

# **Variables Influencing Students' Choice of Disciplines in Higher Education: General Education Vs Professional Degree Program**

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## **Abstract**

*The choice of students at higher education institutions is bifurcated into general, technical or professional degree program. The choice factors in this regard entail financial attractiveness; program and course suitability and availability; ease and flexibility of enrolment procedure; future ease of employment opportunities after graduating; attractiveness of the institutions; quality reputation; gender; students' academic background at pre-university level; degree (content and structure); physical aspects and facilities; value of education; institutional information; people (family, friends, peers and teachers); family income; career goal and location. However, the learner's motives and self-sufficiency are also influential role players that coincide with nature of learning with a view to moral development and job orientation. That's why, to identify the key differentiator in students' choice for private higher education institutions either for general or professional degree program is the motto of this study. Moreover, the authors aim to set discrimination function based on the random selection of samples/students which is in total 100 in numbers with a semi-structured questionnaire from two different dimensional academic institutions namely, Chittagong BGMEA Institute of Fashion Designing and Technology (CBIFT) and Feni University on higher education perspective since both are offering 4-year honors degree but in different dimensions. By using the tools-SPSS 22.0 with the help of Discriminant Analysis, it is found that family income (0.785), career goal (0.360), and location (0.330) are only three influential predictors whereas program suitability & availability (0.290) and financial attractiveness (0.266) toiled as poor predictors. The major contribution of this study is to highlight the significance of predictors on students' decision of higher education study destination. This knowledge is a key to focus in offering effective program and discipline in future in order to ahead in choice competition by attracting prospective students for higher study.*

**Key terms:** Choice of students; higher education; discriminant analysis

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## **Introduction**

Education develops mind, body and soul by absorbing knowledge from accessible sources through learning. The process of learning through general education assures to critical thinking, development of values and knowledge as for the edification of the society. As a matter of fact, students entering higher education today are very different than those of previous generations (Abrahamson, 1990). Moreover the study of choice and decision making in higher education is an area of growing research interest primarily because higher education has been transformed from a domesticated centrally funded non marketised entity to a highly marketised and competitive environment (Soutar & Turner, 2002). The rise of choosing technical or vocational learning has undergone through a rigorous myths with as screening device for selection which might add more market value on the specific field other than those without it and choosing a well reputed institution also have an influential effect on future job market (Taubman & Wales, 1973). Along with all above, some critics urged some other factors relating to choice of higher education institution namely, social, service, regulation and promotion factors (He & Banham, 2011; Perkins & Neumayer, 2011).

The nature of difficulty embodied into the service that some of quality attributes can't be judged in advance and the students intention to engage in higher education for choice is also influential (Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). To understand the satisfaction of consumers, it is necessary to know about the preferential attributes that influencing customer satisfaction (Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Kozak, 2003). Usually the students keep scrutinize the academic recognition, quality of academics, campus atmosphere, tuition fees and quality of facilities and availability of programs for selecting an institution (Chapman, 1981; Burns, 2006; Ismail, 2008). Few researchers argued that students' prediction of an institution is basically attributes and characteristics based (Halstead, Hartman & Schimdt, 1994) whereas controversy against the college attributes for generating satisfaction is somewhat different (Athiyaman, 1997; Oliver, 1997). Availability of desired programs has an influential role for college selection along with other common one (Chapman, 1981; Joseph & Joseph, 2000). However, it is supported by the literature that feeling of satisfaction toward an institution is both reliant and contingent subject to the information prior to selection and aroused expectation there to (Spreng, Mackenzie & Olshavsky, 1996; Bruce, 1998).

The key purposes of the study are to investigate the factors influencing students' choice of discipline to study at private higher education institutions and significant effect of those factors in choice decision. In order to identify the preference, prospective students consider what is important for them and then generate a conscious

and unconscious trade off among the attributes (Souter and Turner, 2002).

### **Literature Review**

Educational choices categorized under three forms such as, investment motive (Borjas, 2009) which measured through net return on investment depending on job opportunities against the cost in education (Blaug, 1976); consumption motive (Alstadsaeter et.al., 2008) as choice factor through non-pecuniary interest (Alstadsaeter et.al., 2008; Orepoulos & Salvanas, 2014) and screening motives work as the parameter of selecting employees from same discipline or having theoretical knowledge about the sector in order to minimize cost of recruitment, that's why the term used a screening (Taubman & Wales, 1973).

