

Exploring the Preferences of Prospective Students in Choosing Private Higher Education Institutions

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Received: 09-04-2025 | Accepted: 25-04-2025 | Published: 28-05-2025

How to cite: Putri, N.A.P. (2025). Exploring the preferences of prospective students in choosing private higher education institutions. *Journal of Emerging Business Management and Entrepreneurship Studies*, 5(1), 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.34149/jebmes.v5i1.188>



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ABSTRACT

As competition among private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Indonesia intensifies, understanding student preferences becomes essential for developing effective marketing strategies and admission policies. This study investigates the key factors influencing high school students' decisions when choosing higher education institutions in Indonesia, and how these preferences differ between public and private school students. Utilizing the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) framework, the research employs a qualitative approach. Data was gathered through focus group discussions with nine (9) public school students and in-depth interviews with six (6) private school students from the Jabodetabek area. The findings indicate that public school students prioritize institutional reputation and affordability. In contrast, private school students emphasize program fit and opportunities for personal growth. These results highlight the need for private higher education institutions to tailor their marketing and admission strategies to effectively attract diverse student segments and enhance recruitment outcomes.

Keywords:

Higher education, CDMP framework, decision-making, Indonesia, marketing strategies, private higher education institutions, student preference

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a crucial role in advancing socio-economic development and fostering innovation (Komari et al., 2023). Indonesia's higher education landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, with the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) increasing from 4,397 in 2022 to 6,615 in 2025. These institutions are categorized into State higher education institutions, Private higher education institutions, Foreign higher education institutions, and Higher Education Institutions under Ministries or Government Agencies. In 2022, Java had the highest number of HEIs, with 1,477 institutions, primarily located in West Java, East Java, Jakarta, Central Java, Banten, and the Special Region of Yogyakarta (PDDikti, 2022).

In terms of student enrollment, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology reported that 4.49 million students were enrolled in private higher education institutions in 2022, while 3.37 million were in public higher education institutions. However, this trend changed as public higher

education institutions aggressively expanded their capacity, enrolling two to three times more students than in previous years. This made it more difficult for private higher education institutions to sustain themselves. The quality of academic programs in private higher education institutions has come under scrutiny, with an analysis of 100 private higher education institutions across various regions revealing approximately 740 academic programs, of which only 131 were rated as excellent in accreditation. Accreditation remains a major challenge, with 84 private higher education institution at risk of losing their licenses due to non-compliance with accreditation requirements (Subanidja, 2025). To address these challenges, private higher education institution must enhance their academic quality and competitiveness by becoming more adaptive to the demands of modern education.

By 2025, the number of private higher education institution continues to grow, contributing to market saturation, making it increasingly difficult for institutions to differentiate themselves and attract prospective students. Jakarta, with the third-highest number of higher education institutions in Java, illustrates this dynamic. Bina Nusantara University (BINUS) stands out with an annual intake of 1,336 students and a strong portfolio of 66 programs aligned with the digital and creative industries. In contrast, Prasetiya Mulya University, which focuses on business and entrepreneurship education, enrolls an average of only 136 students annually. This reflects a niche market strategy or limitations in scaling up. Meanwhile, Pelita Harapan University (UPH) offers the highest number of programs with 85, yet attracts only 713 new students annually. This suggests that a larger program portfolio does not necessarily guarantee higher enrollment (PDDikti, 2025). Table 1 presents a comparative overview of competition among selected private higher education institution in Jakarta based on 2025 data.

