# Key Determinants Influencing Computer Science Undergraduates in Fee-Levying Higher Education Institute Choices in Sri Lanka

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*Abstract* – The increase in student enrolments in computer science (CS) degrees in Sri Lanka has intensified competition among fee-levying higher education institutes (FHEIs). However, FHEIs allocate resources to enrolment strategies without identifying student requirements. This research intends to determine the influences impacting students' choice of an FHEI when pursuing CS-related programmes. 35 factors under the categories- students' internal characteristics, institute-related factors, external individuals, and communication methods were considered. The results revealed that external individuals have no positive impact on students' choice of an FHEI whereas the other three factors do. FHEIs can benefit from these results by developing strategies to attract students and maximise enrolment.

*Keywords* – **University choice factors, computer science majors, fee-levying higher education institutes, Sri Lankan undergraduates.**

## 1. Introduction

The information technology (IT) sector became significant in Sri Lanka during the mid-1990s and has since grown rapidly, now serving various sectors such as banking and finance, education, textiles and apparel, healthcare, and insurance. Over the past few years, this sector has emerged as a key contributor to foreign exchange earnings. In 2019, it accounted for 12% of foreign exchange inflows from the country's service sector and became the fourth largest exporter for Sri Lanka, generating USD 1.5 billion in revenue [34]. The industry is forecasted to earn a revenue of USD 5 billion by the year 2025 [34]. Sri Lanka's IT industry comprises more than 600 companies that provide software solutions and services to customers in countries such as the United States and Europe including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany [25]. The country also acts as a hub for offshore software development for numerous Fortune 500 companies [5].

As a result, the number of workers in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector expanded from 42 019 employees in 2014 to 124 873 in 2018, an increase of nearly 200 % [22]. Additionally, the demand for IT graduates increased from 6 246 in 2014 to 21 216 in 2019 [22]. Against this backdrop, a rise in the number of students pursuing degrees such as computer science (CS), information systems (IS), and ICT [10] has been observed.

This increase can be attributed to the promising career prospects in the IT sector, with numerous benefits such as high remuneration, the availability of many employment opportunities, and recognition, thereby creating a demand for CS-related degrees.

Sri Lanka's higher education sector primarily comprises public and private universities and higher education institutes (HEIs). After gaining independence in 1948, the country implemented a welfare state model and offered free education, including undergraduate studies at state universities. In recent years, Sri Lanka has witnessed a proliferation of state-owned and private FHEIs [36], [43] primarily established in response to the demand created by the limited number of admissions to state universities, thereby creating intense competition among these institutes.

Despite this intense competition, only a small number of studies have examined the key determinants that motivate students when deciding on an FHEI in the country. Furthermore, due to the limited number of studies conducted, it is difficult to determine students' motivational factors solely based on these findings.

Therefore, without proper knowledge of the motivational factors and truly understanding students' requirements, FHEIs in Sri Lanka are formulating recruitment strategies and investing large sums of money to implement them in the hope of attracting potential students. Furthermore, there is a high demand for CS graduates within the country [22] which has increased the number of student enrolments in CS and CS-related degree programmes. However, studies conducted in Sri Lanka have considered students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) related and management-related degree programmes, but none specifically focused on students pursuing CS-related degree programmes. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to ascertain the significant factors influencing students' choices regarding FHEIs in Sri Lanka to pursue CS-related degree programmes.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Chapman's model [11] was used as the basis for the conceptual framework proposed in this study. According to Chapman [11] student decisions are influenced by two main factors: students' internal characteristics such as student aspirations and external factors.
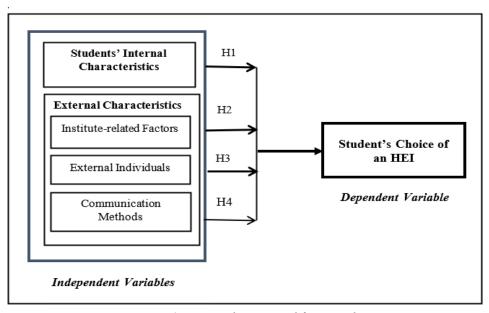


*Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework*

The model further categorises the external factors as institute-related factors such as the institute's reputation; the external individuals who can influence the opinion of the students, for example, parents; and the communication methods used by the FHEI to interact and disseminate information to the students, such as the institute's website [11].

