Determinants of University Program Choices among Students: A Case Study of
Universities in Garowe, Puntland-Somalia

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How to cite in APA format:

Ahmed, M. (2025). Determinants of University Program Choices among Students: A Case Study of Universities in Garowe, Puntland-Somalia. *African Journal of Education and Practice*, *11*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.47604/ajep.3265

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the determinants of university program choices among students in Garowe, Puntland-Somalia, using a mixed-methods approach. The objective is to analyze how students' choices are influenced by institutional characteristics, family dynamics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and peer groups.

Methodology: A descriptive survey design was employed, incorporating quantitative data from structured questionnaires and qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Findings: The study found that students' perception of institutions and program offerings was not a significant factor in their decision-making. A majority of respondents (71%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the reputation of their institution influenced their choice, while 72% did not consider program offerings as a determining factor. Family factors played a crucial role, with 66% of respondents reporting that parental education influenced their choice, 69% acknowledging the impact of family expectations, and 81% agreeing that financial support from parents affected their decision. Additionally, financial factors were significant, as 73% believed that program costs impacted their choice, 76% recognized the influence of their financial circumstances, and 70% stated that their financial situation directly shaped their decision.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study highlights the need for diverse educational opportunities to accommodate students' interests and financial situations. It also recommends enhanced career guidance services to assist students in making informed decisions. Furthermore, the study suggests implementing financial support mechanisms to reduce economic barriers and ensure equitable access to higher education.

Keywords: *University Program Choice, Institutional Characteristics, Family Influence, Socioeconomic Factors, Peer Influence, Higher Education, Career Guidance, Financial Support, Student Decision-Making, Employability, Educational Policy*
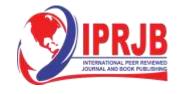
INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a crucial decision, impacting both career paths and personal growth. A variety of factors, differing by individual and context, affect university program selection. Stakeholders, including students, families, and policymakers in Puntland, Somalia, must understand the factors influencing university program choices, especially given recent changes in the region's educational systems. Despite the global body of research on university selection factors, limited studies have examined this issue in the Puntland context, particularly in Garowe, where unique socio-economic and institutional dynamics shape student decision-making. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating the determinants of university program selection among students in Garowe, Puntland, with a focus on institutional characteristics, family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and peer influences.

Institutional characteristics play a critical role in shaping students' perceptions and preferences. Factors such as program content, faculty expertise, and institutional reputation significantly influence university choices (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Research suggests that students are more likely to attend institutions offering programs aligned with their career aspirations and employment prospects (Zhou & Lin, 2020). Additionally, faculty qualifications and expertise contribute to perceived educational quality, making them crucial in the decision-making process (Perkins & Neumark, 2022). Institutional reputation, encompassing academic excellence, campus resources, and industry partnerships, also affects student choices, particularly in contexts where university options are limited and admissions are competitive (Marginson, 2018). However, there is limited research on how these factors influence student choices in Puntland, where the higher education landscape is still developing.

Family factors, including parental education levels, expectations, and financial support, are pivotal in shaping students' program choices. Studies indicate that parents with higher education levels tend to encourage their children to pursue academically prestigious or financially rewarding programs (Wang & Eccles, 2018; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Additionally, parental expectations serve as motivational drivers influencing students' aspirations (Trusty, 2002). Given the high costs of university education in Puntland and limited access to financial aid, families often bear the financial burden of tuition and other expenses (Ali, Warsame, & Hassan, 2021). However, family influence extends beyond financial support, as parents also provide guidance in navigating academic and career pathways (Garg, Kauppi, Urajnik, & Lewko, 2007). While such influences have been studied in other contexts, there is insufficient evidence on how parental education and financial status shape university selection in Garowe.

Socioeconomic factors, particularly affordability and financial constraints, are key determinants in university program selection. In Garowe, tuition costs and associated expenses can be significant barriers, forcing students to choose more affordable programs or those offering scholarships (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, employment prospects heavily shape students' educational decisions. Studies on developing countries indicate that higher education choices are increasingly guided by anticipated job market demands (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). However, it is essential to clarify whether the World Bank (2022) findings specifically pertain to Somalia or reflect a broader global trend. Further contextual studies in Puntland are necessary to establish a direct link between labor market conditions and student choices in higher education.

