
What Drives Study Decisions? Motives, Information Sources, and Determinants of Choice in Poland and Ukraine

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to identify the key elements of the decision-making process of prospective students from Poland and Ukraine and to compare both groups at various stages of this process. Particular attention is given to the motives for pursuing higher education, the formal and informal information sources preferred by applicants, the types of information they sought, and the factors that had a decisive influence on the final choice of institution and program.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The empirical part of the article is based on survey research conducted among 1,022 first-year students at Rzeszów University of Technology (Poland) and the University of Customs and Finance in Dnipro (Ukraine).

Findings: The findings confirm that decisions to undertake higher education are primarily motivated by career-related considerations as well as the desire to acquire knowledge and develop personal interests. The relative importance of these motives, however, differs between the groups: Polish students emphasize pragmatic aspects such as employment prospects, whereas Ukrainian students are more strongly guided by cognitive and intellectual motivations. The study also revealed significant differences in the types of information sought and in the hierarchy of institutional factors shaping the final choice of studies.

Practical implications: The results made it possible to formulate recommendations regarding the optimization of universities' communication strategies, the effective selection of tools and content, and the building of positive relationships with both domestic and international applicants. They also contribute to the ongoing debate on the internationalization of higher education and the improvement of recruitment processes so that they better address the expectations and needs of international candidates.

Originality/Value: The results may serve as a valuable starting point for further research on the effectiveness of university marketing activities in shaping applicants' study choices and constitute a useful source of guidance for higher education management practice.

Keywords: Student recruitment, university choice, study motives, determinants of study choice, information sources, Polish students, Ukrainian students.

JEL codes: I21, J24, D83, D01, P36.

Paper type: Research paper.

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1. Introduction

Since 1989, Polish universities have been subject to profound changes resulting from political, social, and economic transformation. Successive reforms of higher education law (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1990; 2005; 2018) and the accompanying institutional and social changes have influenced the functioning of the entire higher education system.

Universities have also been affected by demographic trends, technological developments, labour market requirements, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as increasing student mobility and the growing popularity of non-formal learning pathways. These phenomena, together with the expansion of the private higher education sector and the oversupply of educational services, have forced institutions to adopt a market orientation and to compete for students, academic staff, research projects, and funding.

The Ukrainian higher education system has also evolved since the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Higher education laws adopted in 1996, 2002, and 2014 (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1996; 2002; 2014), the implementation of the Bologna Process (EHEA/Bologna, 2005), and the democratization of university governance facilitated integration into the European Higher Education Area.

Modernization, however, faced difficulties such as corruption, regional inequalities, and student migration (Levkina *et al.*, 2021). Since 24 February 2022, the war has become the overriding challenge for Ukrainian universities, reshaping the priorities of students and staff but at the same time opening up new opportunities for international cooperation.

Poland has become one of the main destinations for Ukrainian students due to its cultural and geographical proximity and relatively low tuition fees compared to Western Europe. In the 2022/2023 academic year, 48,150 Ukrainian students studied in Poland (an increase of 12,119 compared to the previous year), while in 2023/2024 their number fell to 46,210 (a decrease of 1,846).

Ukrainians accounted for 43.1% of all international students and 39.5% of nearly 17,300 foreign graduates (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2024). Ukrainian students most often choose large academic centres, with management, computer science, and medicine among the most popular fields. The vast majority of them (about 75% in 2022/2023) pursue first-cycle studies (Ośrodek Przetwarzania Informacji – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy, 2022, 2024).

Such a significant presence of Ukrainian students poses new recruitment and communication challenges for Polish universities. It requires professional marketing activities tailored to the specific characteristics of both Polish and Ukrainian applicants.

Meanwhile, a review of the literature shows that research on student decision-making processes has usually focused on single countries or individual institutions, while comparative studies of Poland and Ukraine are lacking (Maringe, 2006; Briggs, 2006; Rembielak, 2015; McLeay *et al.*, 2020; Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2023).

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap by identifying and comparing the key stages of the decision-making process of prospective students in Poland and Ukraine related to the choice of university and field of study. The analysis focuses mainly on three areas: (1) motives for continuing education at the higher level after secondary school, (2) types of information sought by prospective students, and (3) the hierarchy of factors determining the final choice of university and study programme.