The study's conceptual framework comprised the independent variables: students' internal characteristics, institute-related factors, external individuals, and communication methods while the students' choice of HEI was considered as the dependent variable. Considering these independent and dependent variables, the following hypotheses are proposed:

$H_1$ - Students' internal characteristics positively influence the students in FHEI selection.

$H_2$ - Institute-related factors positively influence students in FHEI selection.

$H_3$ - External individuals positively influence students in FHEI selection.

$H_4$ - Communication methods positively influence students in FHEI selection.

The proposed framework also considers several sub-factors (items) for each of the four independent variables, as shown in Table 1. These sub-factors were considered depending on the factors identified by the researchers as significantly influencing students when choosing an HEI. Accordingly, 35 sub-factors were included in the study and considered as the observed variables.

*Table 1. Number of sub-factors considered in the proposed framework*

| Independent variable | No. of sub-factors | Abbreviated name used in the analysis |
|---|---|---|
| Students' Internal Characteristics | 5 | SIC |
| Institute-related Factors | 14 | HEIC |
| External Individuals | 8 | II |
| Communication Methods | 8 | MC |

## 2. Literature Review

The discussion of the key determinants influencing students in choosing an FHEI begins in this section with a discussion of the studies conducted globally.

### 2.1. Factors Influencing the Selection of an HEI

According to the literature reviewed, it was identified that the factors that can impact students' choice of an FHEI vary across individuals, based on factors such as their likes and dislikes, perceptions, socioeconomic background, individuals in the external environment who can influence the students, and the information gathered about the HEIs through various communication methods [11].

Additionally, each HEI has unique characteristics regarding its reputation, facilities, and programmes offered, to which students respond differently. Therefore, the process of choosing an HEI is complicated and difficult to model [14]. Furthermore, as the number of HEIs, especially private ones, increases worldwide [9], students have the opportunity to choose from a wider range of institutes with different institute-related factors, thus making the decision-making process even more complex.

To address this complexity, a variety of models have been developed, some of which include economic, sociological, and combined models [16], [20], [24], [28], [44]. Using these models, especially combined models such as Chapman's model [11], numerous studies have examined the key determinants that motivate students the most when they select an FHEI. The factors differ based on students' internal characteristics such as attitudes, aspirations, and socioeconomic status [2], [3], [17], [21], [31]. The factors also vary depending on institute-related characteristics such as the reputation of the institute [3], [6], [23], [27], [41], facilities provided by the HEI [1], [3], [6], [8], tuition fees [3], [6], [23], [41], [46], academic quality [15], [31], [38], [46], and employability of graduates [13], [26], [31], [37], [46].

Moreover, individuals such as parents [2], [18], [35], friends, and secondary school teachers [18], [29], [35], and the information communicated through the HEI website [2], [8], [42], newspaper articles [41], and printed materials like university banners and brochures [42], [46] influence the students when they select an FHEI. Studies also indicate that the key determinants identified vary across countries and differ based on programme-related factors such as degree major or specialization area [21], [42]. However, despite identifying the influential factors that differ based on the student's degree major or specialization area, limited research has determined the motivational factors of students in CS-related degree programmes when selecting an FHEI.

### 2.2. Factors Influencing Sri Lankan Students

Following the review of factors influencing students globally, literature related to Sri Lankan students was reviewed and presented next, in this section. Accordingly, it was observed that only a small number of studies have been carried out examining the key determinants impacting Sri Lankan students and that their findings vary significantly.