Peer influences also play a significant role in university program selection. Studies show that students' social networks affect perceptions of program appeal, career prospects, and institutional environment (Ryan et al., 2020). Peer recommendations and shared experiences often guide students in Garowe, where social and community ties are strong. Beyond friendships, teachers, alumni, and community leaders also contribute to shaping students' academic decisions (Wentzel, 2017). However, the extent to which peer influence determines university program selection in Puntland remains largely unexplored.

The purpose of this study is to comprehensively examine the factors that influence students' choices of university programs in Garowe. By analyzing institutional characteristics, family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and peer influences, this research addresses a critical knowledge gap in the region's higher education landscape. The findings will provide valuable insights for educational planning and policy, assisting universities, policymakers, and families in creating environments that enable students to make informed, independent, and well-supported decisions regarding their higher education.

Problem Statement

Selecting a university program is a crucial decision that directly impacts students' academic paths and future career prospects. In Garowe, Puntland, however, the factors influencing this decision are not well-understood. While there is research on university selection globally, limited studies focus on Puntland, where socio-economic conditions, institutional characteristics, and local dynamics significantly shape students' choices. Research specific to Somalia is needed to understand how these unique factors influence students' decisions in the context of a developing higher education system (Ali, Warsame, & Hassan, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

The gaps in the literature include insufficient evidence on how institutional characteristics, family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and peer influences affect university program choices in Garowe. Given the rapid growth of higher education in Puntland, understanding these factors is essential for enhancing student decision-making processes. This study aims to fill these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of the influences shaping university program selection in Garowe. The findings will be instrumental for educational institutions, policymakers, and families in creating environments that support informed, well-guided decisions for students (Ali, Warsame, & Hassan, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Social Cognitive Theory: A Framework for Understanding University Program Selection

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura, provides a robust framework for understanding how individuals make decisions based on the interplay of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). SCT suggests that learning and decision-making are influenced not only by personal cognitive factors but also by social interactions and environmental contexts. This is particularly relevant in the context of university program selection, where students' choices are shaped by a combination of internal aspirations, external influences (such as family, peers, and institutional characteristics), and the outcomes they expect to achieve. For instance, students may choose programs that align with their perceived career goals, informed by both personal interests and the recommendations of influential figures in their lives, such as family members or peers. SCT underscores the importance of self-regulation and observational learning

in decision-making processes, where students observe the experiences of others and adjust their decisions based on anticipated outcomes (Bandura, 2001).

In the case of university program selection in Garowe, Puntland, Social Cognitive Theory can be used to analyze how external factors like family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and peer influences affect students' perceptions and choices. Research shows that students are often motivated by expectations of future employment opportunities and the perceived value of their education, which are influenced by the advice and opinions of parents and peers (Ryan et al., 2020; Wang & Eccles, 2018). SCT emphasizes that these environmental factors, alongside personal cognitive evaluations, shape the decision-making process. Moreover, the theory suggests that students' decisions are not merely a reflection of passive learning but involve active self-regulation, where students balance personal goals, financial constraints, and social expectations to make informed choices about their academic futures (Perkins & Neumark, 2022). Applying SCT to the context of Garowe can illuminate how students navigate the socio-economic challenges they face and how their decisions are influenced by the broader educational and social environment.

METHODOLOGY

This research has adopted a mixed methods approach which integrates both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to ensure that all the research objectives are addressed and that a holistic analysis of the institutional, family and socio-economic factors, as well as the peer pressure is made. This methodology was chosen to capture the complex aspects of the research questions and to provide a more detailed analysis of the given data. Research Design The study employed a descriptive survey design to document and analyze, in a systematic way, the factors that affect students' university program choices. This allowed for data to be collected from a number of participants, and thus, patterns and relationships between variables could be established.