This was achieved through a synthesis of the international literature on student choice processes and the authors' empirical research conducted in the 2023/2024 academic year among 1,022 first-year students at Rzeszów University of Technology and the Customs and Finance University in Dnipro.

This dual perspective provides new insights into the comparative dynamics of higher education choice in Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review was to conduct a systematic analysis of the most frequently discussed models of the higher education choice process, with particular attention to the factors influencing the course and outcome of individual stages, the sources and types of information sought, as well as the determinants of studying abroad, with a special focus on Ukrainian candidates pursuing higher education in Poland.

2.1 Models of the Higher Education Choice Process

The decision-making process related to the choice of higher education is characterized by stages, varying durations of individual phases, and complexity resulting from the interplay of numerous linear and repetitive variables (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Joseph and Joseph, 2000; Holmegaard *et al.*, 2014; Piróg, 2017).

One of the most frequently cited models in the literature is Jackson's (1982) three-stage rational model, which includes:

1. the identification of educational aspirations (decision whether to pursue higher education),
2. the selection of available and realistic options,
3. the final choice of institution and field of study.

In comparative studies, another common reference point is the model proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), which distinguishes three phases: the development of aspirations, the search for information, and the final institutional choice.

A somewhat different, identity-oriented approach is reflected in the three-stage model developed by Holmegaard *et al.* (2014). It emphasizes the influence of social pressure and candidate emotions on the final decision. In this model, the process begins with the question, “Who am I, and who do I want to be?”, followed by exploration and analysis of opportunities within the candidate’s social context (family, school, peers, advisors), and culminates in the choice of a specific institution and field of study.

The course of the stages within the decision-making process is shaped by the individual’s motives and by external factors determining outcomes. These aspects are examined in the following sections.

2.2 Motives for Pursuing Higher Education

In the literature, two motives are most frequently emphasized as driving the decision to pursue higher education: improving employment prospects and the desire to gain knowledge and develop personal interests in a specific field (CBOS, 2013; Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji, 2025). At the same time, it is noted that among young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, instrumental motivations linked to improving material conditions often outweigh internal motivations derived from interests and cognitive needs (Horn and Chen, 1998).

Other analyses indicate that the decision to continue education at the university level is not limited to instrumental calculations. Instead, it combines career aspirations with intellectual development, which together shape young people’s educational pathways (IDP Education, 2025). Higher education is thus understood both as an investment in future career opportunities and as a space for self-realization and personal growth (Quinlan and Renninger, 2022).

2.3 Factors Influencing the Choice of Studies

Research on the mechanisms of higher education decision-making has made it possible to identify two broad categories of influencing factors: personal (related to the individual deciding to study) and institutional (dependent on the universities under consideration).

Personal factors include gender, socio-economic status, prior academic achievements, self-assessment, life aspirations and motivations, lifestyle, and personality type (Jackson, 1982; Piróg, 2017). The family environment, particularly parental education levels, plays a crucial role. Horn and Chen (1998) and Galotti *et al.* (2006) found that nearly all young people whose parents both held higher education degrees were convinced that their professional situation would be highly unfavorable without

completing university. Menon *et al.* (2017) emphasize that parental educational aspirations and their role in shaping children's ambitions exert a stronger influence on academic pathways than household economic status or financial stability.

Institutional factors include, among others:

- the quality of teaching and faculty competencies (Fajčíková and Urbancová, 2019; Levkina *et al.*, 2021),
- program offerings and the availability of preferred fields of study (Levkina *et al.*, 2021),
- tuition fees and financial aid opportunities (Brown *et al.*, 2009; Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2023; Long, 2004),
- university reputation and visibility (Vrontis *et al.*, 2007; Sułkowski *et al.*, 2020),
- rankings (Sułkowski *et al.*, 2020),
- location, facilities, and living conditions (Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Levkina *et al.*, 2021),
- communication with candidates, particularly through websites (including admissions procedures) and social media (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011; Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019).

As noted by Menon *et al.* (2017), personal factors play a primary role at the initial stage of the decision-making process (the decision to pursue higher education), while institutional factors become more important in later phases, when candidates compare specific options and make their final choice. Their ultimate evaluation depends not only on individual characteristics but also on the opinions of family, peers, and alumni.

