Sri Lanka due to optionality and flexibility of the BDs in IDPs. The decision of selecting a BD may be influenced by a number of demographic, economic, social and psychological factors, where the decision-making process is complex and multifactorial (Briggs, 2006). Hence the difference between 'correct' and 'wrong' choices of a BD can be difficult to comprehend at an early stage of selection. Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998) opine that sub-optimal choices of students would impact

negatively on their motivation and academic success which may lead to student dissatisfaction. According to Yorke (1999), the unsatisfactory academic progress of students will be a challenge for academic reputation of PHEIs. Furthermore, Yorke (1999) identifies that the sub-optimal decisions at the point of entry could increase the failure rate. Therefore, students' choice in selecting a BD is regarded as a long-term investment decision and students have become consumerists due to the cost of obtaining a BD from IDPs at PHEIs in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

Many studies on 'student decision making' rely on economics and sociological theoretical frameworks to examine factors of students' choice (Jackson, 1978; Tierney, 1983; Somers et al., 2006). These studies discuss students' decision-making behaviour as consumer decision making in the private higher education marketplace when pursuing ULE. According to Neoclassical economics, students select the most suitable BD which maximises their long-term satisfaction among various types of BDs offered in several IDPs. However, the process of decision making is one of the most complex mechanisms of human thinking, since various personal and environmental factors and courses of action intervene with different results. Orasanu & Connolly (1993) define it as a series of cognitive operations performed consciously, which include the elements from the environment in a specific time and place. Narayan & Corcoran (1997) consider decision making as the interaction between a problem that needs to be solved (to select a BD) and a person who wishes to solve it (student) within a specific environment. Especially, when students take a decision about which BD to choose from various types of IDPs in several PHEIs, they must follow several steps in order to arrive at the decision, namely, realising the necessity to make a decision, determining the goals to be achieved, generating alternatives that lead to attaining the proposed goals, evaluating whether the alternatives meet one's expectations and, lastly, selecting the best alternative (Halpern, 1997).

Alternatively, according to Hossler, Schmit & Vesper (1999), most studies that attempted to explain student choice could be included in one of the following three categories: economic models, status-attainment (sociological) models and combined models. The economic models center on the econometric assumptions that prospective students are rational actors and make careful cost-benefit analysis when choosing a BD from a PHEI (Hossler et al., 1999). The sociological models (or status-attainment models), concentrate on the importance of student's background characteristics and socioeconomic status as factors affecting his choice of higher

education. The combined model incorporates the characteristics of the economic and status-attainment models to describe students' choice process (McDonough, 1997). Further, combined models offer more depth and perspective to the decision-making process (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996) and it can be discussed under major models such as Jakson's model, Chapman's model, Hanson & Litten's model and Hossler & Gallagher's model (Hossler et al., 1999).

Many studies have been done worldwide in order to explore factors which influence students' choice in selecting a university or a BD to pursue ULE in various disciplines. Wagner & Fard (2009) have conducted a comparative study considering a sample of Malaysian students between pre-university level programmes and students who have just graduated from secondary schools. Mehboob, Muhammad & Bhutto (2012) have done a quantitative study taking a sample of 251 first-year students in higher educational institutes in Pakistan and Sabir, Ahmad, Ashraf & Ahmad (2013) have conducted a comparative study with 226 undergraduates of engineering and business in Pakistan in order to see the variation of factors. Many researchers have highlighted the geographical location as a significant factor (Wagner & Fard, 2009; Beneke & Human, 2010), while some opined various institutional characteristics such as teaching quality, prestige, scientific research quality, administrative support, extra-curricular activities and the availability of exchange programmes with foreign universities (Tavares, Tavares, Justino & Amaral, 2008) as influential. Many scholars have investigated various types of cost components that influence the students' choice of a BD (Wagner & Fard, 2009; Beneke & Human, 2010) and have discussed the importance of the cost or financial factors from parents' point of view rather than a student's perception (Domino, Libraire, Lutwiller, Superczynski & Tian, 2006). Out of the above mentioned financial factors, the impact of financial aid or packages that include scholarships and grants was examined thoroughly by Kim (2004), Govan, Patrick & Yen (2006) and Hoyt & Brown (2003). In addition, Beneke & Human (2010) found that financial aid offered is ranked only as the fifth influential factor in a study conducted in South Africa. Although it was found that there are numerous important factors considered by students when selecting a BD, the level of importance of those factors may vary with respect to the country. Gender roles, socialization coupled with teacher attitudes, parental expectations (Mutekwe, Modiba & Maphosa, 2011), student characteristics in the form of motivational level aspiration, rewards in the university and peer influence (Wajeeh & Micceri, 1997) were found to be significantly influential. Further, university accessibility, staff enrolment opportunities (Wajeeh & Micceri, 1997), factors related

