



“The Catalysts of Choice:” Factors influencing the Choice of Specialization Areas by Management Undergraduates in University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

GRDCD Bandara¹, L Krithika², MR Nisansala³, YB Premachandra⁴, and T Sukirthan^{5,*}

¹*Department of Human Resources Management, Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

²*Department of Business Finance, Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

^{3,5}*Department of Management Studies, Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

⁴*Department of Marketing Management, Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

ABSTRACT

This study was contextually undertaken in the Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya, with two objectives: to explore the contextual factors affecting the selection of specialization and to classify such contextual factors. The qualitative interpretive methodology, precisely a case study strategy, was followed. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 second and third-year students from different ethnicities and genders. The study found that three major arenas, the self, the people, and the information, influence the choice of specialization areas. Theoretically, this is one of the pioneering qualitative explorations on the factors influencing the choice of specialization of management undergraduates of Sri Lankan State universities.

Keywords: choice of specialization, choice of career, management undergraduates, management education

© Faculty of
Management Studies
Sabaragamuwa
University of Sri Lanka

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received: 10 October 2023
Accepted: 24 December 2023
Published: 29 February 2024

E-mail Address:
sukiir.available@mgt.pdn.ac.lk

INTRODUCTION

As per the latest reports of the University Grants Commission (UGC), out of a total intake of 43,927 students, Management and commerce undergraduates are the second highest undergraduate population counting 8,009 students in Sri Lanka (UGC University Statistics, 2021). Studies like Singam (2017) and Tracer Study Statistics (2018) have highlighted that Management undergraduates have the second-highest unemployment rate in Sri Lanka (36% and 27.7% respectively). To reduce such unemployment issues, many scholars like Samaranyake (2016) recommend that management education in universities should be made more efficient in all aspects like matching the industry requirements, enhancing the employability of students, and increasing the quality of degree programs. Increasing the quality of the degree program would not be possible without understanding and analyzing the customers, who are students. Primarily the decisions, perceptions, and conceptions of students about higher education and specialization areas must be explored, this can lead to proper marketing and effective production of graduates with high employability skills (Kusumawati, 2013).

Abdulla and Ashraf (2020) pointed out that almost all students from secondary schools enter university without any real understanding of the university system, especially about the specialization areas. In Sri Lanka, this issue is very huge, where the university system is less transparent to the general public and even the teachers in secondary schools, who are also graduates, refrain from making students aware of university education. “If you enter university, the struggles will be over and entertainment and fun are guaranteed” is the most spoken statement by Advanced level (A/L) teachers. Hence most of the students decide their specialization areas only when they are informed by the university about it. The decision-making of specialization may be less pre-planned or pre-analyzed in the Sri Lankan context, but still, each student undergoes their way of analyzing. Several factors may directly or indirectly influence their decision making and such factors may be rational or irrational, conscious or unconscious, personal or non-personal, etc. (Kochung & Migunde, 2011).

The Faculty of Management (FOM), University of Peradeniya (UOP) was established in 2015 with the aim of “*Enriching potentials through management education.*” From 2015, the FOM has been divided into five departments and offering specializations namely Business Finance (BF),

Marketing Management (MM), Organizational Management (OM), Human Resources Management (HRM) and Operations Management (OPM). In the beginning, the specializations were offered in the 3rd year, and with the curriculum revision done in the year 2019, FOM started to offer specialization from the second year of study onwards (UOP, 2023). The preference of the students is given priority when selecting the specialization areas. Further, students have to meet the selection criteria of each department. In addition, FOM-UOP undertakes awareness sessions on specialization areas, but there has been no research carried out to explore the reasons behind the choice of students or to validate the real influence of such awareness sessions.

Considering students as customers, studying such a variety of factors that influence them is crucial, because by which the university will be able to understand how students think, which areas are given significance and what students expect from such specializations as outcomes. Anojan and Nimalathasan (2013) also pointed out that there should be continuous studies relating to the factors affecting the choice of specialization, which would bring efficiency to the university education. Bobâlcă et. al., (2014) highlighted the importance of studies in this aspect by relating the choice of specialization as a consumer behaviour and decision-making and as a service provider, universities need to continuously update and study consumer choice, behaviour, decisions, and rationale or irrationals behind them. The study further emphasized that in this process of choice-making, the second step, which is about gathering information, is very crucial. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore the contextual factors that are influencing the choice of specialization areas by management undergraduates.