Cosser and Du Toit (2002) show that the degree of candidate engagement in evaluating higher education options increases with age. Even a two-year age difference significantly affects the depth of analysis (Piróg, 2017).

The choice of studies is also strongly linked to the availability of relevant information. This issue is addressed in the following section.

2.4 Sources and Types of Information Sought by Candidates

Research demonstrates that prospective students—particularly from Generation Z—rely primarily on university websites when considering higher education options (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019). Equally important are informal sources such as parents, relatives, and friends (Moogan *et al.*, 1999), as well as current students and alumni. Social media and online forums (Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2023), teacher recommendations in secondary schools, and university open days also play a significant role (Moogan *et al.*, 1999).

Regarding the type of information sought, candidates prioritize content that allows them to assess the compatibility of educational offerings with their career aspirations,

interests, and learning styles. Research indicates that the most important factors include curriculum content, available modules and specializations, and the practical orientation of the program (Perna, 2006; Briggs, 2006). In addition to employment prospects, graduate career pathways, and connections between the field of study and labor market opportunities (Maringe, 2006; Perna, 2006), candidates also seek information about the teaching process itself, such as class format and group size (Briggs, 2006).

2.5 Factors Shaping the Choice to Study Abroad

Globalization and the internationalization of higher education have expanded students' choices beyond their home countries, but have also made decision-making more complex. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) proposed a three-stage model of international study choice:

1. the decision to study abroad,
2. exploration of the international higher education market and the choice of a host country,
3. the final selection of a specific institution.

At each stage, push and pull factors shape student choices. Push factors include perceptions that foreign education is superior, limited availability of certain programs at home, difficulties accessing preferred programs domestically, the desire to experience the West, migration plans after graduation (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), and poor domestic career prospects (Shkoler and Rabenu, 2022).

Pull factors include economic ties between the home and host country, host-country scholarships for international students (McMahon, 1992; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), the international educational reputation of the host country (Maringe and Carter, 2007; Baloch *et al.*, 2018; McLeay *et al.*, 2020), university reputation and image (Rembielak, 2015; Rembielak *et al.*, 2017; Buchanan, 2019), high teaching quality, and the opportunity for an international career after graduation (Shkoler and Rabenu, 2022).

In the case of Ukrainian candidates—who are of particular interest in this study—push factors include dissatisfaction with the domestic education system (low quality, outdated teaching methods, corruption in universities), difficulties in the local labor market, limited international recognition of Ukrainian diplomas, and the current war.

Pull factors of Polish universities include lower living costs compared to other countries, better job prospects after graduation, perceived higher quality of education, closer student–faculty relations, program diversity, and more modern teaching methods. Other important aspects include scholarships, financial support programs, geographic proximity, and cultural similarities (Gracz *et al.*, 2017; Rębisz and Sikora, 2015).

Given the scarcity of theoretical and empirical comparisons of student choice mechanisms between Poland and Ukraine, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing and contrasting the two groups.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of the study was to identify and compare key elements of the decision-making process related to the choice of studies by candidates from Poland (Rzeszów University of Technology) and Ukraine (Dnipro Customs and Finance University).

Specific objectives included identifying and comparing the two groups in terms of their motivations for undertaking studies, the formal and informal sources of information used when choosing a university and field of study, the types of information considered valuable, and the factors that ultimately determined their choice of university. Students' opinions and assessments of the promotional materials of the universities they were accepted to and the admissions process were also analyzed.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What motives had the strongest influence on respondents' decision to pursue higher education?
2. When did students begin the decision-making process regarding their field of study and university?
3. When did students make their final decision regarding their field of study and university?
4. What information did students seek before making their choice?
5. What sources of information did respondents use?
6. How do respondents assess the influence of various sources of information on their final choice?
7. What is the perceived value of certificates and accreditations for study programs?
8. What factors ultimately determined the choice of studies at a given university?
9. What ideas do students have for promoting their universities?
10. What suggestions do they have for improving the admissions process?

