

Technology and 'Choices' at the Higher Education: A Study of First Generation Students**Priyambada Shah**

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Abstract

In India the schemes like Rashtriya Uchchatar Siksha Abhiyan (2013) are encouraging students to enter higher education. Many of these students entering higher education are the first generation to do so in their families. Students who are the first generation in their families to enter are likely to face challenges as they have to make the crucial decisions regarding the choice of institutions and program of study. In this context it is important to understand the various sources which provide them information about the type of education to be pursued. The study seeks to understand the problems faced by first generation students in deciding the course of action to be undertaken with regard to higher education pathways. They lack sufficient information and guidance regarding higher education. The present paper will look into all these aspects and try to understand how technology in the form of computer, mobile, internet, online websites, television, etc help them to gather information about higher education. The findings highlighted that digital technology was the most important source for gathering information.

Key words: higher education, technology, first generation students**Introduction**

Higher education comes after school and comprises under graduation, post-graduation, and pre-doctoral and doctoral programs. It includes colleges, universities and various institutions providing post-secondary education. Attaining a degree brings economic and social benefits that boosts self-confidence of an individual. Therefore, after completion of school education, students have to make decisions regarding post school pathways and this involves complex processes of decision making and involves family members, relatives, peer group, teacher and so on. With the expansion of the higher education sector, an increasing number of students from diverse background are entering higher education. In India the schemes like Rashtriya Uchchatar Siksha

Abhiyan (2013) are encouraging students to enter higher education. Many of these students entering higher education are the first generation to do so in their families. Students who are the first generation in their families to enter are likely to face challenges as they have to make the crucial decisions regarding the program of study. In this context it is important to understand the various sources which provide them information about the type of education to be pursued. The present paper will look into all these aspects and try to understand how technology in the form of computer, mobile, internet, online websites, television, etc help them to gather information about higher education.

In India, the higher education is highly restrictive, 'exclusive', and 'selective' field (Deshpande 2006: 2440), wherein Deshpande (2006) highlighted that higher education 'remain a selective or elite field', where more students want to get in than can be accommodated. Therefore, some have to be 'turned away'. Thus, discrimination or exclusion is a feature of higher education, whereby 'selection' and 'rejection' are its critical component. There are various factors that constraint student's access to higher education, these include academic and non-academic.

Despite these constraints/ barriers, students are entering higher education. Studies have explained the various factors which suggest that the educational decision making is seen to be different among 'non- traditional' students and those from middle class who are traditional students. Archer (2003) in the study of working class participants mentioned that student's motivation to enter in higher education was to improve personal and familial economic situations, social mobility, gaining social status and prestige, and to improve employment prospects.

Women were also participating in higher education because education is considered important in 'getting jobs' (Chanana 2000). Archer et al (2003) found that within working class group, there are different motivational factors for men and women. For instance, men cited 'personal economic motivations' for going to university whereas, women's motivations was a combination of personal, social, or family motivations, for instance, to become a 'better person', and to 'benefit their families'.

Choice of higher education institution is different for varied groups of students in terms of class background and ethnicity. Reay et al (2001) points out that higher education applicant's choice making process are influenced by individual, peer group, familial and institutional factors and all this produces different 'opportunity structure'.

There is a relation between socio- economic status and choice of subjects. Scholars like Werfhorst et al (2003), Brooks (2003) and Davies et al (2008) in their studies on subject choice found that higher socio- economic status increases the likelihood of taking 'classical subjects' at higher secondary education, thereby decreases the chances of selecting odd options by students. Werfhorst (2003) in his study on the role of social class in England highlighted that humanities subjects (including history, French and Geography) are strongly related to higher social class while social studies (which include commerce and domestic science) are not related to higher social class.

Moreover, 'networking' and 'contacts' are important aspects of educational choices. Drury (1993) and Brooks (2003) in their studies focused on these aspects. Drury (1993) in his study pointed out that people from middle class backgrounds are better educated and have better access through their personal networks to a wider range of experiences, opinions and information about school choice, subject choice and career path. Therefore, whenever they have any doubt or problem with regard to access, subject choice, or performance with the help of their networks and contacts they find out the information enabling their children to do well.