to staff and programme (Patel & Patel, 2012) and role of marketing factors, parent pressure (Shammot, 2011) were also discovered to have greater influence.

Even though a wide range of factors which influence in selecting a BD is available as findings, none of the studies has considered using IDPs. At present, the range of higher education providers in Sri Lanka is large and continuously growing. As a result, prospective students in higher education are faced with a multitude of decisions regarding their choice of a BD. The students' choice at present does not just relate to the selection of either a PHEI or a foreign university or the selection of a discipline or a subject but also to other prominent influential factors including, fees, living costs, location, personal preference and career aspirations. Since the students' choice in selecting a BD from IDPs has not been researched in Sri Lanka due to it being a newly emerging field, it is advantageous to identify the influential factors. Even though numerous factors are identified as influential by previous research studies, all those factors may not be relevant for Sri Lankan students.

3. Research Questions

The research addresses two key questions:

- What are the factors that influence on Sri Lankan students' choice in selecting a BD in IDPs?
- Which factors have the greatest influence on Sri Lankan students' choice in selecting a BD in IDPs?

4. Methodology and Research Design

The overall study objective was to determine the factors which have the greatest influence on Sri Lankan students' choice in selecting a BD from IDPs. The research was designed to capture respondents' perceptions of factors that had influenced their decision in selecting a BD in IDPs, immediately following the decision making process. The study began with the review of relevant literature to identify the influential factors found in previous studies. Further, official documents of PHEIs were reviewed to get the awareness about the characteristics of the IDPs conducted in Sri Lanka. The BSc (BD in Science), BEng (BD in Engineering) and BA/BBA (BD in Arts and Business Administration) degrees have been selected for the study to cover the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and Management related disciplines in order to reflect industry demand. All PHEIs which offer

BDs through IDPs have been categorized into BSc, BEng and BA/BBA using stratified random sampling and 3 PHEIs have been selected from each stratum (type of a BD) using simple random sampling. Some of the PHEIs conduct IDPs for more than one type of a BD and hence few of them have been selected for more than once to represent in the sample. As a result, 7 PHEIs have been chosen randomly to collect 420 first-year students. The target population of undergraduates is "all undergraduates enrolled for a BD in an IDP in PHEIs". But the accessible student population is limited to "all first-year undergraduates in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and Management related BDs in IDPs in PHEIs". A simple random sample of 420 first-year undergraduates in STEM and management related BDs in randomly selected 7 PHEIs have been considered for the survey.

The questionnaire, which was developed to establish influential factors on students' choice in selecting a BD, was tested for subject suitability by senior academics and a few graduates at the participating PHEIs. The questionnaire required respondents to provide demographic data about their background information and to score variables from a list of 59 variables identified by the literature review on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was "strongly agreed" and 5 was "strongly disagreed". The list of 59 variables was employed to ensure an accurate representation of the characteristics which respondents perceived to be important in their choice decision. A pilot study was conducted twice by taking 45 first-year and second-year undergraduates of BSc, BEng and BA/BBA in IDPs separately in order to research the adequacy of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was revised twice according to the Cronbach's alpha value of the reliability test.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