For example, Somarathna [41] determined that the characteristics associated with the institute, such as tuition fees, the institute's reputation, the reputation of the programme, the availability of scholarships, and the availability of accommodation, strongly influence students. Contrarily, Abeygunawardena [1] stated that institute-specific characteristics such as the reputation of the institute, academic excellence and cost factors such as tuition fees only have a moderate effect on students; rather, infrastructure facilities, such as the availability of well-equipped laboratories, library facilities, sports facilities, and extracurricular activities, exert a strong influence on the students. Unlike the aforementioned studies, Premarathne *et al.* [33] noted that institute-related factors, such as the institute's reputation and faculty, have no significance when selecting an FHEI.

These studies also examined the impact of individuals in the external environment when students chose an institute. According to Somarathna [41], students are influenced mainly by their teachers at school, followed by their fathers and schoolmates. However, this study indicates that the impact of friends, relatives, or siblings is comparatively low. Additionally, contrary to previous findings, Abeygunawardena [1] argued that the influence of parents and peers who have attended the same FHEI or programme of study has little impact on students' decisions, whereas Premarathne *et al.* [33] supported this by stating that the impact of parental influence on students does not appear to be significant.

In examining the communication methods used by students to gather information, Somarathna [41] noted that among the five main categories considered, marketing-related factors were ranked last. However, when considering the sub-factors, information obtained through offline modes, such as newspaper articles, visits to the university, and university publications, moderately influences students. Similarly, Abeygunawardena [1] noted that the information obtained through the FHEI website and newspaper advertisements had a low impact on students. However, this study further argues that the marketing strategies used by FHEI through online methods, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, have a strong influence on students.

## 3. Research Design and Setting

A descriptive quantitative research design was used in this study. The survey method was employed for collecting the data and a questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The research was carried out in eight fee-levying institutes in Sri Lanka, three of which are state-owned and five of which are private.

Since some of these institutes have several branch campuses situated in various parts of the country, the authors collected data from students studying in campuses located in five main cities of Sri Lanka, namely Colombo, Galle, Kandy, Kurunegala, and Matara.

### 3.1. Population and Sample of the Research

To investigate the key determinants influencing Sri Lankan students, the population of the study, sample and sampling technique identified in the study are explained in this section. Thus, first-year undergraduates enrolled in degree programmes in CS and related degrees such as IS and IT at FHEIs in the country were considered as the population of this study. From this population, eight hundred students were included in this study. Hence, the sampling frame comprised first-year undergraduates who were citizens of Sri Lanka enrolled in CS and CS-related undergraduate programmes in public and private FHEIs in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire was distributed to 50–150 students at each of the eight FHEIs considered, of which 556 students responded and 510 of those responses were considered in the analysis.

The sampling technique used was a two-stage cluster sampling method. Accordingly, during the first stage, the top three state FHEIs and five private institutes were selected. Webometrics 2022 ranking of Sri Lankan universities was considered for this purpose. Due to time and cost constraints, only eight institutes were selected for data collection. The convenience sampling technique was used during the second stage, to select 50–150 students from each of the eight FHEIs and the questionnaire was sent to them.

### 3.2. Data Collection Instrument

Next, the instrument used for data collection and the methodology used to determine its validity and reliability are addressed in this section. The main method used to gather the data was a questionnaire adapted from [3], [12], and [32]. The survey questionnaire comprised five sections: A) respondents' demographic data, B) students' internal characteristics, C) Institute-related factors, D) communication methods used by the FHEI, and E) External individuals. Sections B, C, D, and E consisted of questions on the 35 sub-factors identified in the conceptual framework. Using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 where 1 was considered as *Strongly Disagree* and 5 as *Strongly Agree*, the respondents were requested to indicate the degree to which each sub-factor affected their decision-making.

Before administering the questionnaire, it was checked for reliability and validity. The reliability of the questionnaire's items was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) value; the α values obtained are presented in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 indicated the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire. Validity testing was performed by seeking the opinions and recommendations of two experts. The questionnaire's reliability and validity were further assessed by carrying out a pilot study comprising 60 students.