Table 1. Comparison of study programs and student admissions per year

Higher Education Institutions	Total Study Programs	Average New Student Intake/Year	Strategic Notes
Bina Nusantara University (BINUS)	66 programs	1,336 students/year	Offers many programs, well-accredited, adaptive to industry trends and digital era
Prasetiya Mulya University	13 programs	136 students/year	Focuses on business & entrepreneurship, small intake; needs diversification & promotion
Pelita Harapan University (UPH)	85 programs	713 students/year	Offers many programs but intake not optimal; needs stronger branding & positioning

Source: PDDikti, 2025

Private higher education institutions' success is influenced by their academic programs, institutional branding, curriculum relevance, and marketing strategies. To maintain sustainability, higher education institutions must enhance academic and non-academic competitiveness. Offering programs in digital technology and sustainability is crucial, along with improving faculty quality through training and international certifications. Using digital and hybrid learning methods can enhance flexibility and student experiences. Understanding prospective students' preferences is essential in this saturated environment. Identifying factors influencing their choices in higher education institutions can provide valuable insights for designing targeted strategies. Applying a consumer behavior perspective can help higher education institutions better understand student decision-making, which is influenced

by psychological, social, and personal aspects. By examining these factors, higher education institutions can tailor their offerings to meet the needs and desires of their target audience, ensuring the success of private higher education institutions.

Drawing from consumer behavior theory, purchasing decisions, including the choice of an educational institution, are influenced by a combination of psychological, social, and personal factors (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Students evaluate higher education institutions based on perceived benefits such as the relevance of academic programs, institutional reputation, career opportunities, social environment, and affordability. Particularly, private higher education institutions students tend to value engaging and distinctive study programs, perceived institutional quality, and future career prospects. This highlights the importance for private higher education institutions to innovate and align their offerings with the expectations of their target audience.

The decision-making process for students in choosing a higher education institution is shaped by emotional, rational, and institutional factors. Although tuition fees matter, offering free tuition alone has limited impact (Espinoza et al., 2024). Many students rely on scholarships or loans, while institutional reputation, program quality, and career prospects remain key considerations. In Indonesia, academic quality—such as accreditation and reputation—is a major factor (Hidayat et al., 2018; Proboyo & Soedarsono, 2015). Marketing strategies and brand image also play a role (Jati et al., 2021), along with campus facilities, location, personal interests, and parental advice (Harahap & Amanah, 2019). Alumni success and institutional values further influence student choices.

Bakar et al. (2021) identified seven main factors affecting enrollment in private institutions, with location being the most influential. Accreditation was seen as more important than facilities or cost (Susilawati et al., 2024). Pratminingsih (2011) found that all elements of the education marketing mix positively affect student decisions, a view supported by Prasetyaningrum & Marliana (2020), who emphasized institutional quality, facilities, and marketing communication. Internal factors such as motivation and personality, along with external influences like family support and institutional image, also play a significant role (Masduki et al., 2023). Further, Pardiyo & Puspita (2021) and Harahap et al. (2023) highlight the importance of study program quality, learning environment, location, tuition, and faculty competence, alongside peer influence. The alignment of academic programs with future employment opportunities remains central in both Indonesia and Vietnam (Hai et al., 2023). As Poole et al. (2023) noted, students often engage in iterative evaluations and seek information from various sources. Institutions must therefore adopt tailored marketing strategies that address both rational and emotional aspects of student choice.

As the decision-making process varies across student segments, higher education institutions must develop tailored marketing strategies that cater to both the rational and emotional aspects of higher education institutions choice. Tailored communication addressing academic quality, higher education institutions image, career prospects, and personalized outreach efforts can effectively engage prospective students and support their decision-making process. These findings underscore the complex

interplay of institutional, personal, and marketing factors that higher education institutions must navigate in attracting and retaining students in a competitive higher education landscape. Previous research has shown that student preferences in choosing a higher education institution—especially private higher education institutions—are diverse and multi-layered. Kusumawati et al. (2019) further suggest that student decisions are shaped by a combination of social network influences and rational evaluations of institutional reputation and employability, highlighting the segmented nature of prospective student groups. In addition, Por, Say, and Mov (2024) identified eight influential factors—ranging from parental influence and teacher recommendations to higher education institutions reputation and learning environment—that must be addressed through comprehensive strategies. Therefore, this study not only discusses the factors influencing high school students in choosing higher education institutions but also explores the differences in preferences between students from public and private high schools.