The objectives of the research are twofold. First, it aims to explore the contextual factors affecting the selection of specialization. Second, it aims to classify such contextual factors for a proper understanding that is necessary for practical implications. The study of the factors influencing decision-making must be continuously undertaken, as the thoughts, priorities, and preferences of each generation are very diverse. Hence this study is significant as it explores the updated contextual factors of students by which the recentness of the factors is ensured. Also, this study provides immense insights into the FOM-UOP about the choice of students, which will be significant in their actions and increase efficiency in the management education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early studies in this area have discovered several factors influencing the choice of specialization areas, among which factors like personality, self-interest, self-concept, cultural identity, globalization, socialization, role model, social support, and university factors can be stated as significant crucial factors (Babad & Tayeb, 2003; Perez, 2010; Kochung and Migunde, 2011). Bobâlcă **et. al.**, (2014) are one of the crucial recent studies that qualitatively explored the updated factors affecting the choice of specialization areas. The study was carried out as a focus group interview on 7 second-year students from each specialization area contextually from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. The Study found several new factors like perceived difficulty, teachers' characteristics, entry requirements, personal interest in the subject, and expectation to learn something new and fit with personal capabilities.

Considering about Sri Lankan context, Tennakoon et.al., (2005) are one of the earliest studies conducted in Sri Lankan settings, where they identified "*university related factors*" such as "*lectures and seminars, practical training opportunities, examination and assignments, and career guidance activities heavily influence on medical undergraduates*" career choices in Sri Lanka. In the area of Management education, Anojan and Nimalathasan (2013) surveyed 100 second-year undergraduates of FOM studies and commerce the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The study concluded that personal factors were the most influential and family, university, market and occupational factors were less influential when choosing specialization areas. Saranapala and Devadas (2020) in their quantitative study conducted on 371 final-year management and commerce undergraduates in six Sri Lankan National universities also found that personal factors which included skills, competencies, abilities, interests, and lifestyle were highly significant. This ensures that modern generations are less influenced by external factors, rather they are more individualized in decisions of career and specialization.

On the other hand, Perera and Pratheesh (2018) undertook another survey consisting of 75 undergraduates from Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka testing several factors and concluded that the most important factors in the choice of specialization are Job factor and Academic quality rather than personal and other factors underlining that students are

more concerned about future job opportunities. Finally, another quantitative survey, by Kalyani and Chathuranga (2021), which was conducted in a state university in Sri Lanka on 306 undergraduates found both personality and career benefits as crucial factors and also, in addition, found students' self-efficacy as another significant factor influencing the decision-making of specialization areas. It further refuted that long-believed peer influence is not a significant factor in the choice of specialization pointing out that friendship is not strong enough to influence specialization choice. Parental influence was also identified as another weak factor in career choice supporting Wijerathna and Thisera (2018), where parental influence was a significant factor. This shows a reducing tendency of parental influence in this aspect.

Anojan and Nimalathasan (2013) used factors like occupational, market and geography, university factors, family relationships and Personal factors in their model formation. Factors like Personal factors, academic quality, job factors, nature and influence were constituted in the model of Perera and Pratheesh (2018), whereas Saranapala and Devadas (2020) considered factors like personal, socio-technical, job-related and university related, in which the first three factors were measured using foreign-made questionnaires and the last factor was measured using the questionnaire developed by Tennakoon et. al., (2005). All such studies were quantitative studies, which aimed to test the factors that were contextually identified in a foreign setting and there prevails a lacuna, where contextual factors of Sri Lanka were not identified and tested (Anojan & Nimalathasan, 2013; Perera & Pratheesh, 2018; Saranapala & Devadas, 2020; Kalyani & Chathuranga, 2021).

All the studies neglected the specificity and approached factors influencing the decision-making from a very broad perspective. On the other hand, FOM, UOP, which was initiated as a separate faculty in 2015, still hasn't been explored in this aspect, which is also another lacuna. Hence this exploratory study has served to fulfill both lacunas by presenting contextual factors that influenced the undergraduates in the choice of specialization.