It is evident from the demographic data that 81.8% of the first-year students in the sample of 420 have passed their ordinary level examination in the National curriculum. Of those, only 76.9% have continued their advanced level education in National curriculum and other students have entered British curriculum to fulfill their advanced level qualification. Further 49.5% of the respondents are from National schools and only 18.1% are from International schools. However, minimum entry level requirement is "C" for Mathematics and English in most the BDs except for engineering disciplines. It has been highlighted that around 75% of students and 68% of students in the data set have obtained "A" grades for English and Mathematics respectively. Further, 76.9% of the students are Sinhalese and 67.4% of the students represent the Western

province in the data set. Moreover, more than 50% of the parents have a BD and a higher level of educational qualification and 63% of the parents have a monthly earning less than Rs.200,000/=. Even though 15.5% of respondents have received the admission to National universities, they have enrolled for IDPs to follow a BD. Of those students, more than 40% highlighted that they were not selected for the first preferred BD to enroll for National universities. As a result, they have been motived to enroll for IDPs to follow their preferred BD. When referring to the students' choice, 6.7% of the respondents have changed their first choice of the BD after a few months and 77% have enrolled to their first preferred PHEI to pursue their BD.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Factor analysis was used as a data reduction method in order to identify the most influential factors on students' choice in selecting a BD to fulfill the second stage of the data analysis. Before applying factor analysis, a reliability test (Table 1) was conducted by the means of Cronbach's alpha. The items in a questionnaire are reliable or internally consistent if the Cronbach's Alpha value is greater than 0.7 (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). The overall value of Cronbach's alpha for 59 different variables of this study was found to be 0.939 which confirms the data is reliable for the analysis. Further, in applying the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's (KMO) overall measure of sampling adequacy (Table 2), a score of 0.886 was recorded which is in the acceptable range based on the fact that a KMO value greater than 0.6 is considered acceptable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Table 1: *Reliability Statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
0.939	59

Table 2: *KMO and Bartlett's Test*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.886
Bartlett's Test of	Approx. Chi-Square	14545.762
Sphericity	df	1711.000
	Sig.	0.000

Moreover, Bartlett's test of Sphericity was found to be significant (approx. Chi-Square value is 14545.762 with 0.000 significant values). Both KMO and Bartlett's test proved that the data set is appropriate for factor analysis. The principal component analysis was the approach used in factor analysis which identified the variation explained by each component. It determined that 66.82% of the total variance is explained by the extracted 13 components by the factor

analysis (Table 3). But 24% of the total variation is explained by the first extracted component and 9.45% of the variance by the second component. Hence this highlights that the first 8 extracted components explained higher variation (56.46%) than from 9th component to 13th component (10.362%). Hence all 13 components need not be considered and scree plot (figure 1) has checked before taking the decision about how many factors need to be extracted. The point of interest is where the curve starts to flatten. It can be seen that the scree plot begins to flatten after 7th component. Further, the scree plot also confirmed that the contribution to the variation by the first 7 components/factors is higher than the rest of the components after 7th. Hence the study confirmed the identification of the items with high factor loading into the first 7 components. The variance explained individually by first 7 factors was found to be 24.008%. 9.452%, 5.147%, 4.425%, 4.149%, 3.658% and 2.826% respectively and the overall cumulative variance explained by these 7 factors were found to be 53.665%.
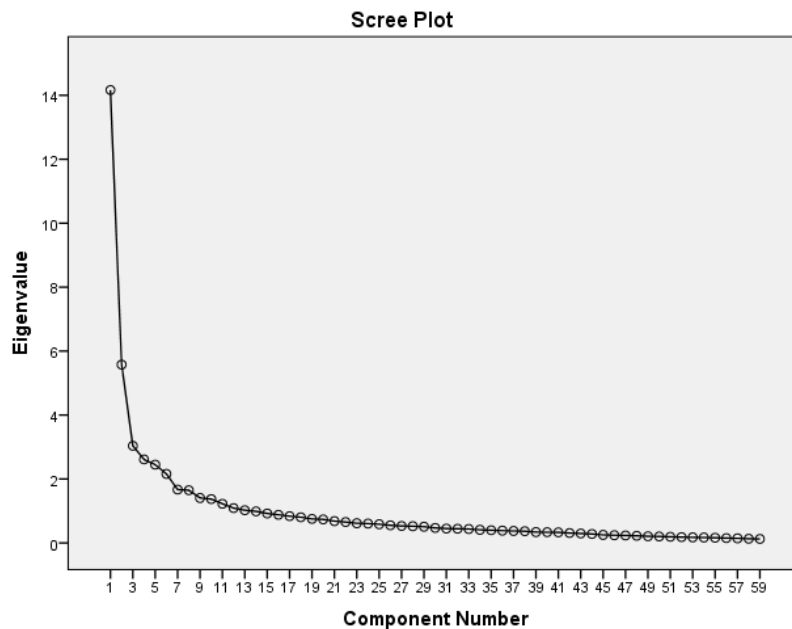