This study uses the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) framework to understand consumer preferences in private higher education institutions. The model consists of five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. These stages help explain how students recognize the importance of higher education, actively seek information, compare options, make final choices, and reflect on satisfaction post-enrollment.

Building on the framework in Figure 2, The study investigates high school students' decision-making processes when choosing higher education institutions, focusing on consumer behavior theory. It uses a qualitative approach, including focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, to understand students' thought processes and criteria. The findings are expected to provide strategic guidance for private higher education institutions to improve their competitiveness in a saturated market.

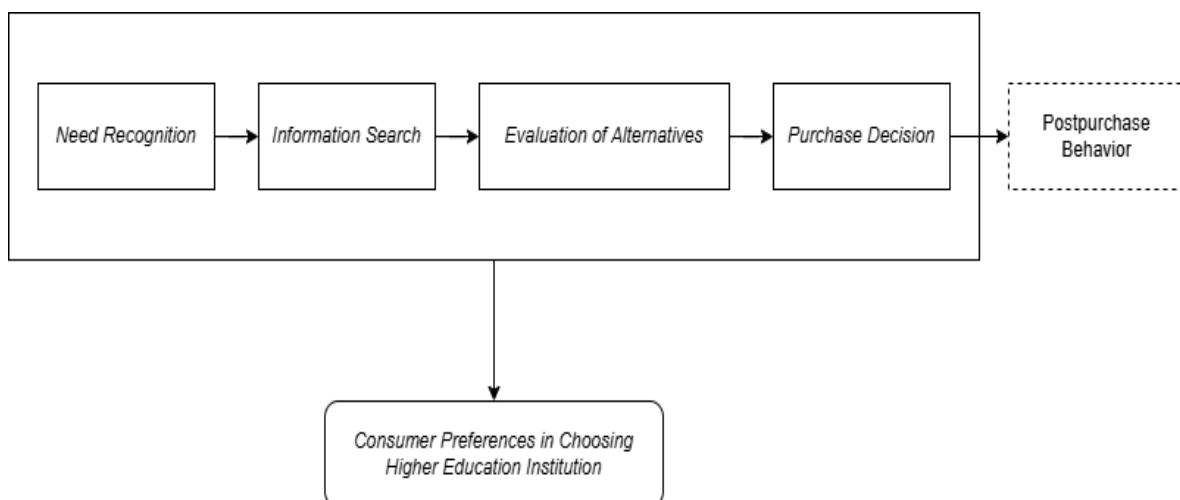


Figure 2. Research Framework

This research focuses on the first four stages of the decision-making process: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase decision. It aims to provide a deeper

understanding of students' complex considerations before finalizing their higher education institution choices. The study uses the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) framework to identify key factors influencing the selection of private higher education institutions. The research question is: "What are the key factors influencing private vs public high school students' preferences in choosing private higher education institutions in Indonesia?" The findings will help develop student-centered strategies and policies, enabling private higher education institutions to design targeted marketing strategies and improve their competitive positioning.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the factors that influence high school students' preferences in selecting higher education institutions. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for understanding experiences, motivations, and decision-making processes that are shaped by social and personal contexts and cannot be easily captured through numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach is considered suitable for investigating the how and why behind students' choices.

To ensure depth and variety in the data, two qualitative data collection methods were used: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs). FGDs were conducted with students from public high schools to gather collective views and explore group dynamics in decision-making. In contrast, IDIs were carried out with students from private high schools to gain deeper insights into individual motivations and experiences, especially regarding their considerations of private higher education institutions. This methodological triangulation enhances the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on data provided by a private higher education institution in Jakarta. The selection criteria included: (1) attending a public or private high school, (2) being in their final year of study, (3) residing in the Greater Jakarta area (Jabodetabek), and (4) having an initial interest in pursuing higher education. This approach ensured the relevance of participants to the study's objective.

Data Collection

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were held with nine (9) final-year students from public high schools via Online Zoom. This group size aligns with McDaniel (2017) recommendation of 8–12 participants for effective discussion. A semi-structured guide with open-ended questions was used to encourage interactive discussion and idea sharing among participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The guide of FGDs was semi-structured developed based on the CDMP stages and covered the following key themes:

1. Higher Education Aspirations and Motivations

Participants discussed their goals after graduation, motivations for pursuing higher education, preferred academic majors, and initial higher education institution choices.