*Table 2. Reliability values of individual scales*

| Scale | No. of Items in the Scale | Cronbach's Alpha value | Remarks |
|-------|---------------------------|------------------------|---------|
| HEIC | 14 | 0.902 | Excellent |
| II | 08 | 0.870 | Good |
| MC | 08 | 0.877 | Good |
| SIC | 05 | 0.769 | Acceptable |

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

Under research design and setting, this final section explains the procedure used for data collection and the techniques adopted for data analysis. Consequently, data were gathered through a survey questionnaire distributed to first-year CS undergraduates in eight state and private FHEIs in the country. The questionnaire was administered through institute visits and emailing a Google Form. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyse the demographic data, while structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed for hypothesis testing and ranking of sub-factors based on the importance indicated by the students. The demographic data was analysed using SPSS software while SmartPLS was utilised for hypothesis testing.

## 4. Results

This section dives into a detailed analysis of key factors affecting the project, including demographics necessary for consideration, the different testing phases involved, and the influences that could impact the outcome.

### 4.1. Analysis of Demographic Data

This first section under results presents the demographic data of the respondents of the study.

Accordingly, the demographic data of the respondents were analysed using descriptive statistics (Table 3). Most respondents in the study were between the ages of 18 and 25 years, male, and had a monthly family income of less than Sri Lankan Rupees (LKR) 100 000. Furthermore, the demographic data show that most respondents had attained at least the General Certificate of Education—Advanced Level (G.C.E AL) educational qualification.

### 4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Following the presentation of demographic data, this section presents the results of the four hypotheses that were tested in this study. Accordingly, the four independent variables considered in the conceptual framework were treated as latent variables, and the four hypotheses were tested using SEM. A fitted model was initially obtained using all 35 variables. Once the model was obtained, the model's convergent validity and discriminant validity were evaluated. As shown in Table 4, the composite reliability (rho_a) values obtained for the variables HEIC, II, MC and SIC, were greater than 0.7, hence the convergent validity of the model was not violated. However, the average variance extraction (AVE) measurement of the HEIC variable was found to be less than 0.5 violating the convergent validity. To satisfy all measurements of convergent validity, the variables in the first model were dropped individually and fitted into the final model.

*Table 3. Analysis of demographic details of respondents*

| Variable | Value | Percentage |
|----------|-------|------------|
| Age | Less than 18 | 2.9 % |
| | 18–25 years | 87.9 % |
| | 26–32 years | 8.2 % |
| | More than 32 years | 1.0 % |
| Gender | Male | 56.5 % |
| | Female | 43.5 % |
| Income | Less than 100 000 | 44.3 % |
| | 100 000–250 000 | 41.4 % |
| | 250 000–500 000 | 11.0 % |
| | More than 500 000 | 3.3 % |
| Student's Highest Education Level – HEQ | GCE Ordinary Level | 11.6 % |
| | GCE Advanced Level | 88.4 % |

*Table 4. Decision for convergent validity measurements*

| Variable | rho_a | Decision | AVE | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| HEIC | 0.857 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.369 < 0.5 | Violated |
| II | 0.887 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.520 > 0.5 | Not violated |
| MC | 0.917 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.541 > 0.5 | Not violated |
| SIC | 0.758 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.518 > 0.5 | Not violated |

Twenty variables were used in the final model to create each latent variable, and the convergent and discernment validities were re-checked in the final model. As presented in Table 5, measurements for convergent validity were not violated for any of the variables in the final fitted model, indicating that convergent validity holds for the final fitted model. Additionally, although some of the factor loadings in the model were below 0.6, these factors were retained in the final model because the AVE measurements were not violated. All factor loadings in the final model exceeded 0.4.

*Table 5. Decision for convergent validity measurements in the final fitted model*

| Variable | rho_a | Decision | AVE | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| HEIC | 0.883 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.500 >= 0.5 | Not Violated |
| II | 0.835 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.612 >= 0.5 | Not violated |
| MC | 0.894 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.650 >= 0.5 | Not violated |
| SIC | 0.742 > 0.7 | Not violated | 0.554 >= 0.5 | Not violated |

The heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was used to check the discernment validity of the final fitted model, and the outputs obtained as presented in Table 6 were less than 0.85, it was concluded that the final fitted model has discernment validity.