Three research hypotheses were formulated, addressing significant differences between Polish and Ukrainian students in terms of key elements of the decision-making process:

- *H1. The main motives for pursuing higher education differ between Polish and Ukrainian students.*

- *H2. Statistically significant differences exist between Polish and Ukrainian students in the type of information they seek about their studies.*
- *H3. The hierarchy of factors influencing the final choice of university differs between the two study groups.*

3.2 Sampling, Research Instrument, and Data Collection

The study was primary, quantitative, and non-exhaustive in nature. It was conducted in 2023 among first-year undergraduate students at Rzeszów University of Technology (PRZ) and the University of Customs and Finance in Dnipro (UCF). The total sample consisted of 1,022 first-year students: 364 from PRZ and 658 from UCF.

The research employed the CAWI method. The original questionnaire—identical for both universities—comprised 21 substantive questions addressing the research questions (including closed-ended items with nominal, ordinal, and interval scales, as well as open-ended and semi-open-ended questions) and five questions on demographics.

The survey was distributed via the internal IT systems of both institutions. Participation was voluntary, and the sample included students from all faculties at both universities.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using *Statistica* and *Microsoft Excel*. Descriptive statistics were applied to identify general patterns, while chi-square (χ^2) tests of independence were used to assess statistically significant differences between the two groups. This analytical approach enabled the verification of all research hypotheses.

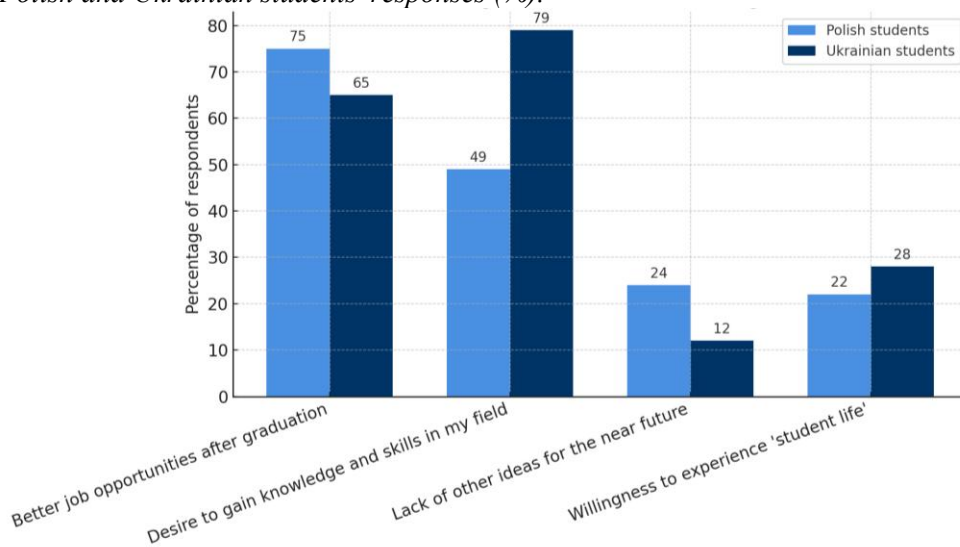
4. Research Results

4.1 Motives for Pursuing Higher Education

The first variable analysed concerned the motives guiding students' decisions to continue their education at the higher level after completing secondary school. The structure of responses to this multiple-choice question is presented in Figure 1.

The chi-square test confirmed that the differences in motives between Polish and Ukrainian students were statistically significant ($\chi^2(3) = 67.92$, $p < 0.001$). The greatest differences were observed with regard to motivation linked to the desire to gain knowledge and skills and the lack of other ideas for the near future (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Motives influencing the decision to start higher education. Comparison of Polish and Ukrainian students' responses (%).



Source: Own elaboration.

4.2 Timing of Decision-Making

Subsequent questions in the questionnaire enabled identification and comparison of when students from the two groups began considering their field of study and university, and when they made their final decisions.

The majority of Polish students began to consider their study options during secondary school (52.5%) and made their final decision after completing the matura exam (79.4%). Most Ukrainian students also began considering their options in secondary school (64.7%), and likewise made their final decision immediately after graduation (53%).