2. Factors Influencing higher education institution Selection

Exploration of key decision factors such as program offerings (e.g., international programs, fast-track), internship and career opportunities, campus facilities, learning technology, tuition fees, scholarships, accreditation, and campus image.

3. Information Sources

How students searched for higher education institution-related information, including social media platforms, websites, school guidance counselors, education fairs, family, and peers. Participants also shared which sources they trusted most.

4. Evaluation Criteria

Students ranked the most important aspects influencing their higher education institution choices and explained the reasoning behind their top priorities.

5. Social Influences and Decision-Making

Discussion of how parental support, peer influence, and guidance counselor input shaped their preferences. This included follow-up questions about plans if not admitted to public higher education institutions and whether private higher education institutions were part of their consideration.

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)

Six (6) final-year students from private high schools were interviewed individually via Online Zoom. The IDIs aimed to uncover personal stories and specific factors influencing their decisions—such as campus visits, scholarship considerations, or interest in international programs. A semi-structured interview guide, aligned with the FGD themes, was used to maintain consistency while allowing deeper individual exploration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The sample size was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation, as supported by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006).

By combining FGDs and IDIs, the study was able to gather both broad group insights and in-depth individual perspectives. FGDs highlighted social dynamics and group-level reasoning among public school students, while IDIs provided rich narratives about the personal decision-making processes of private school students. Together, these methods offered a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping students' preferences in selecting higher education institutions.

Data Analysis & Validation

The data collected from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with verbatim transcription of all audio recordings to ensure accurate representation of participants' responses. Following transcription, a content grid was developed to systematically organize the data according to

guiding questions and emerging topics. This step allowed for a clear comparison and identification of patterns across participant groups. The next phase involved manual coding, with the data being categorized both inductively and deductively to identify recurring themes, distinctive patterns, and meaningful categories. Coding was carried out using Microsoft Excel, where the researcher organized the data into separate columns for different themes and categories, facilitating a more accessible and flexible coding process.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, two validation strategies were applied: triangulation and peer debriefing. Triangulation was achieved by combining data from two sources, FGDs and in-depth interviews, allowing for cross-verification of themes from different participant groups. This approach provided a richer, more nuanced interpretation by integrating both collective and individual perspectives. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted, where a fellow researcher reviewed the coding scheme and thematic interpretations. This collaborative review process minimized potential researcher bias and strengthened the reliability and accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the preferences and decision-making considerations of high school students in selecting higher education institutions, focusing on both public and private high school students. Data were collected through a focus group discussion (FGD) with nine students from public high schools and in-depth interviews with six students from private high schools. This study was conducted from October 2022 to January 2023 through online with students in Jabodetabek Area.

The majority of participants in both the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews were female, accounting for 67% of the total, while male participants represented 33%. In terms of educational level, most participants were in the 12th grade of senior high school, comprising 89% of the FGD participants and 83% of the interview informants. The remaining participants were in the 11th grade. Regarding age distribution, FGD participants were predominantly 17 years old (67%), followed by 18 years old (22%), and 16 years old (11%).

Table 2. Participant Profile

FGD Participant Profile			Interview Informants Profile		
FGD Participant Profile		FGD Participant Profile	Interview Informants Profile		Interview Informants Profile
Gender	Female	67%	Gender	Female	67%
	Male	33%		Male	33%
Grade	12th Grade	89%	Grade	12th Grade	83%
	11th Grade	11%		11th Grade	17%
Age	16 years old	11%	Age	16 years old	50%
	17 years old	67%		17 years old	33%
	18 years old	22%		18 years old	17%

In contrast, interview informants showed a more balanced age distribution, with 50% aged 16, 33% aged 17, and 17% aged 18. To provide a clearer overview, the detailed composition of participants in terms of gender, grade level, and age for both the FGD and in-depth interview sessions is presented

in Table 2. This demographic composition reflects a diverse yet predominantly senior high school cohort, providing valuable insights from students at critical stages of their educational decision-making process.