Figure 1: Scree Plot

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**
1	14.165	24.008	24.008	14.165	24.008	24.008
2	5.576	9.452	33.460	5.576	9.452	33.46
3	3.037	5.147	38.607	3.037	5.147	38.607
4	2.611	4.425	43.033	2.611	4.425	43.033
5	2.448	4.149	47.181	2.448	4.149	47.181
6	2.158	3.658	50.839	2.158	3.658	50.839
7	1.668	2.826	53.665	1.668	2.826	53.665
8	1.649	2.794	56.460	1.649	2.794	56.46
9	1.406	2.382	58.842	1.405	2.382	58.842
10	1.373	2.327	61.169	1.373	2.327	61.169
11	1.224	2.075	63.244	1.224	2.075	63.244
12	1.089	1.845	65.089	1.089	1.845	65.089
13	1.022	1.732	66.822	1.022	1.732	66.822
14	0.986	1.671	68.493			
15	0.921	1.561	70.053			
16	0.881	1.493	71.546			
17	0.837	1.418	72.965			
18	0.804	1.363	74.327			
19	0.749	1.27	75.597			
20	0.736	1.248	76.846			
21	0.682	1.156	78.001			
22	0.653	1.107	79.108			
23	0.616	1.044	80.152			
24	0.604	1.024	81.176			
25	0.584	0.989	82.165			
26	0.552	0.936	83.101			
27	0.532	0.902	84.003			
28	0.523	0.887	84.890			
29	0.507	0.859	85.749			
30	0.47	0.797	86.546			
31	0.45	0.763	87.309			
32	0.443	0.751	88.061			
33	0.437	0.74	88.801			
34	0.41	0.695	89.496			
35	0.397	0.673	90.169			
36	0.384	0.65	90.819			
37	0.374	0.635	91.454			
38	0.368	0.624	92.078			
39	0.338	0.573	92.650			
40	0.334	0.566	93.216			
41	0.329	0.558	93.775			
42	0.309	0.523	94.298			
43	0.296	0.502	94.800			
44	0.28	0.474	95.274			
45	0.252	0.426	95.700			
46	0.241	0.408	96.108			
47	0.232	0.394	96.502			
48	0.222	0.377	96.879			
49	0.209	0.354	97.232			
50	0.202	0.343	97.575			
51	0.191	0.324	97.899			
52	0.184	0.311	98.210			
53	0.175	0.296	98.507			
54	0.169	0.287	98.794			
55	0.163	0.276	99.070			
56	0.15	0.254	99.324			
57	0.144	0.244	99.568			
58	0.131	0.221	99.789			
59	0.124	0.211	100.000			

Table 3: *Total Variance Explained*

Varimax rotation has been used to maximize the numbers of variables with high loading on to each factor or a component separately (Field, 2005). The factor analysis has been conducted several times to extract a stronger correlation. Data were suppressed if the absolute value of the coefficient was less than 0.4 in order to remove the inter-correlations between the variables and the components. Moreover, the KMO test and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were monitored continuously and some of the items were removed which loaded under multiple components. It has been decided to consider the first 7 extracted components in the final rotated component matrix (Table 4) after comparing total variance and the scree plot. The total variance explained by the 7 components has been reduced to 53.647% which is the reduction of 0.018% which is negligible and the KMO value reduced to 0.882. The variables which have been loaded into 7 components have been overviewed in order to identify an appropriate name for each component.