Students' choice to decide on higher education study can be described by three phases where each phase, factors both of individual and organizational factors interact to generate outcome for choice decision (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Students choice affected through students ability, socioeconomic status, parents, peer educational activities, and school characteristics (Litten, 1980; Nora, 2004; Somers et al., 2006; Tillery, 1973), preliminary higher education institute values, search activities of both students and institutions in general (Chapman, 1981; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987), and educational and occupational inspirations, costs, institution courtship activities (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

It is not peculiar to have the different attribute choice preference between academically talented students and average students (Tierney, 1983) and institutions located relatively near their homes is considerable as well (Jackson, 1982) along with teaching faculty and attractiveness & campus atmosphere (Lin, 1997; Mazzarol, 1998) under security, safety and cleanliness and other related issues (Price et al., 2003).

A number of studies have been conducted by many researchers on the institutional characteristics and underlying factors that influencing the choice of institutions (Gray et al., 2003; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Lin, 1997). The image and reputation of the institution is referred to the crucial role players in the development of marketing positioning (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). The academic reputation and image of the institutions are worth considerable. The excellence of the institute very often goes beyond its actual quality (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Increasingly, students are becoming critical and analytical when choosing their institute for higher education (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003) in respect to branding and reputation (Hall, 1993; Mazzarol, 1998).

Involvement relates to a student with personal or social ties sway the decision making in choice process either from parents, other family members or peers (Sheppard et.al.,

1992; Stefanie, 2006). The influence of the family and parental encouragement for higher education attainment is significant (Freeman, 1997; Wilson & Allen, 1987; Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987) whether for motivation or for proactive role (Cabera & La Nasa, 2000). In other words, to know students and their parents' expectations are making the challenges for institution in competitive environment (Thomas et.al., 1996). The intimacy around the friends weighs heavily on decision making (Hayden, 2000) and also neighbors (Maringe, 2006) for higher education choice.

The availability of positive attitude creating information has been impacts on potential students and their decision making (Cleopatra, 2004) and this a continual process in selecting institution initially (Moogan et.al., 1999; Joseph & Joseph, 2000) along with career prospects related information and areas of study (Cleopatra, 2004). After reviewing the literature, the discriminant factor analysis on the said variables in two different categorical institutions particularly in Bangladesh is not well thought-out on the earlier researchers' views that's why found gap and this study is considered on the said topic.

### **Methodology**

Higher Education institutes across the country are currently experiencing increased competitions to attract international students. There is clearly a need for more explicit knowledge about what underpins students' decision of study destination. The implications of these are discussed in light of the current literature. Here, students' choice of institution is a categorical variable consisting of two major categories/options: general education and professional education. While there are many factor that influence students' decision, this study requires to delineate the interrelated categories of factors including financial attractiveness; program and course suitability and availability; ease and flexibility of enrolment procedure; future ease of employment opportunities after graduating; attractiveness of the institutions; quality reputation; gender; students' academic background at pre-university level; degree (content and structure); physical aspects and facilities; value of education; institutional information; people (family, friends, peers and teachers); family income; career goal and location. Based on the significant attributes, questionnaire has been set. But in data screening, all factors are not significantly discriminate between these two academic institutions. That's why; we revised the attributes for analysis and the most significant attributes are financial attractiveness, program suitability & availability, career goal, family income, and location.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The dimensions of all components of students' choice are overviewed as follows:

**Location:** A low-cost, nearby academic institution was an important stimulator of a student's decision to further his or her education. A study by Kohn et al. (1976) discussed that an important factor in student predisposition to attend college is the close proximity of a higher education institution to home. More interestingly, the proximity to a college campus does affect college attendance rates. Students who live close to a campus are more likely to attend college though they may not attend the campus located near home (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Sevier (1986) stated that research has consistently shown that college or university location can be a major factor for potential student's decision to apply and enroll. Some students may be looking for a school close to their hometown or place of work for convenience and accessibility (Absher & Crawford, 1996).