This analysis explores the decision-making processes of public and private high school students in selecting higher education institutions. The analysis identifies key themes related to need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase decisions, highlighting both commonalities and differences between the two groups.

Drivers of Need Recognition

This theme captures the factors that prompt students to recognize the need to pursue higher education and their initial considerations regarding higher education institution selection. The findings reveal that students' initial motivations to pursue higher education are significantly influenced by their school backgrounds and future orientations. Thematic analysis identifies three sub-themes that shape their early decision-making processes.

1. Aspiration for Upward Mobility and Career Prospects (Public School Students)

Students from public schools often view higher education as a strategic means to achieve upward social mobility and secure better career prospects. They demonstrate a pragmatic orientation, showing a strong preference for well-known and top-ranked higher education institutions, especially those in the “Top 10”, believing that attending such institutions will boost their competitiveness in the job market. This insight aligns with the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) framework, where the recognition of a need emerges from a desire to improve one’s life circumstances. In this case, higher education institution education is perceived as a tool to elevate both economic and social standing. Several participants expressed this preference:

- *“Pilih univ favorit agar setelah lulus dapat mudah cari kerja bagus.”*
(“I choose a reputable higher education institution so it’ll be easier to get a good job after graduation.”)
- *“Kalau milih PT yang favorit, karena biayanya terjangkau dan ada nilai plusnya. Pilih favorit juga berpengaruh ke pekerjaan.*
(“I choose a top higher education institution because it’s affordable and has added value. A well-known campus also influences job prospects.”)
- *“Melihat adanya jurusan yang diminati, PTN-nya favorit agar gampang nyari kerja.*
(“I consider the major I’m interested in, and I prefer a top public higher education institution to make it easier to find a job.”)

2. Supportive Environment and Holistic Development (Private School Students)

In contrast, students from private schools prioritize a supportive academic and social environment. While they also acknowledge the importance of career readiness, their considerations extend to factors such as campus facilities, personal comfort, and opportunities for holistic development through higher education institution-industry partnerships. This perception highlights a greater sensitivity among private school students toward the quality of the customer experience in higher education. They view higher education institutions not only as degree-granting institutions but also as service providers that must deliver comprehensive value. Several participants expressed this preference:

- *“Memilih kampus yang bisa melatih untuk mendapatkan pekerjaan yang sesuai, fasilitas yang mendukung, kampus yang punya banyak mitra perusahaan.”*
(“I choose a campus that can train me to get a suitable job, with supportive facilities and many industry partnerships.”)
- *“Tidak harus universitas TOP tapi universitas dengan program kuliah, kualitas dosen, materi pembelajaran, dan prospek kerja.”*
(“It doesn’t have to be a top higher education institution, but one with quality programs, good professors, learning materials, and job prospects.”)

3. Shift from Prestige to Personal Growth

Interestingly, there is a noticeable shift among private school students from valuing higher education institution prestige to emphasizing personal growth and self-development. This reflects a transition from an external, status-oriented approach to an internal, meaning-driven perspective. Such a shift supports existing research indicating that today’s younger generation increasingly seeks purpose, emotional engagement, and balance when choosing their educational and career paths. From a higher education marketing strategy standpoint, this presents an opportunity for institutions to tailor their messaging and value propositions—especially toward student segments who prioritize personal fit and meaningful experiences.

Information Search Strategies

The second theme emerging from the analysis focuses on the strategies employed by students in their search for information related to higher education institutions. The findings reveal that students from both public and private schools utilize a range of platforms and channels, shaped by their access, preferences, and perceived reliability of information sources. Three key sub-themes were identified:

1. Social Media Dominance

Across both public and private school groups, social media has become the primary source of higher education institutions-related information, with platforms like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) being the most accessible and updated. Students follow higher education

institution accounts, student ambassadors, and alumni content to gain insights into campus life, facilities, academic programs, and activities. This reliance on social media reflects the growing influence of digital ecosystems on consumer behavior, particularly among digital-native generations.