On the other hand, the lower middle class and working class have lesser contacts. Thus, they are seen as disadvantaged in comparison to the upper middle classes. Woods (1976) found that for working class children in England, the choice of the subject is 'vaguely' linked to career as they themselves and their parents were unaware of wide career opportunities. This results in their different choice of subjects.

Need and Significance of the Study

There are a growing number of students from working/ lower class, often first generation in their families entering higher education (Reay et al 2009; Brooks 2004). As seen in the above review of literature, there are very few studies have looked at processes that influence choices, decision making and selecting of higher education subject/ courses (Werfhorst 2003; Brooks 2003). The factors that play a vital role in shaping the decisions in the choice of program of study of first generation college students has remained a neglected area.

An attempt is made to understand the factors first generation college students keep in mind while 'choosing' courses prior to entering higher education and how these students actually get into specific institutions? What factors influence their higher education choices? How do families strategize their support? Does the neighbourhood or networks play any role in it? How

the technology provide the basis for forming decision? The complex process of decision making within the family and the influence of socio- economic factors, networks, parental aspirations, gender differentiation, have received little attention among the scholars in western countries (Reay et al 2009; Brooks 2003; Archer ed. 2003) and has been a completely neglected area of research in India. These are some of the questions which are neglected areas of research. So, the present study will address some of these issues.

Objectives

1. To understand the factors that influence the decision making around higher education of first generation college students.
2. To explore the role that the family and students play in this process?
3. To understand the role that technology play in helping the students?

The Field Study

Methodology

In order to comprehend the first generation college student's choices in relation to higher education, a study was conducted in Delhi. Families whose children were first generation to enter higher education and were studying in colleges in Delhi were selected for the study. Through these students their families were approached. These students are referred to as 'respondents'.

For the purpose of the study qualitative method was used. 65 respondents were interviewed. Along with respondents their parents were also interviewed. The data was collected in two stages. In the first stage respondents identified were asked few questions to gather information on few variables like streams taken by the respondents, marks in class XII, age, family background, educational qualifications of parents and siblings, etc.

After gathering the basic information, the second stage of interview started. In-depth interviews were carried out. In this stage semi-structured interview schedule was used with questions on the choice of program of study, role of technology and consultation. Further the respondents and their parents were asked questions on a range of themes around choice of higher education, their decision making regarding selection of program of study, use of technology, and familial support.

Results and Discussions

Preference of Disciplines in Higher Education

Higher education applicants presented with a range of subject/ courses of study to be made. The socio- economic background influences the choice. In the present study pre-college academic credentials (such as stream chosen, subjects within the stream and school attended at higher secondary level) played a significant role in deciding the discipline in higher education. However, majority of the respondents informed that they had preference of disciplines. As these were the first in their families to enter higher education so everything was new to them. They were anxious about what discipline to take.

However, it is interesting to note that majority of these respondents had prefer more than one discipline. Some respondents said that their family had a role to play in decisions on which discipline to choose at undergraduate level. However, there are variations in the involvement of family members in the decision making process as seen through the discussion that follows.

Father's Role

It was found in the present study that very few fathers were involved in decision making regarding disciplines to be taken in higher education. These fathers also helped in deciding the course with a particular discipline. These fathers 'guided' the respondent to take particular disciplines in the under graduation. They did so by explaining the future scope of the disciplines and various courses within it. One respondent recalled

My father always wanted that I should continue my education in science subject... so he always motivated me to take science stream in class XI and when it came to decide undergraduate discipline he asked me to continue in science as he said science is a reputed field. He also suggested me to do bachelor either in chemistry, maths, physics, computer science or B. Tech. As he said these are the good courses within science discipline (S-15).

Moreover, 'networking' and 'contacts' are important aspects of educational choices. It is found that the father's workplace and network played a vital part in father's views of the disciplines the respondent should choose. Respondent's said that their fathers helped them in selecting discipline as their (parents) workplace made them 'aware' (*jagruk*) about the disciplines. Respondents emphasized that due to their (parents) everyday interaction with the staff, colleague and officers they are getting to know about the disciplines at college level. Hence, they (fathers) recommended respondents to choose among certain disciplines. Mainly the father suggested the respondents to continue in the stream which they (respondents) took in higher secondary level. Of these, majority of the respondents chose science stream and very few

took arts stream in the school.