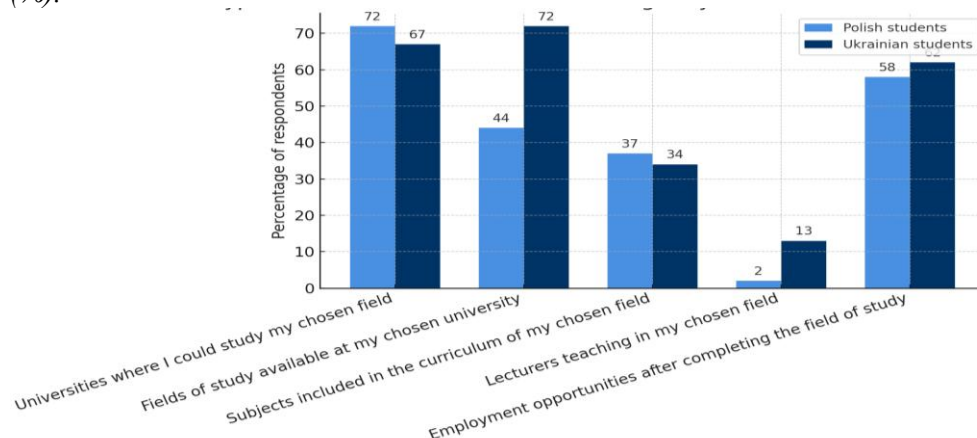
4.3 Categories and Sources of Information

In their decision-making processes, students from both groups sought various types of information. The categories of information sought by Polish and Ukrainian respondents are presented in Figure 2.

The chi-square test of independence revealed statistically significant differences between Polish and Ukrainian students regarding the types of information sought ($\chi^2(4) = 54.11, p < 0.001$). The largest difference was observed in the category of fields of study available at chosen university, which was the most frequently sought information by Ukrainian students (72%) but by less than half of Polish respondents (44%) (Figure 2).

In the context of information considered by respondents in the process of choosing their studies, they were also asked about the importance of certificates and accreditations of study programmes (scale 0–6, where 0 = no value and 6 = very high value). For Polish students, the mean score was 3.5, while for Ukrainian students it was 4.9. The mode of responses was 4 for Polish students and 6 for Ukrainian students.

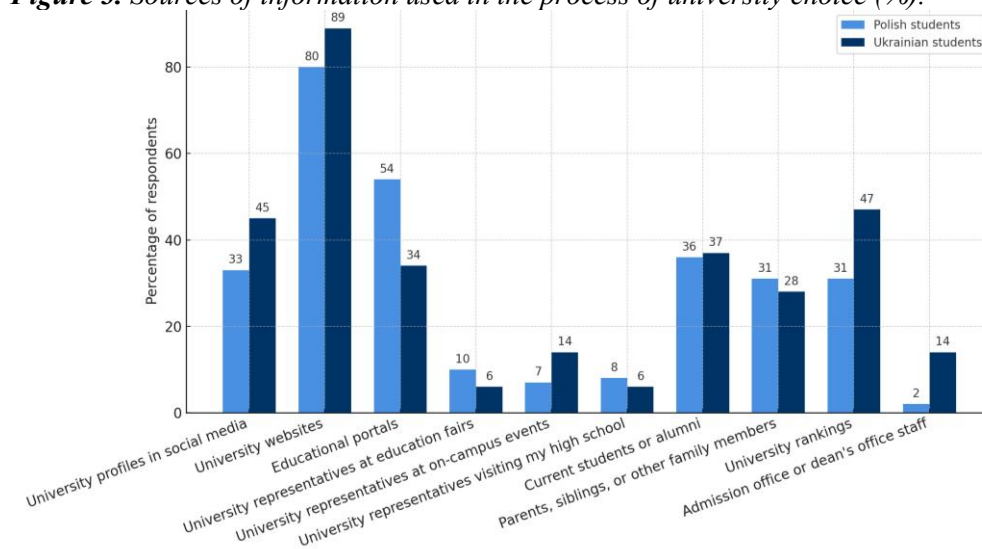
Figure 2. Types of information about studies sought by Polish and Ukrainian students (%).



Source: Own elaboration.

Another question addressed the sources of information used by respondents. Their popularity in the decision-making process among the two groups is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Sources of information used in the process of university choice (%).