**Program Suitability and Availability:** Student suitability of the program is considered to be the most important factor than any other from students' acceptance view point (Hooley & Lynch, 1981; Krone et al., 1983; Peng & Lee, 1992; Webb, 1993) with the issues selection of courses, their quality, flexibility and length of the program and program entry requirements (Qureshi, 1995). Ford et al (1999) also found that program issues such as range of programs of study, flexibility of degree program, major change flexibility and range of degree options are the most important factors for students to choose higher education institutions. Ismail (2009) indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information satisfaction with respect to academic recognition (external influence). Again, the availability of the required program is considered as "the very importance attributes" for first year university students to choose a particular higher education institution (Yusof et al., 2008).

**Career Goal:** Students are often attracted to post-secondary education because of the career opportunities it may provide Sevier (1998). Paulsen (1990) stated that students often make college choices based on existing job opportunities for college graduates. Students are interested in outcomes. They are influenced by what graduates are doing, what graduate schools they attend and contributions that they are making to society (Sevier, 1997).

**Financial Attractiveness:** Price is a negative influence on college choice while financial aid to reduce costs is a positive influence (Jackson, 1982). It was reviewed by Joseph & Joseph (2000) that cost-related issues seem to have more importance as years go by. For instance, Houston (1979) found those issues at the bottom of the scale, while in Webb (1993) and Joseph & Joseph (1998) traced as one of the most important elements.

**Family Income:** Ismail (2009) studied on mediating effect of information on college choice indicated that students are satisfied with college choice based on their information satisfaction with respect financial factors (external influences) which include financial aids and affordable fees. Again, a study conducted by Yusof (2008) found that financial assistance offered by university as one of the four very important attributes expected from a particular higher education institution of choice. Thus, students who receive financial aid awards are more likely to enter college (Litten, 1980).

### **Proposed Conceptual Framework**

Along with demographic questions in a format of open-ended questions, independent variable (Choice Factors) are attributes based where the attributes are rated based on importance scale highly important (5) to not all important (1) whereas categories prevailed as professional degree program and general education degree program for dependent variables. In our study, we selected Chittagong BGMEA Institute of Fashion Designing and Technology (CBIFT) and Feni University since both are offering 4-year honors degree but in different dimensions.

The proposed conceptual framework is shown as figure-1 below. It shows the relationships between the independent variables and dependent variable. The independent variables to be examined are financial attractiveness, program suitability & availability, career goal, family income; and location. Figure-1 Proposed Conceptual Framework is showing the relationship between institutional factors (financial attractiveness, program suitability & availability, career goal, family income; and location) and students choice decision either on general education or professional degree program. From the philosophical consideration, this is a 'quantitative positivist' approach under epistemological and ontological paradigm (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Gregor, 2006; Straub et.al., 2004)

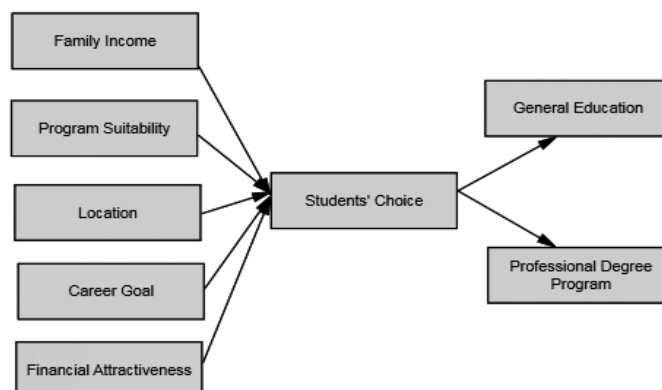


Fig-1: Conceptual Framework of the study

The field survey took place in January-February 2016 with the procedure of simple random sampling. A total of 120 students survey, 100 were selected based on avoiding missing responses though techniques for data collection were self-completion and interviewer filled survey. Being included into the cluster of having choices made toward institution by the students/samples, Discriminant Analysis is an appropriate technique to classify the cases with categorical dependent variables and metric independent variables and to explore significant relationship (Malhotra & Dash, 2010). However, by discriminant analysis, it is possible to develop discriminant functions i.e., the linear combination of independent variables that will discriminate between the categories of the dependent variable in a perfect manner and examine whether significant differences exist among the groups, in terms of the predictor variables. As in statistics, we use two-group discriminant analysis since the dependent variable has two categories namely, general education and professional degree program. As per objective, we want to set a discriminant function by creating linear combinations of predictors. The typical discriminant function is:

$$D = a + W_1X_{1k} + W_2X_{2k} + W_3X_{3k} + \dots + W_kX_{nk}$$

Where,

D = Discriminant score

a = Intercept

$W_i$  = Discriminant Weight for Independent Variables 'i'(importance of each X in helping us distinguish the institution selection groups)