2. Community-Sourced Insights (Public School Students)

Public school students heavily rely on peer communities, particularly Twitter-based discussion threads, for authentic information about higher education institution life. They actively seek opinions, campus experiences, and informal reviews from current students or alumni. They also participate in institutional events like Edufairs and Campus Expos to collect brochures and interact with higher education institution representatives. This behavior highlights the importance of social proof and peer influence in the decision-making process, emphasizing the value of grassroots narratives and informal, user-driven communities in supporting knowledge acquisition during the early stages of higher education institution selection.

3. Direct and Curated Sources (Private School Students)

Private school students use a diverse range of information sources, including social media, official higher education institution websites, Edufairs, campus visits, and guidance from family and peers. Campus visits are seen as valuable opportunities to validate information and experience the higher education institution environment firsthand. This structured approach to information search may be attributed to access to guided activities like higher education institution tours and information sessions. Their preference for verified, multi-channel information reflects a holistic evaluation process that combines affective impressions with factual data.

These findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to adopt an integrated communication strategy that balances digital presence with opportunities for in-person engagement. Personalized outreach and experiential marketing, such as open house events, can be particularly effective in addressing the expectations of this student segment.

Evaluation Criteria

This theme explores the factors students consider when evaluating and comparing higher education institutions. The data revealed that students use a diverse set of evaluative criteria, combining both rational and experiential considerations. Nine factors were evaluated: (1) curriculum and academic program attractiveness, (2) internship and career opportunities, (3) accreditation, (4) learning technologies, (5) tuition fee, (6) scholarships and updated social media presence, (7) campus image, (8) admission system simplicity, and (9) campus facilities. However, the priority given to these factors varied significantly between public and private school students.

1. Accreditation and Cost-Effectiveness as Top Priorities (Public School Students)

Public school students prioritize accreditation as the most critical factor in higher education institution evaluation, as it is seen as a proxy for institutional quality and future employability. Tuition fees are the second most important factor, reflecting students' concerns about affordability and financial burden. Comparing tuition costs across institutions is a key step in shortlisting options. Scholarship availability is appreciated, but students prioritize manageable base tuition. Other considerations include the attractiveness of the curriculum, campus facilities, and learning technology. Campus image, social media activity, and ease of admission process are lower priorities. This suggests that public school students follow a logical, needs-based evaluation model, where value for money and academic legitimacy are more important than branding or experiential features.

2. Program Fit and Holistic Value (Private School Students)

Private school students prioritize curriculum and academic program attractiveness, focusing on programs that align with their interests, learning styles, and career goals. They view education as a developmental journey rather than a job-based credential. Accreditation is considered a baseline requirement, but students expect higher education institutions to meet quality standards. Internship and career opportunities are also top priorities, allowing students to combine academic learning with real-world experience. Tuition fees are considered more in terms of perceived value than affordability. Other mid-priority factors include campus facilities, learning technology, scholarship availability, and an active social media presence. Lower-priority aspects include admission process ease and campus image. Private school students adopt a holistic approach, balancing academic fit with long-term value and lifestyle factors.

3. Comparative Summary of Evaluation Priorities

The table below reveals the ranking order of nine most frequently mentioned evaluation factors among public and private school students. It highlights the distinct weight each student segment places on institutional features when selecting a higher education institution, with overlapping considerations but divergent motivations. Public school students prioritize institutional legitimacy and affordability, while private school students prioritize program alignment and experiential value.