METHODOLOGY

The study was contextually undertaken in the FOM, UOP, which is one of the public universities in Sri Lanka. The key study area, which is the factors influencing the decision making, was majorly subjective, as each

participant was influenced by a variety of contextual factors. Hence the study was undertaken in a social constructivist paradigm with the ontological stance of relativism, in which each participant had their unique life journey denoting the prevalence of multiple realities and the epistemological stance of subjectivism, where the participants had their reasons and justifications for their choice of specialization. Subjectivities of researchers being employed as temporary lecturers in the FOM may have influenced the analysis, whereas their being attached to four diverse departments ensures the absence of biases about specialization areas. Since the research dealt with the phenomena of choice of specialization among the students of FOM, UOP, there were obvious boundaries to consider each participant as a 'case', following the case study approach of Stake (1995). The nature of the study is exploratory as it aims to explore new and contextual factors that influence the choice of specialization. The study was also conducted in a non-contrived setting, as it gave more relativity and comfort to the participants to recall and narrate about their influences.

The population of the study is the students of FOM, UOP in particular, the students of the third year (2019 A/L batch), who have spent one year in specialization, and the students of the second year (2020 A/L batch), who have recently selected the specialization area and are yet to study specialized subjects. The reason for the above selection is to analyze the choices of two consequent batches and to enhance the recentness of the influencing factors. Numerically, this is a finite population of 360 students. The researchers undertook purposive sampling to narrow down the population into samples. First, the researchers filtered the participants based on the possibility of getting rich and in-depth data with the support of temporary lecturers teaching them. Such filtration led to 5 students from each specialization area in each batch (2019 A/L batch and 2020 A/L batch). It also ensured the representation of all ethnicities and genders within the filtered samples. After which, randomly, 2-3 students were selected as per their availability and to the subjective point of data saturation. Altogether, 24 participants were selected from both batches, of which 8 were males, 16 were females, 15 were Sinhalese, 6 were Tamils, and 3 were Muslims. Data collection took place from June 7th to June 22nd during the spare time of both researchers and participants. Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews for 30 - 45 minutes, and three researchers from diverse specialization areas were involved in data collection.

The instrument consisted of questions investigating three different arenas, namely people (who were the people influential in the choice-making process), information (what was the information that was influential in the choice-making process), and self (what kind of person is the participant and how their self and plans were influential in the choice making process). These arenas were derived from studies like Moore et. al., (2016) highlighting the influence of self in decision-making, Yaniv (2004) affirming the influence of diverse relationships in personal decisions and the broad rational decision-making models signifying the role of information and analysis of it in decision making. To ensure credibility, prolonged engagement and member checks (in between interviews and after analysis) were followed. Also, participants' direct quotations are used to add more reliability.

Data consisted of experiences, narratives, and opinions of the students. All interviews were conducted in Tamil and Sinhala languages, which are the native languages of both researchers and participants, to ensure the richness of the data and to avoid semantic noises. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Thematic Analysis was conducted in which data were manually coded into 67 codes, where open coding was undertaken for unique data and selective coding otherwise. Later 3 broad themes namely Influence from Self Concepts, Influence from People, and Influence from Information. Sub-themes were also included to make the data analysis more precise. Opinions of the participants relating to their choices were accumulated and general statements were derived as per inductive reasoning. Pseudonyms have been used instead of real names of students concerning their privacies.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This study through thematic analysis found three major themes: Influence from self, influence from people and influence from information. Sub-themes have been identified for better understanding.

Influence from Self

This study primarily found huge influences from the “*self*” of students in choosing their specialization areas, as modern-day students are self-aware of their mental processes and their identities. Accordingly, self-concepts namely self-image, self-motivation, self-management, and social-

self have been identified as constituents of 'Self'. Most findings in this study fall for the influence of self, emphasizing the importance of self or personal factors in the choice of specialization supporting the international studies like Kochung and Migunde, (2011) and local quantitative surveys like Anojan and Nimalathasan (2013), Saranapala and Devadas (2020) and Kalyani and Chathuranga (2021).

Self- image

Self-image means how one perceives oneself or in simple terms it is the self-perceived personality. Students have shared their self-image in various paradigms. Most participants identified themselves as their own-decision makers, whereby they embrace autonomous decision-making, avoiding constant doubt that comes with following others' choices. Their confidence in personal decisions reflects courage, not immunity to external influence. They prioritize information over the source, basing choices on thorough analysis. This highlights their analytical and critical thinking, key factors guiding specialization selection. On the other hand, in universities, group behaviors are inevitable and impactful on decision-making. The majority of student choices, whether within a friend circle or in the batch, significantly shape specialization preferences. For example, individuals tend to choose the specialization that is chosen by the majority of students in the batch. Dulanjali stated, *"A low number of people choose organizational management as the majority of students don't choose it."* Sanjeevan shared, *"In my batch, I have found herd mentality, but I am against it."* The reason behind this is shared by the students was some students believe if something is selected by many people, it will be always the correct selection, where rationality is not valued. Most students identified themselves as their decision-makers, but some students might be there who follow the group behaviors.