$X_{ik}$  = Independent variables for object 'k'

Usually the sample has been split into analysis sample and holdout sample for cross validation. In this study, the analysis sample was 60% i.e. 60 cases, 30 cases for each group and holdout samples for remaining 40 cases, 20 cases for each group.

### **Result**

The SPSS 22.0 has been used to analyze the data according to the specification required for discriminant analysis. However, the discriminant model validity justified through the significance of discriminant functions and re-classifying the cases. One of the relative importances available in discriminate analysis is to develop predictive model for generalization of other samples (Hair et.al., 2006).

**Table # 1(a) : Group Statistics**

	Predictors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Valid N (listwise)	
				Unweighted	Weighted
1	FamilyIncome	33.30	16.932	30	30.000
	Program Suitability	4.23	.728	30	30.000
	Location	3.33	1.061	30	30.000
	Financial Attractiveness	2.13	1.137	30	30.000
	CareerGoal	3.97	.765	30	30.000
2	Family Income	71.83	17.877	30	30.000
	Program Suitability	4.77	.568	30	30.000
	Location	4.27	.944	30	30.000
	Financial Attractiveness	3.23	1.736	30	30.000
	Career Goal	4.67	.606	30	30.000
Total	Family Income	52.57	25.990	60	60.000
	Program Suitability	4.50	.701	60	60.000
	Location	3.80	1.102	60	60.000
	Financial Attractiveness	2.68	1.557	60	60.000
	Career Goal	4.32	.770	60	60.000

**1(b) : Tests of Equality of Group Means**

Wilks' Lambda	F	df1	df2	Sig.
.441	73.470	1	58	.000
.853	10.005	1	58	.002
.818	12.948	1	58	.001
.873	8.433	1	58	.005
.790	15.427	1	58	.000

Group membership can be predicted on significant difference between groups on each of the independent variables using group means and ANOVA result data. Here in the GroupStatistics Table (#1a) , we see strong evidence of significant differences between means of professional degree programs and general education for all independent variables with Financial Attractiveness, Program Suitability & Availability, Career Goal, Family Income; and Location producing very high value F's.



**Table # 2: Pooled Within-Groups Matrices<sup>a</sup>**

Predictors	Family Income	Program Suitability	Location	Financial Attractiveness	Career Goal
Covariance Family Income	303.146	-.280	2.661	4.655	-2.317
<input type="checkbox"/> Program					
<input type="checkbox"/> Suitability	-.280	.426	-.077	-.057	.136
<input type="checkbox"/> Location	2.661	-.077	1.009	-.055	-.103
<input type="checkbox"/> Financial					
<input type="checkbox"/> Attractiveness	4.655	-.057	-.055	2.152	.336
<input type="checkbox"/> Career Goal	-2.317	.136	-.103	.336	.476
Correlation Family Income	1.000	-.025	.152	.182	-.193
<input type="checkbox"/> Program					
<input type="checkbox"/> Suitability	-.025	1.000	-.117	-.059	.302
<input type="checkbox"/> Location	.152	-.117	1.000	-.037	-.149
<input type="checkbox"/> Financial	.182	-.059	-.037	1.000	.331
<input type="checkbox"/> Attractiveness					
<input type="checkbox"/> Career Goal	-.193	.302	-.149	.331	1.000

a. The covariance matrix has 58 degrees of freedom.  
Again the Pooled - Within Group Matrices (table # 2) also supports use of these independent variables being low in inter-correlation.

**Table # 3: Eigenvalues**

Function	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Canonical Correlation
1	2.056 <sup>a</sup>	100.0	100.0	.820

a. First 1 canonical discriminant functions were used in the analysis.