Data Collection Methods

Survey Questionnaires; To gather quantitative data on the four research objectives, a structured questionnaire was developed. Closed ended questions were used in the questionnaire to measure institutional characteristics, family factors, socio economic conditions and peer influences on program choices. Perceptions and attitudes were quantified using Likert scales.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Qualitative data were collected through FGDs with newly selected students. These discussions gave more detailed views on the motivations and contextual factors that influence program choices.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Interviews were done with university administrators, career advisors, and faculty members to get their views on the factors that shape students' decisions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs. Then, themes and patterns were recognized and coded to give a narrative explanation of the results in addition to the quantitative findings.

Objective of the study

1. To examine the influence of institutional characteristics (such as program offerings, faculty qualifications, and institutional reputation) on students' university program choices
2. To assess the influence of family factors (Including parental education, expectations, and financial support) on students' university program choices
3. To investigate the influence of socioeconomic factors (such as affordability and financial status) on students' university program choices
4. To explore the influence of peers in shaping students' university program choices

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: To Examine the Influence of Institutional Characteristics (Such as Program Offerings, Faculty Qualifications, and Institutional Reputation) on Students' University Program Choices

Factors Under Consideration	Strongly Agree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	Strongly Disagree F(%)
The degree program offerings at my university influenced my choice of program.	87 (10%)	157 (18%)	297 (34%)	338 (38%)
The qualifications of the faculty in my chosen field were important in my program choice.	87 (10%)	105 (12%)	342 (39%)	345 (39%)
The reputation of my university affected my decision to choose this program	131 (15%)	122 (14%)	342 (39%)	284 (32%)
The availability of specialized or unique programs at the university played a role in my program choice	44 (5%)	114 (13%)	201 (23%)	520 (59%)

The purpose of this study was to assess how students' decisions about university programs were impacted by institutional features, including program options, faculty credentials, and institutional repute. As seen in Table 1, the results show that a number of factors influenced students' selections to differing degrees.

Just 29% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their university's reputation influenced their choice, but a noteworthy 71% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This implies that secondary graduates might not base their choice primarily on the university's reputation. According to an interviewee, "I never considered the reputation of the university when making my choice, as I was more focused on finding a program that suited my interests." " According to another respondent, "There is no difference in the opportunities available when you look at the community after graduation, so it makes no sense to focus on the university's reputation." Regardless of where you receive your degree, neither the university name nor the certificate confer any further benefits. The question "Which university did you graduate from?" is not present. According to a third interviewee, "I don't prioritize thinking about a university's reputation because I don't know how to measure it; all universities seem to have the same situation."*.*" This finding contrasts with research by Green et al. (2018), which highlights the importance of reputation in more competitive

and high-profile fields. The discrepancy could be due to the relatively limited exposure of secondary graduates to broader institutional reputation dynamics.

Additionally, compared to 28% who agreed or strongly agreed, 72% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the degree program offerings influenced their choice. This suggests that while program availability is important, secondary graduates may place a higher value on other considerations like program substance or employment prospects. One interviewee said, "We couldn't say the degree program influenced our choice because we don't know much about the degree programs offered at universities—some of them we haven't even heard before now" This finding aligns with the work of Smith and Jones (2019), which suggests that students often choose programs based on practical considerations, such as career opportunities, rather than the specific offerings of the university.

Furthermore, a significant 78% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the credentials of the lecturers/teachers in the field they had chosen were significant in their program choice, compared to just 22% who agreed or strongly agreed. According to one interviewee, "We don't even know the names of the university's lecturers/teachers, let alone their qualifications. We didn't concentrate on the faculty members' qualifications because we don't have any information regarding the staff, especially the faculty members. We could hear that a certain lecturer is good from friends who have already enrolled in the institution, but that's about it. This implies that we do not take faculty lecturer qualifications into account while selecting a university. This implies that while choosing their programs, students might not give teacher credentials top priority. However, research by Brown and Taylor (2020) suggests that, although faculty qualifications might not be a key factor in the initial selection, they become increasingly important as students progress in their studies. A further interviewee stated, "At the time of choosing a program, I didn't consider the qualifications of faculty members, but once enrolled, I realized their expertise made a huge difference in my learning experience."