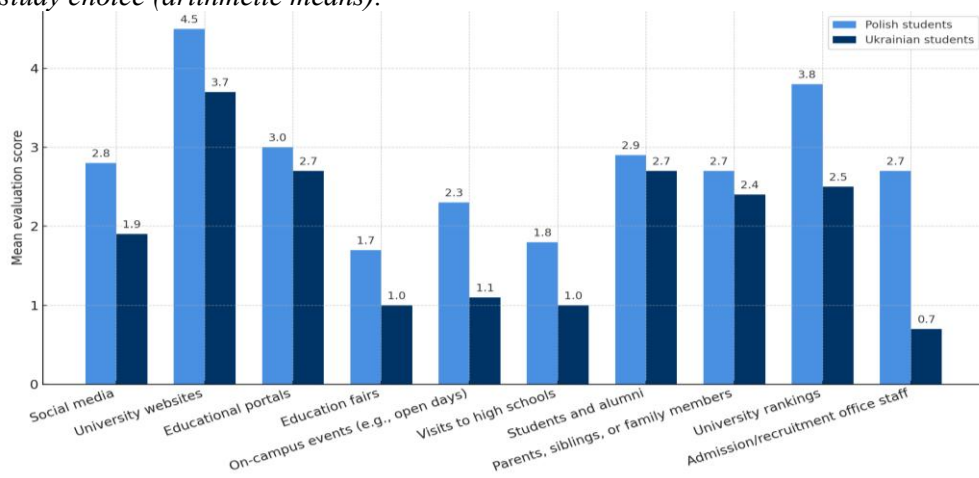


Source: Own elaboration.

In both groups, university websites were the most frequently used source (by nearly 80% of Polish and 89% of Ukrainian students). Among Polish respondents, other common sources included: educational portals, students and alumni, university social media profiles, and equally family and university rankings. The main sources of information used by Ukrainian students were essentially the same as those identified by Polish students, differing only in their relative ranking within the response structure.

Students were also asked to evaluate the usefulness of these information sources in their final choice (on a scale from 0 = not useful at all, to 6 = very useful). The arithmetic means of responses for each source are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Students' evaluation of the usefulness of information sources in their final study choice (arithmetic means).



Source: Own elaboration.

For both Polish and Ukrainian students, university websites proved the most useful source. Other highly valued sources included educational portals, students and alumni, and university rankings.

4.4 Determinants of University Choice

Regarding factors influencing university choice, only location ranked among the top criteria in both groups (61.8% for PRZ students and 58.8% for UCF students). For Polish respondents, the most important factors were the availability of their field of interest (76.1%) and positive opinions of students and alumni (30.5%). For Ukrainian respondents, the decisive factors were high quality of education (64.0%) and university prestige (61.9%).

The statistical analysis confirmed the research hypothesis that the hierarchy of factors influencing university choice differs significantly between Polish and Ukrainian

students. Chi-square test results showed significant differences in most factors analysed. For instance, Ukrainian students placed greater emphasis on university prestige ($\chi^2 = 124.0$; $p < 0.001$) and high quality of education ($\chi^2 = 142.9$; $p < 0.001$), whereas Polish students stressed the availability of their preferred field of study ($\chi^2 = 98.7$; $p < 0.001$).

Significant differences were also observed regarding positive opinions of students and alumni ($\chi^2 = 26.0$; $p < 0.001$), encouragement from siblings ($\chi^2 = 10.2$; $p = 0.001$), and peers ($\chi^2 = 54.0$; $p < 0.001$). No significant differences were found for university location ($\chi^2 = 0.76$; $p = 0.384$), diploma value in the labour market ($\chi^2 = 0.98$; $p = 0.323$), or parental encouragement ($\chi^2 = 1.74$; $p = 0.187$).

Additionally, analysis of rank order correlations revealed only moderate agreement between the two groups ($p = 0.63$), which did not reach statistical significance ($p \approx 0.067$). This indicates that although some factors—such as location or student opinions—were highly ranked in both groups, the overall hierarchy of priorities differed (Table 1).