The minimum number of Discriminant functions is the minimum of either the number of independent variables or less than one category of dependents variables (Hair et.al, 2006). Here only one function is displayed due to considering two groups namely professional and general education in table # 3. The canonical correlation is the multiple correlations between the predictors and the discriminant function. So a canonical correlation of 0.820 suggests the model explaining 67.24% ( $R^2$ ) of the variation in the grouping variables whether a student choice either on professional degree program or general education degree program.

**Table # 4: Wilks' Lambda**

Test of Function(s)	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-square	df	Sig.
1	.327	61.992	5	.000

Here in table # 4: Wilks' Lambda Values exerted the significance of the function. The chi-square statistics is also supporting to the Wilks' Lambda for statistical significance means to have a relation between dependent groups and independent variables.

**Table # 5: Standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients**

	Function
	1
Family Income	.853
Program Suitability	.184
Location	.298
Financial Attractiveness	-.042
Career Goal	.527

The Standard Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients provides the index of each predictor where sign indicates the direction of relationship. Family Income was the strongest predictor while Career Goal was next in importance as predictor in table # 5. Location, Program Suitability & Availability, and Financial Attractiveness were less successful as predictors

**Table # 6: Structure Matrix**

	Function
	1
Family Income	.785
Career Goal	.360
Location	.330
Program Suitability	.290
Financial Attractiveness	.266

- Pooled within-groups correlations between discriminating variables and standardized canonical discriminant functions
- Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function.

In table # 6, the structure matrix indicates the relative importance of the predictors and correlations means to shows the correlation of each variable with each discriminate function i.e. discriminant loadings. Usually the cut-off value between important and less important variables is 0.30 like factor analysis loadings, here Program Suitability & Availability and Financial Attractiveness clearly not loaded on the discriminant functions means to weakest predictors and suggests that these attributes are not differentiating the choice factors between professional and general education, but a function of other un-assessed factors.

**Table # 7: Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients**

	Function
	1
Family Income	.049
Program Suitability	.282
Location	.297
Financial Attractiveness	-.029
Career Goal	.764
(Constant)	-8.193

**Unstandardized coefficients**

The Un-standardized Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients are used to create the discriminant function equation which provides relative importance of each of the predictor in table # 7. In this case, we have,

$$D = (0.049 \times \text{Family Income}) + (0.282 \times \text{Program Suitability \& Availability}) + (0.297 \times \text{Location}) + (-0.029 \times \text{Financial Attractiveness}) + (0.764 \times \text{Career Goal}) - 8.193$$

**Table # 8: Functions at Group Centroids**

Predictors	Function
	1
General	-1.410
Professional	1.410

Unstandardized  
canonical discriminant  
functions evaluated at  
group means

Group Centroid describes each group in terms of its profile using group means (Centroid) of the predictor variables and it is discriminatory as well as per the table value (table#8).

**Table # 9(a): Classification Results<sup>a,c</sup>**

				Predicted Group Membership		Total
				General	Professional	
Original	Count	General	28	2	30	
		Professional	5	25	30	
	%	General	93.3	6.7	100.0	
		Professional	16.7	83.3	100.0	
Cross-validated <sup>b</sup>	Count	General	27	3	30	
		Professional	5	25	30	
	%	General	90.0	10.0	100.0	
		Professional	16.7	83.3	100.0	

- a. 88.3% of original grouped cases correctly classified.
- b. Cross validation is done only for those cases in the analysis. In cross validation, each case is classified by the functions derived from all cases other than that case.
- c. 86.7% of cross-validated grouped cases correctly classified

**Table # 9(b): Classification Results<sup>a,c</sup> for cases not selected for use in the analysis (Holdout Sample)**

				Predicted Group Membership		Total
				General	Professional	
Original	Count	General	19	1	20	
		Professional	1	19	20	
	%	General	95.0	5.0	100.0	
		Professional	5.0	95.0	100.0	
Cross-validated <sup>b</sup>	Count	General	17	3	20	
		Professional	2	18	20	
	%	General	85.0	15.0	100.0	
		Professional	10.0	90.0	100.0	

- a. 95.0% of original grouped cases correctly classified.
- b. Cross validation is done only for those cases in the analysis. In cross validation, each case is classified by the functions derived from all cases other than that case.
- c. 87.5% of cross-validated grouped cases correctly classified.