Lastly, 82% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the availability of specialized or unique programs changed their decision, compared to just 18% who agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests that, even when a program is exclusive to a university, the majority of secondary graduates do not find that the program's distinctiveness has a substantial impact on their choice. This finding contradicts earlier studies, such as those by Johnson et al. (2017), which emphasize the importance of specialized programs in attracting students. The limited role of specialized programs in this context may reflect a lack of awareness or the unavailability of such options among secondary graduates. A participant said, "I don't consider whether the course is very unique or even if only one university offers it, because I don't see the difference between programs available at all universities and one that's offered only by a single university." A different respondent stated, "The university didn't offer specialized programs I was interested in, but I chose a program based on its general fit with my interests." This implies that secondary graduates give less weight to the program's distinctiveness and more weight to more pragmatic aspects like how well it fits with their interests, how affordable the costs are, and other things.

These results demonstrate that program options, teacher qualities, and institutional repute have no bearing on secondary graduates' program selections. For universities, this poses serious difficulties. Instead of emphasizing academic excellence and programs with good employment

prospects, colleges may choose to extend their program offerings, including courses that might not be in line with the expectations of the labor market.

Established universities run the risk of losing their competitive advantage to recently founded establishments that largely serve the immediate preferences of recent graduates. As a result, universities may decide to concentrate on growing enrollment by designing programs only to meet student demand, disregarding academic rigor or market relevance. This strategy might result in an overabundance of programs, promote the unrestrained founding of new universities, and ultimately lower educational standards. This drop in educational quality may eventually make graduate jobless rates worse.

Table 2: To Assess the Influence of Family Factors (Including Parental Education, Expectations, and Financial Support) on Students' University Program Choices

#	Factors Under Consideration	Strongly Agree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	Strongly Disagree F(%)
1.	My parents' education level influenced my choice of program	280 (32%)	300 (34%)	200 (23%)	99 (11%)
2.	My family's expectations affected my decision on which program to pursue.	310 (35%)	300 (34%)	180 (21%)	89 (10%)
3.	The financial support provided by my family played a role in my program choice	350 (40%)	360 (41%)	120 (14%)	49 (5%)
4.	My parents' advice about career opportunities influenced my program choice.	330 (38%)	390 (44%)	120 (14%)	39 (4%)

The study's findings show that secondary school graduates' decisions about their university programs are greatly influenced by family factors, such as parental education, expectations, financial support, and career guidance. These results demonstrate how dependent students are on their families as a result of their limited access to a variety of professional options and resources for making decisions.

First, according to 66% of respondents (strongly agree and agree), their choice of university program was impacted by their parents' educational attainment. This demonstrates how important parental education is in influencing students' academic goals. Secondary school graduates frequently depend significantly on their parents' educational background because they do not have access to thorough job guidance. "My parents chose my program because they are in charge of me," one respondent clarified. Another said, "Being my parents, I couldn't reject their decision, even though I wasn't interested in the course or it didn't seem applicable to me. According to *Eccles et al. (2005)*, parents with higher education levels act as role models, guiding their children toward fields perceived as prestigious or beneficial. This reliance on parental guidance underscores the importance of providing students with more autonomy and exposure to diverse career opportunities.

Second, 69% of respondents said that family expectations had a big influence on the programs they chose (strongly agree and agree). Since they are at a pivotal point in their academic careers, secondary school graduates are frequently impacted by their families' hopes and objectives. "My

family expects me to choose a program that will elevate their social status," said one respondent. Another said, "I didn't want to let my family down, so I chose a program that matched their wishes." *Schneider and Stevenson (1999)* highlight that families often view educational program selection as a reflection of collective goals and cultural values. In collectivist civilizations like Puntland, where completing family obligations and winning acceptance are crucial factors in decision-making, this dynamic is especially noticeable.

Furthermore, 81% of respondents (strongly agree and agree) said that their program choices were influenced by their families' financial support. In Puntland, secondary graduates' financial limitations frequently prevent them from pursuing a variety of academic possibilities. "Even though it wasn't my first choice, I had to choose a program that my family could afford," one responder said. Another said, "My family could only afford certain programs, so the cost of education played a big role." *Perna (2006)* asserts that financial resources are critical in determining access to higher education, especially in low-income settings. This explains why students often prioritize programs with lower tuition fees or those perceived as having better financial returns, ensuring that their education remains affordable for their families.