*Table 6. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT)*

| | HEI Selection | HEIC | II | MC | SIC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HEIC | 0.108 | | | | |
| II | 0.211 | 0.526 | | | |
| MC | 0.186 | 0.588 | 0.614 | | |
| SIC | 0.124 | 0.803 | 0.534 | 0.52 | |

Once the validity and reliability of the measurement model were confirmed, the four hypotheses represented in the structural model were tested in the next step.

To test all four hypotheses developed in the study, bootstrapping was used with 5000 repetitions to calculate the t-statistics and p values. The results obtained are given in Table 7.

*Table 7. Results of hypothesis testing*

| | Hypothesis | T statistics | P values | Assessment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| HEIC → HEI Selection | $H_2$ | 4.282 > 1.96 | 0.000 < 0.05 | Not reject |
| II → HEI Selection | $H_3$ | 0.515 < 1.96 | 0.606 > 0.05 | Reject |
| MC → HEI Selection | $H_4$ | 2.003 > 1.96 | 0.045 < 0.05 | Not reject |
| SIC → HEI Selection | $H_1$ | 2.899 >1.96 | 0.004 < 0.05 | Not reject |

From Table 7, it is concluded that:

- Students' internal characteristics positively influence students' selection of an FHEI since $p < 0.05$, and $t$-statistic $> 1.96$, $t(509) = 2.899$, $p = .004$.
- Institute-related factors positively influence students' selection of an FHEI, since $p < 0.05$, and $t$-statistic $> 1.96$, $t(509) = 4.282$, $p = .000$
- Communication methods positively influence students' selection of an FHEI, since $p < 0.05$, and $t$-statistic $> 1.96$, $t(509) = 2.003$, $p = .045$.

However, external individuals do not positively influence students in the selection of an FHEI, since $p > 0.05$ and $t$-statistic $< 1.96$, $t(509) = 0.515$, $p = .606$. Thus, hypotheses $H_1, H_2$, and $H_4$ were accepted, and it was shown that students' internal characteristics, institute-related factors, and communication methods used by the FHEIs positively influence students when choosing an FHEI in Sri Lanka.

### 4.3. Analysis of Influential Factors

This final section under results aims to present the influential sub-factors identified in the study. Hence, to identify the most important sub-factors, the data were further analysed using factor loading, and Table 8 presents the importance of these sub-factors in each of the three variables, HEIC, MC, and SIC, based on their significance.

*Table 8. Factor loading of variables*

| | HEIC | II | MC | SIC |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| HEIC6 | 0.787 | | | |
| HEIC9 | 0.754 | | | |
| HEIC11 | 0.751 | | | |
| HEIC710 | 0.715 | | | |
| HEIC7 | 0.652 | | | |
| HEIC12 | 0.642 | | | |
| HEIC1 | 0.634 | | | |
| MC5 | | | 0.836 | |
| MC6 | | | 0.835 | |
| MC8 | | | 0.831 | |
| MC4 | | | 0.826 | |
| MC2 | | | 0.695 | |
| SIC5 | | | | 0.836 |
| SIC2 | | | | 0.785 |
| SIC4 | | | | 0.771 |
| SIC1 | | | | 0.554 |
| II7 | | 0.844 | | |
| II5 | | 0.791 | | |
| II6 | | 0.761 | | |
| II3 | | 0.729 | | |

Considering the factor loading values obtained, Table 9 presents the rankings of the sub-factors that have the greatest impact on the students when selecting an FHEI to pursue a CS-related degree programme.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of the data showed that of the four main influential factors identified by Chapman [11] that motivate students, only three factors—students' internal characteristics, institute-related factors, and communication methods—positively impact Sri Lankan students when choosing a suitable FHEI to enrol in a CS-related degree programme. The results indicate that external individuals do not positively impact the students' decisions, which aligns with the findings of [1] and [33].