Table 1. *Ranking of factors influencing university choice among Polish and Ukrainian students (%).*

Factor influencing university choice	Poland (%)	Ukraine (%)	Rank PL	Rank UA
Field of interest	76.1	43.6	1	5
Location	61.8	58.8	2	3
Positive opinion of students/alumni	30.5	47.1	3	4
University prestige	25.3	61.9	4	2
High quality of education	24.7	64.0	5	1
Diploma value in labour market	22.3	25.2	6	7
Parental encouragement	16.5	20.1	7	8
Peer encouragement	9.6	29.9	8	6
Sibling encouragement	5.5	11.9	9	9

Source: *Own elaboration.*

4.5 Student Suggestions for Promotion and Admissions Improvement

In an open-ended question about promotion of Rzeszów University of Technology (PRZ), 23% of Polish respondents provided answers. Their suggestions focused on three main aspects:

1. visits to secondary schools by university representatives—primarily students (e.g. from student organisations) or selected staff,
2. visits of secondary school pupils to the university and their participation in events,
3. online promotion, particularly through platforms such as TikTok.

Selected quotations illustrating these suggestions included:

- “Visit schools with students who can present the university in an engaging way, share their experiences honestly, talk about the weak sides, and reveal the cultural aspects of student life.”
- “Invite pupils to interesting classes, such as lectures or sample laboratories, where they could engage in practical tasks themselves.”
- “I was most encouraged by videos showing different aspects of studying and presenting the university. This is, I think, the most attractive form of promotion.”

Other comments referred to the content of promotional materials, didactic processes, and campus life, such as:

- “Present profiles of alumni working both in the industry and outside it, who graduated from PRZ.”
- “Provide more detailed descriptions of study programmes on the university website.”
- “Install vending machines with healthy food, since current ones offer only unhealthy snacks.”
- “Train staff to connect better with students and make lectures more engaging.”

For UCF students, 53% responded to the open-ended question about university promotion. Their suggestions were similar, focusing on:

- visits to secondary schools in Dnipro and beyond by university representatives, including students sharing personal experiences,
- organisation of open days, events, and meetings with alumni,
- promotion through social media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram), using targeted ads, short videos, and youth-oriented formats.

Illustrative quotes included:

- “Come to schools and tell pupils about the university—many young people simply don’t know where to go next, and you can help them choose.”
- “Organise trips for 10th–11th grade pupils to the university—nothing convinces like experiencing the atmosphere firsthand.”
- “If you don’t have a TikTok account, create one and post funny and useful videos—today it’s the most effective way to advertise to young people.”
- “Talk more often about alumni success stories—it gives real motivation to future students.”

Other opinions were less frequent but noteworthy, such as:

- “Hire me as an editor and PR manager—the websites would immediately improve. I have experience with bloggers and influencers.”

- “Increase the number of state-funded places, introduce a 4-day study week, and that’s it.”
- “Invite successful finance professionals—learning would then be more inspiring.”
- “Make the university experience more comfortable and engaging, and students will naturally spread positive emotions.”

Finally, both groups of students also commented on the recruitment process itself. PRZ students pointed to gaps in information, communication issues with admissions staff, and the need for a more user-friendly website. UCF students emphasised the need for more admissions staff, improved service quality, and additional interviews for candidates disadvantaged by the war. As with PRZ students, they also highlighted the importance of improving website navigation, content updates, and clarity.

5. Discussion

The analysis confirmed that while both Polish and Ukrainian students are motivated by career prospects and the desire for intellectual development, the relative importance of these motives differs significantly. Polish students emphasized pragmatic considerations, particularly employability, whereas Ukrainian students highlighted cognitive and intellectual motivations.

The timing of decisions was also distinct: Poles typically made final choices after the matura exam, while Ukrainians decided immediately after graduation from secondary school. Both groups relied primarily on university websites and social media, yet differed in the type of information sought, with Ukrainians focusing more on programme availability and Poles on labour market outcomes.

Institutional choice factors also revealed contrasting priorities: Polish students valued the availability of their chosen field and peer opinions, while Ukrainian students placed greater emphasis on educational quality and prestige. Open-ended responses showed that candidates in both countries expect more direct contact with universities through school visits, open days, and engaging online communication. Collectively, these findings confirm all research hypotheses and highlight the necessity of tailoring recruitment and communication strategies to the specific expectations of domestic and international student groups.