Additionally, 82% of respondents (strongly agree and agree) said that their program choices were greatly impacted by their parents' advice regarding career chances. Secondary graduates frequently rely on their parents' advice to help them make decisions since they lack sufficient exposure to the workforce. "My parents' advice was crucial because they understand the job market better than I do," said one interviewee. "I trust my parents to know what's best for my future career," said another. *Savickas (2002)* and *Shumba and Naong (2012)* emphasize the pivotal role of parental advice in career decision-making, particularly for students with limited access to career counseling services. Parents' insights and perceptions of market trends help shape their children's academic and career paths, especially during this critical transition phase.

Table 3: To Investigate the Influence of Socioeconomic Factors (Such as Affordability and Financial Status) on Students' University Program Choices

#	Factors Under Consideration	Strongly Agree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	Strongly Disagree F(%)
1.	The cost of the program influenced my decision to choose it	330 (38%)	310 (35%)	140 (16%)	99 (11%)
2.	My financial situation affected my choice of program	350 (40%)	320 (36%)	140 (16%)	69 (8%)
3.	I would prefer a course that offers a scholarship, even if the course is not a good fit for me, due to my family's financial situation.	395 (45%)	400 (45%)	53 (6%)	31 (4%)
4.	I selected my program based on my ability to afford the tuition fees.	360 (41%)	370 (42%)	100 (11%)	49 (6%)

This section examines the ways in which socioeconomic factors specifically, affordability and financial standing affect students' decisions about university programs. As indicated by the

responses and interview insights, the results show that financial restrictions play a substantial role in influencing students' academic decisions.

First, according to 73% of respondents (strongly agree and agree), the program's cost had an impact on their decision. Because of their families' financial constraints, secondary graduates frequently place a high priority on affordability. "Even though it wasn't my first choice, I chose a program that fit my family's budget," said one interviewee. "Cost is always a factor because my family cannot afford expensive tuition," another person observed. According to a third interviewee, "I had to select the least expensive program to lessen the strain on my parents because of the financial strain on my family." According to *Perna (2006)*, financial considerations play a pivotal role in determining access to higher education, particularly in low-income settings with limited financial aid options. Similarly, *Hossler et al. (1999)* argue that the cost of education significantly shapes students' choices, as financial barriers restrict access to diverse programs. This underscores the urgent need for accessible and affordable academic options in Puntland to address these constraints.

Second, 76% of respondents said that their financial status had a direct impact on the programs they chose (strongly agree and agree). Due to severe financial constraints, secondary school graduates in Puntland are frequently limited in their choices to what their families can afford. "My family's financial situation left me with no choice but to pick a course within our means," one participant said. "I wanted to pursue a different program, but the tuition was beyond our means," said another. According to a third interviewee, "Economic constraints forced me to select a program that my parents could afford, even though it didn't align with my professional objectives." These findings align with *Schneider and Stevenson (1999)*, who emphasize the strong influence of family income on higher education decisions, as students from lower-income families are often restricted in their academic choices. *McDonough (1997)* further supports this by highlighting that financial constraints disproportionately affect students in low-income regions, making affordability a critical determinant of access to higher education.

Furthermore, due to financial constraints, 90% of respondents (strongly agree and agree) said they would prefer a course that offered a scholarship, even if it did not fit with their interests or career ambitions. Even if the course isn't my first choice, I'll accept a scholarship if one is offered, according to one interviewee. "Scholarships are essential because they alleviate the financial strain on my family," another stressed. According to a third participant, "My family's financial situation doesn't allow any flexibility, so I prioritize scholarships over personal interest." *Paulsen and St. John (2002)* highlight the transformative role of scholarships in enabling access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students, particularly in regions with limited financial resources. Similarly, *Perna (2006)* underscores that scholarships are critical in low-income settings, allowing students to pursue education despite financial challenges. In order to match students' academic interests with their financial circumstances, this finding emphasizes the necessity of expanding scholarship options.