Table 4: *Rotated Component Matrix*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Factor 31	0.766												
Factor 34	0.751												
Factor 33	0.741												
Factor 29	0.664												
Factor 35	0.641												
Factor 32	0.639												
Factor 30	0.628												
Factor 36	0.614												
Factor 37	0.599												
Factor 15		0.754											
Factor 16		0.730											
Factor 17		0.702											
Factor 18		0.602											
Factor 3		0.564											
Factor 14		0.541											
Factor 21			0.794										
Factor 20			0.756										
Factor 22			0.750										
Factor 23			0.627										
Factor 19			0.502										
Factor 40				0.757									
Factor 39				0.725									
Factor 41				0.680									
Factor 42				0.608									
Factor 38				0.587									
Factor 56					0.724								
Factor 57					0.707								

Factor 58				0.686							
Factor 54				0.654							
Factor 59				0.624							
Factor 55				0.623							
Factor 1					0.756						
Factor 2					0.733						
Factor 8					0.632						
Factor 10						0.880					
Factor 11						0.817					
Factor 9						0.504					
Factor 5							0.745				
Factor 7							0.707				
Factor 6							0.696				
Factor 50								0.696			
Factor 49								0.675			
Factor 47									0.648		
Factor 48									0.618		
Factor 45									0.522		
Factor 25										0.631	
Factor 26										0.552	
Factor 53											0.743

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

a. Rotation converged in 14 iterations.

Finally, infrastructure facilities, marketing strategy, cost, university characteristics, programme evaluation, messenger (sources of information) and peers have been identified as the most influential factors which affect in selecting a BD from the IDPs. Table 5 displays the percentages of variation explained by each labeled factor based on the output of SPSS analysis.

Table 5: *Influential factors identified by factor analysis*

	Factors (labeled)	% variance	Items/variables loaded into each factor	Item number	Loading
1	Infrastructure facilities	23.790	availability of sporting facilities	v31	0.766
			availability of extra-curricular activities	v34	0.751
			availability of wider range of student administered societies	v33	0.741
			library facilities with all recommended reading	v29	0.664
			availability of fully equipped laboratory instruments with trained instructors	v35	0.641
			availability of medical facilities at emergency situations	v32	0.639
			prefer institute with maximum operation hours of library	v30	0.628
			availability of modern IT lab with trained staff	v36	0.614
			availability of free internet or WIFI access	v37	0.599

2	Marketing strategy	9.580	location of university is convenient and accessible	v15	0.754
			excellent layout of the university	v16	0.73
			friendly atmosphere of the campus	v17	0.702
			availability of integrated transportation facilities	v18	0.602
			impression of campus visit before the enrollment	v3	0.564
			social networking sites (Facebook, twitter, YouTube)	v14	0.541
3	Cost	5.268	Cost of the internal degree programme compared to other alternative programmes	v21	0.794
			Cost of local university fee for the programme	v20	0.756
			Other costs involve the selection	v22	0.75
			university offer education at an affordable rates	v23	0.627
			preference to institutions nearer my home	v19	0.502
4	University characteristics	4.520	higher education opportunities offered for graduates	v40	0.757
			affiliation or collaboration with a reputed foreign university	v39	0.725
			maintain discipline in students	v41	0.68
			Good social environment at the university (college)	v42	0.608
			academic reputation and the image of the institute	v38	0.587
5	Programme evaluation	4.020	arrangement of specialised study programmes when required	v56	0.724
			methodology of teaching	v57	0.707
			international recognition of the university programmes	v58	0.686
			availability of required degree programmes	v54	0.654
			industry demand for the programme	v59	0.624
			flexibility of switching majors between the optional units	v55	0.623
6	Messenger (source of information)	3.600	selection of an institution is based on its website	v1	0.756
			selection of an institution is based on its paper advertisement	v2	0.733
			choosing an institution is based on parents suggestion	v8	0.632
7	Peers	2.868	advice from peers who have been following the similar programme	v10	0.88
			advice from peers who have been studying in a similar university	v11	0.817
			choosing an institution is based on peer influence	v9	0.504

6. Discussion

The 7 components determined by factor analysis have been identified as influential factors in selecting a BD from IDPs which consist of 37 different variables out of 59 variables examined under the questionnaire. Those 7 influential factors have been named as 'infrastructure facilities', 'marketing strategy', 'cost', 'university characteristics', 'programme evaluation', 'sources of information', and 'peer' based on different variables loaded into each component in the principal component matrix (Table 1.3).