Students shared that there are several social stereotypes regarding specialization areas concerning workload, work-life balance, social status, gender compliance, etc. Kavish mentioned, *"Marketing will not suit women, as it is fieldwork"* Navoda expressed *"HRM is a field for women, men have no patience and mothering."* It is quite derivable that many students may have believed these stereotypes and chosen specialization accordingly, but some students challenge societal stereotypes, inspired by social rebels, rejecting imposed gender roles in specialization. Their choices aim to critique

and defy stereotypes. Hence such rebellious character of students is one of the rare influences in the choice of specialization.

Few students have identified themselves as risk/stress/pressure avoiders. They have preferred to live a stress-free life and their preferences have always matched their personality of risk avoidance. Students have omitted the specializations, which they perceived might pose risk or pressure and will hinder their expectations of a stress-free life. Riswan said, *“Calculations of Finance and OPM are depressing”* Deepika shared, *“HRM has 6 subjects each semester, much stressful”* Janani mentioned *“OM has too many theories and I am weak in written English.”* The above finding can also be interpreted in another way, where the students have identified what will work for them based on their skills and abilities. Hence besides risk avoidance, it is a thorough understanding of self-efficacy and self-evaluation of oneself. This finding on understanding self-efficacy further ensures the study of Kalyani and Chathuranga (2021), which directly identified self-efficacy as a factor in choice and also supports the study of Saranapala and Devadas (2020) and Bobâlcă *et. al.*, (2014), which indirectly identified self-efficacy through the wording of *“understanding skills, competencies, and abilities”* and *“fit with personal capabilities”* respectively. Whatsoever, it can be concluded that the self-image of either risk avoider or self-evaluator has been highly influencing the choice of specialization areas.

Self-motivation

Self-motivation is another self-concept, which identifies how an individual is motivated by himself, and what factors are perceived by them as driving factors. It was found that Motivation is a crucial aspect in the choice of specialization as well. Some students value intrinsic rewards like knowledge enhancing, and experience gaining over extrinsic rewards like money, luxury life, and social status. Such students preferred HRM or OM as it makes sense for them even though comparatively extrinsic rewards are low. Similarly, there were students with pre-determined ambition or passion and they selected respective specialization areas that supported their ambition or passion. Sangeetha expressed, *“I got a craze in the hotel industry from childhood and I selected marketing as it will satisfy my ambition.”* Srinath stated, *“My passion is filmmaking and I prefer organizational management as it will give me the holistic knowledge and confidence to manage all functional areas involved in filmmaking.”* On the other hand, the study found two

unique driving factors that have influenced the choice of specialization. Two students, considering their underutilized potential due to laziness, chose specialization as a risk-taking measure. Stepping out of their comfort zones, they seek to fully exploit their capabilities. Rukmi mentioned, *“I need tough things to drive me”* Chathura stated, *“I selected finance, which is tough because it will make me utilize my full potential.”* As the next driving factor, it was found that three students identified that learning new things has always been a drive for them and they have found intense curiosity in it, supporting the findings of Bobâlcă et al., (2014). Accordingly, they have selected OPM, which is entirely a new arena; and marketing as it is always an updating field.

Some students prefer theory and others prefer calculation, and they get motivated if they find their preference matches with the contents of specialization areas. Aashik expressed, *“I like mathematical areas, as it is to the point and no need to memorize”* Sazna shared, *“From childhood, I am more inclined to calculations than theory.”* Such students have selected either OPM or Business Finance specialization areas. While another portion of undergraduates prefers theories more rather than calculations. Janith stated, *“Theory subjects are really easy to understand,”* Imesha mentioned, *“I like to keep big notes in an attractive and structured way,”* Hansani shared, *“I excelled in notes subjects from my school times.”* Such students have selected either HRM or Marketing Management. This finding also interprets the findings of Bobâlcă et al., (2014) that the *“perceived difficulty”* factor can also be applicable regarding the preference of calculations vs. theory. Also, interestingly it was found that some students even though they excelled with theory subjects in schooling preferred calculation subjects as motivating in universities due to their perceived toughness in studying theory in English medium.