Additionally, 83% of respondents (strongly agree and agree) said that their ability to pay tuition was a factor in their program choice. Many recent high school graduates are forced to focus their choices more on financial viability than on their academic interests or desired careers. One participant said, "My family couldn't afford a more expensive program, so affordability was my

only criterion." "Even though it wasn't what I wanted, I had no choice but to pick a program within my budget," said another. "Knowing my family's struggles, I sacrificed my academic preferences for a program we could afford," explained a third respondent. According to *McDonough (1997)*, affordability is a critical factor in higher education decisions, particularly for students from low-income families, as it often determines whether they can access education at all. *Hossler et al. (1999)* further emphasize that financial barriers limit students' ability to explore diverse academic opportunities, reinforcing the need for affordable tuition policies in Puntland to support equitable access to education.

Table 4: To Explore the Influence of Peers in Shaping Students' University Program Choices

#	Factors Under Consideration	Strongly Agree F(%)	Agree F(%)	Disagree F(%)	Strongly Disagree F(%)
1.	My friends' opinions influenced my choice of program	243 (28%)	454 (52%)	86 (9%)	96 (11%)
2.	Talking to my peers helped me decide on my program	308 (35%)	400 (46%)	88 (10%)	83 (9%)
3.	The pressure from my friends influenced my decision to choose this program.	395 (45%)	362 (41%)	79 (9%)	43 (5%)
4.	I considered how popular a program was among my peers when making my decision.	167 (19%)	341 (39%)	210 (24%)	161 (18%)

This table examines how students' decisions about university programs are influenced by their peers. Based on survey results and qualitative interview insights, the results show that peers have a big influence on students' academic choices.

First, according to 80% of respondents (strongly agree and agree), their friends' opinions affected the program they chose. A crucial point of reference during the decision-making process is frequently peer input. "I chose this program because my friends recommended it and seemed confident about its quality," said one candidate. Another said, "When I wasn't sure what to do, my friends' opinions helped me understand my options." "My friends' suggestions were influential because they had already researched programs more thoroughly than I had," according to a third respondent. According to *Astin (1993)*, peer influence is one of the most significant social factors shaping educational choices, as students tend to value their friends' recommendations when navigating complex decisions. Similarly, *Pascarella and Terenzini (2005)* highlight that peer interactions often shape students' perceptions of academic programs and career paths, reinforcing their significance in decision-making.

Second, according to 81% of respondents (strongly agree and agree), discussing their program options with peers aided in their decision. Peer discussions frequently give students advice and encouragement when they're making decisions. "Talking with my classmates helped me weigh the pros and cons of different programs," said one interviewee. "My peers' experiences gave me a better understanding of what to expect in various courses," said another commenter. "Hearing my friends' perspectives made me more confident in my final decision," a third participant remarked. These findings align with *Brown and Evans (2002)*, who argue that peer discussions play a crucial

role in shaping students' educational aspirations by providing social validation and shared insights. Additionally, *Crosnoe and McNeely (2008)* emphasize that peer networks often serve as information hubs, helping students navigate academic choices effectively.

Furthermore, 86% of respondents (strongly agree and agree) admitted that peer pressure played a role in their program selection. Students may be persuaded by their peers to follow group norms even when they go against their personal preferences. "I felt compelled to join the same program as my friends to avoid being left out," one respondent remarked. Another said, "I had to reconsider my original preferences because I felt pressured to keep up with my friends' choices." "Selecting a different program felt isolating, so I followed my friends' lead to stay connected," said a third participant. According to *Wentzel (1999)*, peer pressure significantly impacts students' decisions, as the desire for social belonging often outweighs individual preferences. Similarly, *Berndt (2002)* highlights that the influence of peer pressure is particularly strong in group-oriented cultures, where maintaining social harmony is a priority.