Table 3. Comparative Summary of Evaluation Priorities between Private & Public Students

Evaluation Factor	Public School Students	Private School Students
Accreditation	1	2
Tuition Fee	2	4
Curriculum & Program Attractiveness	3	1
Campus Facilities	4	5
Learning Technologies	5	6
Campus Image	6	9
Scholarships & Updated Social Media	7	7
Easy Admission Process	9	8
Internship & Career Opportunities	8	3

These findings demonstrate the importance of tailoring higher education institution marketing and communication strategies to the unique priorities of different student segments. Public school students are influenced most by practical, cost-related considerations and formal institutional reputation, while private school students seek a more customized, growth-oriented academic experience. Higher education institutions aiming to appeal to both markets must therefore combine credibility, affordability, and personalized value in their messaging.

Purchase Decision Tendencies

This theme explores students' final choices regarding higher education institution enrollment, particularly how they respond when their initial admission preferences, typically public higher education institutions, are unmet.

1. **Public School Students: Prestige-Oriented and Willing to Wait**

A majority of public school students (67%) indicated a preference to take a gap year and reapply to public higher education institutions if not accepted. This reflects a prestige-oriented mindset, where public institutions are seen as offering higher status, affordability, and better long-term prospects. For these students, private higher education institutions are often viewed as a less desirable backup, leading them to delay enrollment rather than compromise on their aspiration.

2. **Private School Students: Pragmatic and Forward-Moving**

In contrast, private school students are more inclined to immediately enroll in private higher education institutions if they are not admitted to public ones. Their decision-making emphasizes continuity and progress over institutional prestige. With greater access to resources and information, these students perceive private higher education institutions as valid alternatives that offer quality programs, modern facilities, and career-ready experiences.

This thematic analysis reveals distinct patterns in how public and private high school students approach the higher education institution decision-making process. Public school students are primarily driven by aspirations for social mobility and career security, placing high importance on institutional accreditation, affordable tuition, and public higher education institution prestige. Their decision-making reflects a strong preference for long-term outcomes, even if it means delaying enrollment by taking a gap year. In contrast, private school students adopt a more holistic and pragmatic approach. While career opportunities remain important, they prioritize attractive academic programs, a supportive campus environment, and the ability to continue their education without delay—even if it means enrolling in a private higher education institution. Their evaluation emphasizes personal growth, experiential learning, and alignment with individual interests.

These findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to design segmented outreach and engagement strategies. Addressing the distinct values and constraints of each group can help institutions more effectively attract and support prospective students from diverse educational backgrounds.

Summary of Key Findings between Public and Private High School Students

This thematic analysis mapped students' higher education institution decision-making journey using the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) framework. Insights from public and private high school students revealed both overlapping and contrasting priorities across four key themes: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase decision. While both groups view higher education as a stepping stone to career advancement, their preferences diverge in terms of values, priorities, and flexibility in choosing institutions. Public school students are typically prestige-driven and cost-sensitive, with strong attachments to public higher education institutions. Private school students tend to be experience-driven and pragmatic, valuing personal growth, program fit, and continuity in education. These distinctions carry strategic implications for higher education institution marketing and enrollment efforts.

Table 4. High school students Consumer Decision Making Process

CDMP Stage	Public High School Students (FGD)	Private High School Students (In-Depth Interview)
Need Recognition	Driven by desire for upward mobility and job security. Strong preference for top-tier public higher education institutions.	Motivated by holistic personal development and career readiness. Emphasis on supportive learning environment.
Information Search	Use social media (Instagram, Twitter), online expos, and alumni testimonials. Passive search behavior.	Use multi-source search: official websites, peer input, campus visits. Seek validation through direct experience.
Evaluation of Alternatives	Rank-order of importance: accreditation, tuition fee, attractive programs, campus facilities, edtech, campus image, scholarship info, application ease.	Rank-order of importance: attractive programs, accreditation, internship/career opportunities, tuition fee, facilities, edtech, scholarship info, application ease, campus image.
Purchase Decision	67% prefer taking a gap year to reattempt public higher education institution admission rather than enroll in private higher education institutions.	67% are willing to proceed with private higher education institution enrollment if it fits their academic and career goals.