Self-management

Self-management is about how an individual manages all his work, which includes the working style, acceptance of control and authority, work planning, etc. Individuals' commitment to accountability and responsibility, impacts their specialization preference. A participant's affinity for these traits drew them to Business Finance, a field demanding such qualities and fiduciary duties. Another personal feature that was found in the study is the unwillingness to work under some person, abiding the authority, advice, and control. Srinath stated, *“I don't like to work under strict supervision and*

control,” Aashik said, *“I like to be free and I would like to start my own business.”* The above participants perceived that the choice of organizational management provides them with entrepreneurial freedom, an understanding of authority, and control to build self-management habits. Some people always include creativity and uniqueness in their work, and they feel motivated to do so. Anjali said, *“I tend to always give much effort to do things creatively and uniquely,”* and Dilka expressed, *“I like to attract others with my creative work.”* Both perceived that marketing specialization suits the above style of working, trying to attract customers using creativity. Thus, this entirely new finding makes sure that creative working behavior has influenced the selection of a specialization area.

Systematic and organized working is often related to the character of a perfectionist and it was observed that two such perfectionists expressed their preference for the OPM specialization area during their choice-making. Dharshini mentioned, *“I am a perfectionist in work,”* Sazna stated, *“always values organized and systematic work and I maintain calendars and write diaries.”* The habit of maintaining calendars is similar to the Gantt chart and maintaining diaries is also related to scheduling practices in OPM. Next, it was also found that two participants identified themselves as multi-taskers, Multitaskers prefer organizational management due to its broad knowledge, aligning with their ability to handle multiple tasks effectively, potentially influencing specialization choices and career paths. These findings further emphasize the findings of Saranapala and Devadas (2020), that lifestyle is a crucial sub-factor that influences choice. The lifestyle has been described in detail by this sub-theme of self-management.

Social self

The social self is a crucial self-concept, which presents how an individual is having relationships and working together with others or society at large. The research finding suggests that undergraduates often choose their specialization departments based on their desire to interact and engage with others in their future job roles, which is a fresh finding compared to the literature. In other words, when selecting a field of study, these students take into consideration whether the specialization matches their individualism or collectivism. A group of undergraduates likes to interact with people a lot and identified as collectivist believers emphasizing teamwork, synergy, discussion, and collaboration. Kavish expressed, *“I am passionate about*

working with different people,” Sanjeevan stated *“I realized that I can deal with diverse people,”* and Navoda mentioned, *“I believe in synergy.”* Such students value collaborative work due to their fascination with diverse attitudes and show self-awareness in interpersonal skills, enhancing collaboration, empathy, and communication. HRM has been the option for such students as it offers interactions with people.

On the other hand, some students value personal space more than collaborative space and identified themselves more with the paradigm of individualism. They argued that humans are complex and interactions with them are always tough, whereas working individually seems less stressful. Deepika said *“I like to work individually rather than in group work, where we can never understand the other”* and Dharshini shared, *“I’m a perfectionist and always give my utmost effort, whereas I can’t guarantee that others will also do the same.”* Sazna stated *“I can’t understand any human, many times I end up depressed.”* These statements reveal that students may be introverted personalities, who avoid crowds, or maybe personalities who wish to perform things on their own, by which control, decision-making, and effort can be efficiently undertaken. Such students have preferred OPM and Finance specialization areas, as interactions, collaboration, and sharing with others are comparatively low about HRM and Marketing.

Influence from People

This study also finds the influence of people as another factor influencing the choice of specialization, in which influence from close relations, influence from the academic community, and influence from the industrial community have been identified as constituents.

Influence from close relations

Close relations mean the parties with whom caring, sharing, and high attachment prevail. As per the data, such close relations were family members, relations, friends, and relationship partners.