*Table 9. Ranking of sub-factors*

| Variable | Sub-factor | Factor Loadings | Importance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Institute-related Factors | Internship programs/job placements programs of the institute. | 0.787 | 1 |
| | Availability of scholarships by the institute. | 0.754 | 2 |
| | Links the institute has with the IT industry. | 0.751 | 3 |
| | Availability of easy payment schemes to pay the course fee. | 0.715 | 4 |
| | Quality of educational facilities such as classroom/laboratory/library facilities of the institute. | 0.652 | 5 |
| | Foreign Universities the Institute is affiliated with. | 0.642 | 6 |
| | The reputation of the institute. | 0.634 | 7 |
| Students' Internal Characteristic | I selected this institute because I feel it will help me in my personal development and professional development. | 0.836 | 1 |
| | I selected this institute because the course fee is well suited to my/my parents' income. | 0.785 | 2 |
| | I selected this institute because I feel it will help me attain my future career goals. | 0.771 | 3 |
| | I always wanted to study at this institute. | 0.554 | 4 |
| Communication Methods | Television/radio advertisements of the institute. | 0.836 | 1 |
| | Information I obtained when the institute visited my school. | 0.835 | 2 |
| | Education fairs/exhibitions that the institute participated in that I attended. | 0.831 | 3 |
| | Newspaper advertisements of the institute. | 0.826 | 4 |
| | Flyers of the Institute on social media. | 0.695 | 5 |

Initially, 35 sub-factors were considered in the analysis, but 15 of these were dropped from the final model. Under students' internal characteristics, the analysis revealed that students were motivated to select an institute that they believed would help them in personal and professional development. This was followed by the fact that students would choose an institute that has tuition fees to suit the income of the student/parents. Students would also select an institute that they believe will assist them realise their future goals. These findings were in support of studies such as those conducted by [3], [21], and [30]. However, it was surprising to note that the ability of the students in terms of their G.C.E ordinary level and advanced level examination results as a motivational factor in the selection of an FHEI was removed from the final model, hence contradicting the studies such as those of [17], [29], [30], and [35].

Under institute-related factors, students were mainly motivated by the internship/job placement programmes offered by the institutes. This supports the findings of [4], [7], [26], [30], [31], [37], [40], [45], and [46]. This was followed by the availability of scholarships and the links the institute has with the IT industry. Contrary to many studies, such as those of [3], [4], [6], [15], [17], [19], [23], [27], [29], [31], [35], [37], [38], [39], [40] and [41], the reputation of the institute was ranked last among the factors considered in the final model, indicating only a moderate impact on the students.

The study showed that the information gathered through television/radio advertisements was sighted as the communication method having the highest impact on the student. This was followed by the information students gathered during school visits by the institutes and through education fairs/exhibitions. This was in support of the studies of [23], [41], [42], and [46]. Despite the widespread use of technology, the analysis indicated that the information gathered through online methods, such as flyers on social media, was ranked last, indicating only a moderate impact on the students.

When considering the overall ranking of the influential factors, the analysis indicates that students are mainly influenced by the information gathered about the institute through television/radio advertisements and by an institute that they believe will help them in their personal and professional development. These factors were followed by school visits by the institute, education fairs/exhibitions, newspaper advertisements and internship/job placement programmes of the institute, indicating that traditional offline modes of communication have a high impact on the decision-making of students.

## 6. Conclusion

The study results indicated that the main factors: students' internal characteristics, institute-related factors, and communication methods used by the institutes to disseminate information positively impact students when selecting an FHEI, whereas individuals in the external environment, such as parents, friends, and teachers, did not positively influence the students' selection process. When considering the sub-factors, the students were mostly influenced by two factors: information gathered through television and radio advertisements of the institute and an institute they believed would help them in their personal and professional development.

According to the results obtained from this study, it was noted that students who wish to pursue a CS-related degree programme are mainly influenced by the information obtained through traditional offline modes and by the internship/job placement programmes offered by HEIs. Therefore, HEIs could use the results of this study when planning enrolment strategies and marketing campaigns in the future for maximum effect, in particular, to attract prospective students interested in joining CS-related programmes. Moreover, future studies should be conducted to compare the motivational factors of students in different disciplines to better understand the factors influencing Sri Lankan students' choice of an FHEI.

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