Factor 1, infrastructure facilities, was identified as the strongest factor for the first-year students when selecting a BD from IDPs. Indeed, sporting facilities, extra-curricular activities

and student administered societies were the main contributing variables than other variables related to the learning environment. Hence the management of PHEIs should note these interests by students and provide a range of activities and sports which will meet the students' interest and needs for physical and social growth. Along with this, first-year students highlighted that when they need medical attention, adequate health care facilities must be available to them. Hence, PHEIs should make provisions for an adequate health care system on campus to fulfill this basic need. In addition, library facilities, fully equipped laboratory facilities and availability of modern IT labs with internet and Wi-Fi access were also rated under factor 1 by the respondents, but those variables are generally expected as basic provisions from any PHEIs. The importance of infrastructure facilities was highlighted through the work of Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi (2003), Woolnough (1994) and Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño (2006).

Factor 2, the marketing strategy, was ranked as the second strongest determinant factor regarding the students' choice of a BD. This is because marketing strategy plays an important role in creating awareness among the prospective students, and student intake for a given PHEI can increase with better awareness. Hence PHEIs should maintain a safe, attractive and friendly atmosphere within the campus in order to create a positive impression before students make the decision. Further, students seek the PHEIs which are situated in an accessible and convenient location with the availability of integrated transportation facilities. PHEIs should maintain social networking sites with updated information about their courses, students' activities and achievements, innovative developments and scholarship awarding details to get the attention of prospective students. The role of marketing strategy while making the university and BD choice decision was explained through the work of Erdal (2001), Steele (2002), Furbeck, Harding, Wohlgemuth & Bousquet (2004), Yamamoto (2006), Donnellan (2002), Donaldson & McNicholas (2004) and Keskinen, Tiuraniemi & Liimola (2008).

Factor 3 determined the importance of 'cost' factor for first-year students in selecting a BD from IDPs in Sri Lanka., Most of the students search for affordable BDs by evaluating the cost of other alternative BDs offered in different IDPs at various PHEIs based on their preferred discipline. Indeed, they looked into various types of costs such as the foreign university fee of the BD programme, the fee of the local PHEI, transportation cost and day-to-day expenses involved with the selection. Hence PHEIs should provide the facility of obtaining students' loans from private or local banks with reasonable interest rates. Further, the arrangement of special

grant schemes or scholarships for high achievers in the advanced level examination, sports and extra-curricular activities may attract more students for enrolment to the PHEIs. The importance of 'cost' was explained through the work of Briggs & Wilson (2007), Hoyt & Brown (2003) and Mazzarol & Soutar (2002).

Factor 4, university characteristics, has been identified by the respondents as another determinant which influences students' choice in selecting a BD from IDPs in Sri Lanka. According to Agrey & Lampadan (2014), the reputation of the affiliated foreign university is important to prospective students along with the indication that upon successful completion of their selected BD programme there will be a high probability that jobs will be available for them. Further, the academic reputation of the PHEIs who conduct the IDP in Sri Lanka is also important based on the finding of this study. While the reputation of an institution is built over time, it would be important to ensure that efforts are being made to establish a positive reputation within and beyond the immediate context in which the local or affiliated university is located (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014). The reputation may also impact on higher education opportunities for graduates and it was indicated by the respondents as important when selecting a BD. The importance of reputation was highlighted through the work of Yamamoto (2006), Keling, Krishnan & Nurtjahja (2007), Saeed & Ehsan (2010) and Ming (2010).