Most students conveyed that family members influenced their selection of specialization areas. Rukmi said, *“My mother insisted I choose HRM,”* Anjali shared, *“My brother advised me to go for Accounting & Finance since there are ample opportunities in this field.”* Some students said that they were highly influenced by their family friends and relations as well,

if they are also from the management arena. Aashik said, *“one of our family friends supported marketing,”* whereas Janith pointed out, *“my cousin insisted on the high demand for HRM in foreign countries.”* Even some students were highly influenced by the relationships and affairs they had, Srinath opened up, *“another reason to select finance was my girlfriend also selected the same.”* On the whole, it can be iterated that close relations have influenced in the selection of specialization areas, but such influence has been perceived by most students as minimal in contrary to Wijerathna and Thisera (2018), which identified family influences as huge. It also supports the claim of Kalyani and Chathuranga (2021) that peer influences are also getting reduced.

Influence from the academic community

Academic community refers to the parties who are related to the academic activities of one person, it may be school teachers, tuition teachers, lecturers, tutors, colleagues, or senior students. Advanced Level tuition class teachers had a huge influence on the selection of specialization areas by students. Sangeetha said *“my AL sir inspired me to choose Accounting, and since then I had a special desire towards accounting subject.”* Dilka stated *“My tuition sir always takes examples from marketing and it made us get more attracted to marketing.”* Students expressed that in schools, they are not given any official awareness about specialization areas, hence the influence from tuition teachers are huge. This finding also supports the general claim that in secondary schools, teachers create an image of the university as a place of fun and entertainment and rarely explain the reality of it. Students have been attracted to lecturers, about their teaching style and social skills during the common courses in the 1st year. Chathura expressed *“lecturer, who taught principles of marketing management subject in the first year, influenced me highly towards selecting Marketing Management.”* Students are allocated with mentors within the faculty who are lecturers, who also influence the decisions of students when selecting their area of study. This finding also supports and elaborates the findings of Bobâlcă et al., (2014) where teachers' characteristics have been identified as a weak factor of influence. Students also mentioned the advice they received from their seniors who were in their 3rd and 4th years. Aashik shared, *“a senior insisted that it's quite easy to get 1st class in HRM”* Ravini mentioned, *“a senior advised me that ample job opportunities are available for Accounting & Finance.”* But when it comes to the influence of the academic community, students have perceived it as a

huge influence compared to close relations, as the academic community possesses more knowledge, and experience in academia.

Influence from the industrial community

Industrial community means parties who work in various industries or worlds of work. FOM is practicing a program where students are allotted industry experts and such people will guide the students regarding their careers. Since students spend a considerable amount of time with their respective mentors from 1st year itself, mentors have also influenced the choice of specialization. Imesha said, *“my mentor is from an Audit firm, and because of the work settings there, I would also like to work in an audit firm.”* Anjaani stated, *“my mentor always boasts about the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, where he works and I got interested to work there and selected Finance which includes banking as a module.”* Senior students who are in the industry have also influenced the choice of specialization areas. Students were inspired by most of their seniors who are in good positions in the industry, and they got advice from them in choosing their specialization area. Janani expressed *“I contacted my senior who is working in the tourism industry and she made me aware of the trend of marketing.”* Moreover, it was found that students got influenced by random industry personalities either when they meet such personalities to collect data for university assignments or through any other medium. Similar to the academic community, the industry community’s influence on the choice of specialization is huge, as such people from the industry know about the market of jobs and students have given significance to their opinions. These findings are contrary to Anojan and Nimalathasan (2013) that occupational factors are weak influences.

Influence of information

It was well explored in this study that it is not only self and influence from people, but in this modern informative world, it is the information that plays a huge role in changing preferences. The gathering of information is the second stage before evaluation and arriving at a decision in the process of choice of specialization areas as elaborated by Bobâlcă **et. al.**, (2014). Accordingly, the study has found information about specialization areas and information about job prospects as significant aspects.

Information about specialization area

It has been observed that undergraduates actively seek out information about different specialization areas before making their final choice. First, there was general information about specialization areas that students collected from various general sources like the internet, social media, Quora-like platforms, close relations, academic community of secondary schools, etc. Riswan said *“I got to know about marketing from social media and advertisements.”* Rukmi mentioned *“my cousin brother works as an account assistant and I have watched him during work from home.”* Students lack even general information about each specialization area when they enter universities and after which only they search or even becomes open to such general information. But as time passes, they search for specific information to select their respective specialization area. This specific information-gathering involves exploring the details of each specialization in FOM, including the courses they have to study, the skills they will acquire, the functioning of departments, etc. Kavish stated, *“I read the subject content of the Marketing Management from Student Handbook.”* Srinath mentioned, *“I inquired seniors about the subjects that are given in HRM.”* Students gathered information about the content from various sources like the handbook, senior students, first-year lecturers even tutors, who were knowledgeable about these subjects. Therefore, the content of the department subject is one of the specific information that undergraduates consider when they select the specialization area.