Lastly, when choosing a program, 58% of respondents (strongly agree and agree) took into account how well-liked it was by their peers. Peer acceptance of a software seems to serve as a heuristic for its worth or quality. "I chose it based on its popularity because I thought a program with a lot of students must be good," said one participant. "The number of my friends enrolling in a program influenced my perception of its relevance," another person added. "Seeing how many of my peers chose the same course made me believe it was the right choice," said a third respondent. *Tinto (1993)* argues that students often rely on social cues, such as program popularity, when making decisions in uncertain contexts. Furthermore, *Bandura (1986)* suggests that social learning processes, including observing peer behaviors and choices, play a crucial role in shaping individual decisions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study revealed that while various factors influenced students' decisions regarding their university programs, family-related influences, peer dynamics, and financial considerations played the most significant roles. Specifically, family factors such as parental education (66%), family expectations (69%), and financial support (81%) were found to be the most influential determinants in students' choices. Peer influence was also notable, with many students citing that discussions with friends and their perspectives were pivotal in shaping their decisions. In contrast, institutional features like faculty qualifications, university reputation, and program offerings had minimal impact, with only 27% of respondents indicating that faculty qualifications and 28% considering university reputation as crucial to their decisions.

These findings suggest that practical considerations, such as program costs and perceived job fit, hold more weight in students' decisions than institutional prestige. In fact, 73% of respondents reported that the cost of the program was an important factor in their choice, and 76% acknowledged the significant influence of their financial situation. Additionally, 70% stated that their financial circumstances directly impacted their decision-making, emphasizing the importance of affordability. Moreover, students were more likely to prioritize programs that aligned with their future career goals, highlighting the practical aspect of job market relevance. The limited impact

of institutional reputation and program content suggests that students in Garowe prioritize affordability and employment prospects over prestige, likely due to the financial constraints they face. These findings point to the need for more comprehensive career counseling services and increased exposure to diverse academic options to help students make well-rounded decisions that balance family expectations, financial constraints, and career aspirations.

Recommendations

Improve Career Counseling Services; To address the knowledge gaps students face when selecting university programs, colleges and high schools should prioritize developing robust career counseling services. These services should not only provide detailed information about the academic programs offered, but also include guidance on career paths, labor market trends, and faculty credentials in various fields. This will empower students to make more informed and independent decisions, reducing their reliance on peer and family perspectives. With 73% of respondents citing the financial burden of university programs as a key factor, career counseling should also highlight potential employment prospects and job market trends. By including labor market insights, students will be better equipped to understand how their education will align with future employment opportunities, ensuring that their choices reflect both personal interests and economic realities.

Increase Institutional Visibility; To enhance student awareness and attract prospective students, universities should implement comprehensive marketing and communication strategies. Highlighting the strengths of the institution such as faculty expertise, unique program offerings, and strong career prospects can help sway student choices. With only 27% of respondents considering faculty qualifications as a major factor, universities should focus on showcasing these attributes to demonstrate the value of their academic programs. Engaging potential students through digital channels, such as social media campaigns and interactive webinars, can significantly improve visibility. This digital engagement is more effective than traditional pamphlets, as it allows for real-time interaction and broadens the reach to a wider audience, especially among younger generations.
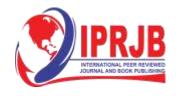
Involve Families in the Decision-Making Process; Given the significant role of family factors in students' program choices 81% of respondents acknowledged the influence of parental financial support it's important to engage families more actively in the decision-making process. Universities and career counselors could organize workshops and informational sessions specifically designed for parents and guardians. These sessions would focus on the academic offerings, potential career paths, and the long-term benefits of higher education. With 69% of respondents citing family expectations as a determining factor, fostering a dialogue between parents and students can bridge the gap between student goals and parental expectations, facilitating a collaborative approach to decision-making.

Introduce Outreach Programs; To empower students and expand their academic options, universities should develop targeted outreach programs aimed at secondary school students. These programs can provide students with a clear understanding of their potential career choices and introduce them to a broader range of academic programs, including specialized and unique offerings. With 76% of respondents acknowledging the influence of financial circumstances, outreach programs could also emphasize affordable programs and available scholarships. Early

exposure to these options will allow students to explore various academic fields, helping them find programs that align with their interests and long-term career goals. By offering these programs at an earlier stage in the students' educational journey, universities can guide them toward informed, well-rounded decisions that take both personal aspirations and practical constraints into account.

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