Interaction with the 'regular' passenger led some fathers to suggest particular disciplines to the respondents. These fathers were taxi drivers and asked their passenger (whom they know and trust as they were their regular passengers) regarding what discipline their child (respondent) should take. As Ranveer put, "my father asked one of his passenger regarding what discipline I should opt in college. After knowing that I took commerce in higher secondary education, uncle (passenger) suggested him that I can take B.com pass or honors".

The respondents who took science stream in higher secondary education their fathers encouraged the respondents to continue education in science because science is considered as a 'good' and 'reputed' discipline. While, these fathers could not help the respondents regarding the particular course to opt for in science discipline as they lack knowledge about it. As one of the respondent stated "my father wanted me to continue science because it is a good stream and has good scope like, engineer, doctor... so the father asked me to take science discipline. However, he could not helped with what disciplines in science to choose" (R-65).

The choice of deciding the discipline was left entirely on the respondent in a number of cases. There were fathers who said that they were ready to support the child and spend money on their education, but as the respondent has to study so it was better for them to decide themselves. One of the respondent's father stated, "I said to my daughter to choose the discipline of her choice. I told her to score good marks in whatever discipline she chooses... I am ready to spend money on her education and will try my best to provide everything she needed for her education. I will support her choice" (RP-42).

Mother's Role

Mother's in large number were not involved in the process of decision making regarding any particular discipline at undergraduate level. A large number of mothers had no idea about the disciplines, others suggested the respondent to take a discipline on the basis of their interest and there were some who reiterated what the father or the elder sibling had suggested.

Significant Other's Role

Teacher and counsellor were consulted by very few respondents while deciding on the discipline. These respondents mainly took arts and commerce stream in school. The respondents were not aware as to what to take in higher education so they consulted their school personnel. Rajini elaborated, "I consulted my drawing teacher in school... my teacher knew

that I was good in drawing and paintings so he suggested me to pursue higher education in fine arts”.

Some respondents appeared to be comfortable in consulting their tutors. Tutors appear to have largely based their suggestions on the interest of the respondents. These respondents were in science stream in school and were interested in science. They advised by their tutors to take science discipline such as, mathematics, computer science, biology, zoology, Technology, chemistry, physics and all science disciplines and told them to score good marks in graduation. Further, tutor informed them to appear for IIT entrance exam.

It is interesting to note that in families where parents and significant others could not help the respondents in choosing the discipline, the respondents chose the disciplines on their own. It is important to note that though this group of respondent took the decision on their 'own' but they were influenced by the information available on digital technology and social media such as television (TV) and internet. As these students were first in their families and in many cases parents were unaware regarding disciplines. So these students were at a vulnerable position. However, digital technology played a vital role and helped these students in gathering information regarding disciplines. Information available in internet facilitated students to get to know about the future scopes of the particular disciplines.

Furthermore, news channel also helped these students in selecting the disciplines. As some of the respondents informed that 'news channel discussed about the disciplines to choose after class XII. The information that these news channel provided to these students had huge impact on their decision making process. As Neeta said, “my parents could not help me with the studies and disciplines to take in college. So I myself start searching about it. I once heard in news channel in TV about the various courses in science disciplines, like-computer science, biology, physics, maths. I was interested in science... so this helped me in choosing. I thought of applying in all these science courses”.

Conclusion

Higher education is an important stage. The respondents as seen, were unaware about the discipline to choose at higher education level. In cases where parents were unaware about the disciplines, respondents who were often unsure and confused consulted those who could help them in suggesting disciplines. It is interesting that teachers, counsellors and tutors were also

consulted by the respondents. Further, the use of technology played an important role in deciding the discipline to choose at the higher education level.

Thus, some of the crucial issues in relation to the choice of discipline were explored. It is important to note that the respondents felt that the technology played a vital role in the process of discipline choice. The study has not looked into the role of caste in choice of discipline and the cumulative effect of caste and gender on the discipline choice of students. There is scope for more nuanced studies in the higher education.

However, the study suggested that there were some complex processes due to the class and school which mediated their selection of discipline. The study has highlighted the understanding into the process of decision making around discipline choice of the respondents. The study has showed some structural limitations whereby the class was a hindrance in the decision making but digital technology played a crucial role.

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