Secondly, students were keen on the functioning of the departments, especially about the strict compliance to rules, student-friendly approaches, flexibility in providing make-up exams, and overall support to the learning process. Thirdly, students were curious about the subjects' evaluations, which included continuous assignments and final paper marking. Janith said, *“I inquired seniors about the types of assignments given.”* Omali said, *“I got to know from seniors which lecturers are lenient in marking.”* Students perceived this information as crucial because they had to survive in that particular setting and excel in their performance. Hence, this information is short-term oriented, though it influences the choice of specialization areas contrary to the findings of Anojan and Nimalathan (2013) that university factors are weak influencers. These findings support findings of Tennakoon et. al., (2005), and Perera and Pratheesh (2018).

Information about job prospects

Students have perceived that information about specialization areas is not enough, information about the availability of jobs, the career path, and the rewards of jobs are also very crucial when deciding on specialization areas. Hence, they have been open to information and insights about job prospects in respective specialization areas, Sazna shared, *“I got to know about what kind of jobs are available within the Sri Lankan context related to OPM as it is a new field.”* Kavish stated, *“I searched for modern jobs in the HR field and got to know about Ombudsman.”* The perspective provided by the respondent distinctly reveals the pivotal role of information about career paths in influencing the decision-making process of undergraduates when it comes to selecting their areas of specialization. Further students have used several platforms to get information. Janani expressed *“I asked questions in “Quora” regarding job prospects and many people have answered it, which was enlightening.”* Dulanjali pointed out, *“I used LinkedIn to inquire about a career path to organizational management when I seemed confused about entry-level jobs.”* Students are very concerned about job prospects as they perceive the ultimate intention of selection of specialization is to get employed, so some students who value long-term planning have given high priority to the information about career path than to the information about specialization area. This finding also explorative evidences the findings of Perera and Pratheesh (2018) and Kalyani and Chathuranga (2021) that job factors and career benefits are crucial influencers. On the whole, the findings also reiterate the findings of Abdulla and Ashraf (2020) that in the Sri Lankan context most students enter the university system without proper awareness, especially about specialization areas.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study found three major arenas: the self, the people, and the information influencing the choice of specialization areas. Students’ self-image of who they are, self-motivation of what is driving them, self-management of their working style, and social self of whether they are collectivist or individualist have been the most crucial factors that people and information. Secondly, concerning people, it can be concluded that close relation has been influencing on a minimal level, whereas both the academic community and industrial community influences highly as they have referent power in academia and industry. Finally, influences from the information

about specialization areas have been short-term oriented, whereas influences from the information about job prospects have been long-term oriented (Refer Figure 1: Concluding Diagram). Theoretically, this is one of the initial qualitative explorations of the factors influencing the choice of specialization of management undergraduates in Management faculties of Sri Lankan State universities, especially that of the UOP.