The classification result reveals that 86.7% of respondents were correctly classified in between groups (Hit ratio) in table # 9(a). The students preferred General Education Based Institution is classified with slightly better accuracy (93.3%) than those of

Professional degree program (83.3%) which is larger than the chance ratio (50/50 for equal size group). Most researchers accepted a hit ratio of more than 25% due to chance and here 86.7% of cross-validated grouped cases correctly classified. Again in table # 9(b), the classification result for cases not selected for use in the analysis (holdout sample) is 87.5 % of cross-validated grouped cases correctly classified. Finally, the discrimination function has got worthiness of prediction on the students' choice preference by considering relevant attributes.

### **Discussion**

Universally, availability of a desired course is the most important for students when selecting a university. However, the costs of going to university are the most influential when selecting between several universities that offer a similar course (Price et al., 2003). In our study, the career goal is the best consideration for discriminating these two institutions for higher education which is similar to the study of Maringe (2006) as a career investment. Again, the same positive views also found in other studies as 'Value for money' as a critical issue for students when selecting higher education by Petruzzellis & Romanazzi (2010); as future career by Chen's (2007) analysis; and as career prospect by Soutar & Turner (2002).

However, the category location factors appear to have an important impact on students' decision of study destination. The respondents show different opinions about native town as an attractive study destination, irrespective to the regional etiquette, the lifestyle and institution's ranking. This may relate to the fact that knowledge and awareness of study destination influence students' decision of study destination to certain extent (Maringe, 2006).

In relation to the factors that influence students' decision of study destination, the data analysis shows evidence which is supported by early research that costs is another important and practical factor especially following the introduction of tuition fees in higher education. It is an essential factor, even though in this study all respondents are excluded from the fees, it remains an important influencing factor because there are other costs such as relevant expenses that they considered. While it is not surprising that costs is an important factor, higher education management could focus on providing more financial aids and scholarships (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003) to assist prospective students to be able to have options to further study. Interestingly, few respondents highlight that free tuition fees is an additional bonus; the quality of the education is more important. This is surprising because these respondents place the highest concerns to the program they are interested and indicate that there are other solutions to overcome concerns with regards to other factors such as costs.

The category social factors are surprising because the respondents place less priority to these aspects in this study. The most of the respondents claimed that they made their final decision independently for higher education; this is quite different from what early research suggests about family and friends influences. Parental role (Gomes & Murphy, 2003) and pressure are highlighted as influencing the decision making of their children, especially the conservative parents. This is interesting because among the important factors that influence the respondents' decisions, the majority of them indicate that culture issues are unimportant factors to consider when selecting their higher education study destination. However, this study suggests that, in fact, they consider culture issues indirectly or even implicitly. A strong alumnus could be a valuable source of referral for higher education institutes with consideration family and friends' recommendation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The recommendations gathered from the respondents' suggestions are mainly focused on effectiveness of the program introduced in the institutions and quality of both online and offline communication to raise awareness among the prospective students. Furthermore, the respondents suggest offline communication channels like education fairs and exhibitions, seminars held at embassies in different locations still play an important role for many prospective students. That's why; the institutes perhaps need to understand the interest of their student market in order to market their programs/courses more effectively.

### **Conclusion**

The study is beneficial to both students and the institutions for better future planning and decision making. This is obviously a better view of the factors having influential roles in selection of higher education, particularly the needs and perceptions of the students in their further study decision making process. Though the samples only covered only two academic institutions which may not generate exhaustive picture that reflect the whole student population in Bangladesh and which may be idea of concern for the future researcher.

The students passed from HSC or intermediate level have both of the options to enroll. The decision to engage any one of them is influencing through several factors. Even though not only students choice is primary concern but also the family, the key role players of the family and influential role of family members in decision making, the earlier GPA both in HSC and SSC, the participation and performance in public competitive exam in higher education level, the conservatism within the family tradition, family size, family income, the psychology of the students whether predetermined, self-dependent, balanced are worth considerable. Each of the factors has influential role in general but few factors have dominating role in this aspect or

circumstances. Very critically, the conservatism within the family regarding female students has profound effects toward the students' choice for higher education. The students' own psychological considerations are imperative predominantly when students have their own choice of decision making. It is undoubtedly holistic whereas professional education is too specific towards job or career and intensifies a person with specialty on particular fields. Both the options are not forcibly worked as alternative but complementary in some respect as well.

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