Factor 5, programme evaluation, was another determinant which was ranked as an influential factor by first-year students of the sample with 6 different variables. They have highlighted the importance of conducting a quality BD programme with qualified lecturers and how it impacts on selecting a BD in PHEIs. As good support from lecturers was desirable to the respondents based on the findings, faculty members should realise that support for students within their classes needs to be balanced with equal opportunities for all learners with different abilities. Hence it is deemed important to arrange special classes for students based on the requirement and need. Different teaching methodologies can be utilized to overcome difficulties of learning of different learners. Moreover, international recognition of the university programmes, availability of required degree programmes, industry demand for the programme and flexibility of switching majors between optional units were also indicated by the respondents under the 'programme evaluation' factor. As a result, students look for a BD in a PHEI which will brighten their career prospectus and will also be accepted by the industry. Hence it is of vital importance to conduct BD programmes which have relevant industry demand and the

recognition with high flexibility of selecting optional units based on the student interest. The importance of career-oriented courses with a focus on industry relevance and reputation was highlighted through the work of Shanka, Quintal & Taylor (2005), Keskinen et al., (2008), Songan, Sam, Tonga, Rahman, & Wah (2010) and Ming (2010) and the results are in line with the previously published scholarly work.

The source of information (or 'messenger') was ranked as the **6th factor** based on the findings of the study which indicates the role of website information, paper advertisements and parents on students' decision making in order to select a BD. Hence PHEIs could strengthen these criteria to attract students to their corresponding degree programmes. The role and the impact of the messenger on students' choice were highlighted through the work of Reddy (2014) and Phang (2013).

Factor 7, 'peers', was indicated as influential on students' choice by the respondents but it was rated as an independent influencer in the present study. The importance of the role of the 'peer' was to obtain recommendations about the BD programmes, PHEIs, job prospects, and industry demand. Hence the word-of-mouth influences by the graduates or senior undergraduates impact very highly. However, in most of the studies, the role of the peer and parent has been rated together as a 'reference group' and is discussed through the work of Donnellan (2002), Strasser, Ozgur & Schroeder (2002), Esters & Bowen (2005), Shanka et al., (2005) and Yamamoto (2006).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the present study determined infrastructure facilities, marketing strategy, cost, university characteristics, programme evaluation, sources of information and peers as the influential factors in selecting a BD in IDPs which consists of 37 different variables out of 59 variables examined under the questionnaire. The variance explained in total by the influential factors ranging from 1 to 7 was found to be 23.79%, 9.58%, 5.268%, 4.520% 4.02%, 3.6% and 2.868% respectively (Table 5). The overall cumulative variance explained by all these factors was found to be 59.772%. Rest of the variance was due to other variables which have not been identified as influential by the factor analysis of this study. Table 5 shows the factor extraction which was prepared on the basis of the rotated component matrix. This table shows different factors ranging from 1 to 7 and each factor constitutes different variables with their factor loadings. The factors are in order of percentage of variance explained by the collective variables

taken together. The infrastructure facilities related variables such as availability of sporting facilities, extracurricular activities, and wide range of student administered societies, internet and WIFI access, modern IT lab facilities with trained staff, fully equipped laboratory instruments, library facilities and medical facilities are most influential. Further, the marketing-related variables such as location, layout and atmosphere of the university, impression of the university before enrolment and social networking sites were also highly influential. Additionally, 5 variables grouped under 'cost', 5 variables grouped under 'university characteristics' and 6 variables grouped under 'programme evaluation' can be considered as moderately influential in students' choice in selecting a BD. Moreover, the variables such as website information, paper advertisements and parents grouped under 'source of information' were identified as influential factors in students' decision making. However, the influence of peers was also determined as an influential factor and it has not been loaded under the source of information (messenger) like previous other studies. This may be due to the fact that first-year undergraduates believed the 'peer' as a mentor to guide them in the proper direction to make an optimal decision about the BD and not merely as an 'information provider'. The findings of the study can be beneficial to develop enrolment strategies to increase the student intake of PHEIs.

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