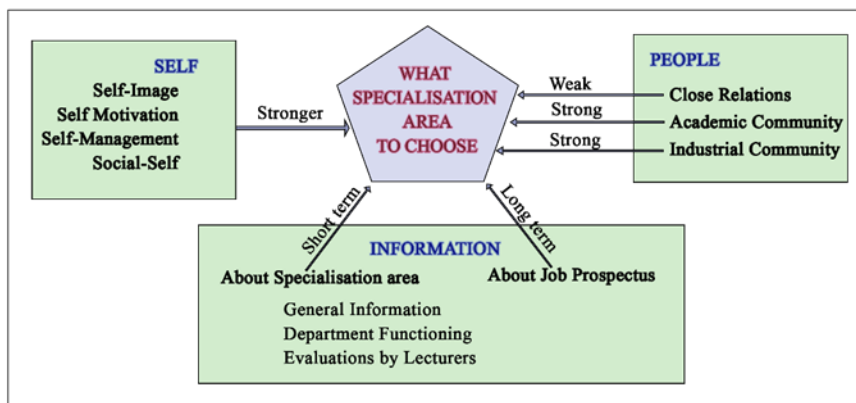


Figure 1: Concluding Diagram

As an exploratory study, this possesses practical implications. First, it makes several parties like undergraduates, lecturers, university administration, higher education-related authorities, and researchers aware of the updated factors that influence the choice of specialization areas. This study also advocates for more comprehensive awareness to undergraduates about specialization areas, by which irrational and unnecessary influences in the decision-making can be limited ensuring the efficacy of choice. This study also encourages the teachers of secondary schools, who are graduates, to make the students aware of the specialization areas in the schooling itself, so that they would be able to create their path and plan accordingly. University administration can also take several measures to enhance the exposure of specialization areas to secondary schools as well as to the general public. Finally, this study urges the respective specialization departments to study the factors that have influenced the students and take the necessary initiatives to position their specialization and avoid the influence of unnecessary factors.

As a limitation, this study is contextual to FOM, and UOP, where only the present second and third years were included making the study less generalizable. Secondly, the factors identified were based on the subjective viewpoints of participants, hence personal biases of participants may have

persisted in the findings. Thus, it has been recommended for further quantitative studies to test the ensured existence of the above-identified factors. Moreover, explorations on this aspect in different management faculties throughout Sri Lanka are much needed to enhance the efficacy of Management Education in Sri Lanka.

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, N. A., & Ashraf, M. (2020). Comparative Study of Factors influencing the choice in Area of Specialization among Management and Social Science students at the University Level.
- Anojan, V., & Nimalathan, B. (2013). Factors influencing in the career choice of second year undergraduate students: A case study of faculty of management studies and commerce. *International journal of social science and Interdisciplinary research*, 2(11), 16-25.
- Babad, E., & Tayeb. (2003). Experimental analysis of student's course selection. *British Journal of Education Psychology*, 373-393.
- Bobâlcă, C., Țugulea, O., & Bradu, C. (2014). How are the students selecting their bachelor specialization? A qualitative approach. *Procedia economics and Finance*, 15, 894-902.
- Kalyani, M. W., & Chathuranga, M. M. (2021). Career Choice Determinants of the Management Students: A Case of a Sri Lankan State University. *Journal of Accounting Research, Business and Finance Management*, 2(2).
- Kochung, E., & Migunde, Q. (2011). Factors Influencing Students Career Choices among Secondary School students in Kisumu Municipality Kenya. *Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (Jeteraps)*, 2(2), 81-87.
- Kusumawati, A. (2013). Students' perceptions of choice criteria in the selection of an Indonesian public university.

- Moore, S. M., Behrends, A. A., Mazur, D., & Sanbonmatsu, D. M. (2016). When do people bet on their selves? The role of global self-concepts in decision making. *Self and Identity, 15*(5), 548-560.
- Perera, R. H., & Pratheesh, P. (2018). Factors influence on student course selection: a case of Trincomalee campus. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology, 3*(5).
- Perez, P. (2010). College choice process of Latino undocumented students: Implications for recruitment and retention. *Journal of College Admission, 21-25*.
- Samaranayake, G. (2016). Expansion of University Education, Graduate Unemployment, and the Knowledge Hub in Sri Lanka. *Social Affairs: A Journal for the Social Sciences, 1*(4), 15-32.
- Saranapala, I. S., & Devadas, U. M. (2020). Factors Influencing on Career Choice of Management and Commerce Undergraduates in National Universities in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Human Resource Management, 15*, 108.
- Singam, K. (2017). Review on Graduates' Unemployment in Sri Lanka and the Globe. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: G Linguistics and Education, 17*(8).
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE publications.
- Tennakoon, H., Vidanapathirana, A. K., & Sutharsan, S. (2005). Career preferences and the factors influencing their selection in fourth year medical students in the University of Colombo.
- Tracer Study Statistics. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/statistics/webTracer/2018/Tracer%20Study%202018.pdf#page=49&zoom=100,141,96>
- UGC University Statistics . (2021). University Admissions - Chapter 2. Retrieved from https://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/statistics/stat_2021/Chapter%202.pdf

University of Peradeniya. (2023, 08 02). General Information. Retrieved from Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya Official Website: <https://mgt.pdn.ac.lk/about/general.php>

Wijerathna, K. G., & Thisera, T. J. (2018). The Factors Influencing the Career Choice of Final Year Undergraduates. 5th HRM Student Research Symposium 2018 (p. 52). Kelaniya: Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies, University of Kelaniya.

Yaniv, I. (2004). Receiving other people's advice: Influence and benefit. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 93(1), 1-13.