As illustrated in Table 4, public school students' decisions are anchored in institutional reputation, affordability, and long-term value, often at the expense of time. In contrast, private school students exhibit greater adaptability, favoring program relevance, campus experience, and continuity. These nuanced differences suggest that higher education institutions, especially private higher education institutions, should adopt segmented communication and outreach strategies, tailoring their value propositions to align with the cognitive and emotional drivers of each group. Doing so can enhance recruitment outcomes and student-institution fit.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concludes that public and private high school students exhibit distinct preferences when choosing higher education institutions. Public school students are primarily driven by aspirations for upward mobility and career security, prioritizing institutional accreditation and affordability. Private school students adopt a more holistic approach, valuing program fit, personal growth, and a supportive learning environment. These findings underscore the importance of segmented outreach and

engagement strategies by higher education institutions to effectively cater to the diverse needs and priorities of prospective students. The implications of this research suggest that higher education institutions, particularly private higher education institutions, should tailor their marketing and communication strategies to align with the specific preferences of different student segments. This necessitates a nuanced approach that combines various stages of the Consumer Decision-Making Process (CDMP) with targeted media types, messaging, and touchpoints.

For instance, to effectively reach public school students during the Need Recognition stage, higher education institutions could utilize social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) with messaging that emphasizes career prospects and graduate success stories. During the Information Search and Evaluation of Alternatives stages, webinars and online brochures highlighting accreditation and tuition fee structures would be beneficial. Key touchpoints would include virtual career fairs and online Q&A sessions with alumni. In contrast, to engage private school students, higher education institutions might use personalized email campaigns and high-quality brochures showcasing program attractiveness and campus facilities during the Need Recognition and Information Search phases. During the Evaluation of Alternatives and Purchase Decision stages, strategies could include campus visits and personalized consultations, emphasizing opportunities for internships and industry partnerships.

These strategies have significant managerial implications for higher education institution marketing and admissions departments. Higher education institutions need to invest in market research to deeply understand the evolving preferences of prospective students. They should also develop flexible communication plans that can be adapted to different student profiles. Furthermore, higher education institutions should train their staff to deliver personalized and informative interactions that address the specific concerns and aspirations of each student segment. To illustrate the practical application of these strategies, case studies of private higher education institutions in Indonesia that have successfully implemented segmented marketing approaches would provide valuable insights. For example, higher education institutions that have leveraged social media to showcase student life and career outcomes or those that have created specialized programs aligned with industry needs. Comprehensive Recommendations for Private higher education institutions to enhance student attraction and engagement:

1. **Develop and Promote Attractive Academic Programs**

Design programs that are closely aligned with industry needs and student interests, highlighting unique value propositions during campus visits and promotional activities.

2. **Strengthen Industry Partnerships and Career Pathways**

Build collaborations with companies to provide clear employment opportunities post-graduation, and actively communicate these opportunities to prospective students.

3. Leverage Direct Engagement Strategies

Increase efforts in organizing impactful campus visits, edufairs, and interactive online sessions to create memorable experiences and build trust among students and their families.

4. Enhance Integrated Marketing Communication through Trusted Channels

Utilize social media platforms, higher education institution websites, and peer networks effectively to disseminate relevant information about programs, tuition, scholarships, and student life. Create opportunities to interact with future students at each stage of their decision-making journey.

5. Address Affordability Concerns

Offer transparent information about tuition fees and provide accessible scholarship opportunities to mitigate cost barriers, particularly for students from public high schools.

6. Empower Influencers in Student Decision-Making

Engage with school counselors, parents, and alumni as key influencers in the decision-making process to amplify positive messaging and guide students towards informed choices.

By implementing these strategies, private higher education institutions can strengthen their positioning and appeal to a broader spectrum of high school students, ultimately increasing enrollment and sustaining competitiveness in the evolving education market. This study has certain limitations. The sample size, while sufficient for qualitative research, is relatively small and primarily focused on the Jabodetabek area. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample, including students from various regions across Indonesia, to provide a broader perspective on student preferences. Additionally, future studies could incorporate a quantitative approach to statistically measure the influence of specific factors, such as accreditation, tuition fees, and program attractiveness, on students' decision-making. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing higher education institution choice.

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