The study provided answers to all the research questions and allowed for the verification of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 assumed that the main motives for continuing higher education differ significantly between students from Poland and Ukraine. This hypothesis was confirmed: for Polish students, the most important motive was the prospect of increasing their chances of employment, while for Ukrainian students it was the desire to acquire knowledge and skills in a field of interest. Employment prospects and the development of knowledge and interests were the two most frequently mentioned

reasons for undertaking higher education, as confirmed by studies conducted by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (2025) and CBOS (2013). Similar results can be found in other international studies, which emphasize both pragmatic calculations related to career opportunities and intellectual aspirations as key factors shaping decisions to pursue higher education (Maringe, 2006; Perna, 2006; Quinlan and Renninger, 2022).

Hypothesis 2 concerned differences in the types of information sought about higher education. This hypothesis was also confirmed: Polish students were more likely to seek information about universities and employment prospects after graduation, whereas Ukrainian students focused on available study programmes and programme content. These findings are consistent with existing literature (see Maringe, 2006; Perna, 2006; Briggs, 2006).

Hypothesis 3 assumed that the hierarchy of factors influencing the final choice of university differs between the studied groups. This hypothesis was likewise confirmed. For Polish students, access to an attractive field of study and the location of the university were decisive, whereas Ukrainian students emphasized the prestige of the institution and the quality of education.

Findings concerning Polish students confirm, among others, the conclusions of Moogan, Baron, and Harris (1999) and Levkina, Yurchenko, and Kim (2021), while findings concerning Ukrainian students align with those of Rembielak (2015), Rembielak et al. (2017), Baloch et al. (2018), Buchanan (2019), McLeay et al. (2020), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002).

In summary, the findings indicate that while motivations, decision-making factors, and the types of information sought differ between Polish and Ukrainian students, they remain broadly consistent with the patterns described in international literature. These results confirm the main assumptions of classical models of student choice, while at the same time pointing to the need to adapt recruitment communication, marketing tools, and institutional strategies to the specific cultural and national contexts of prospective students.

6. Practical Implications

The research provides a range of practical recommendations for higher education institutions. First, it highlights the importance of segmenting candidates according to their educational motives.

Dominant motivations (employment prospects vs. knowledge and interest development) determine both the criteria for evaluating an offer and the types of information sought. Proper segmentation not only increases the effectiveness of promotional activities but also allows institutions to better adapt their educational offers to specific needs.

Second, the results emphasize the need to differentiate marketing communication. For Polish candidates, effective messaging should highlight attractive internships, business cooperation, labor market analyses, and examples of graduates' career paths. For Ukrainian candidates, communication should stress the high quality of education, institutional prestige, the international nature of studies, and opportunities for financial support.

Third, since university websites remain the key recruitment channel for students from both countries, they should be treated as primary recruitment tools, ensuring intuitive navigation, multilingual content, and interactive features that facilitate the comparison of study programs.

Additionally, universities should leverage the potential of social media, particularly for Ukrainian candidates (TikTok, Instagram, Telegram), who place stronger emphasis on these channels in their decision-making, thus requiring active institutional presence on these platforms. For Polish students, cooperation with educational portals and activating alumni networks is recommended to create credible sources of peer-based recommendations.

Fourth, it is essential to build ongoing positive relationships with both groups of candidates, as they value direct contact with universities. This highlights the importance of open days, university visits to secondary schools, and the involvement of student ambassadors, whose opinions are perceived as highly credible.

Finally, recommendations also concern the recruitment process and the integration of international students. Polish candidates pointed to the need for more transparent and simplified procedures, while Ukrainian students emphasized the necessity of a larger recruitment staff and additional support mechanisms, especially given the context of war. Universities should also expand mentoring and tutoring programs and provide career counseling, ideally in the native languages of international students.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Despite producing valuable results, this study has several limitations.

First, it included students from only two institutions—Rzeszów University of Technology and the University of Customs and Finance in Dnipro — which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Second, the use of an online survey (CAWI) with voluntary participation introduces the risk of declarative bias and sample self-selection.

Third, the study had a cross-sectional design and did not account for changes over time, which may influence motivations and preferences, particularly in dynamic geopolitical and social contexts.

Fourth, the broader international context and societal environment in which the study was conducted may have shaped students' responses and their educational priorities.

Future research should extend the analysis to other universities and regions in both countries and apply methodological triangulation, for example through qualitative studies (in-depth interviews, focus groups) that can better capture the role of emotional and identity-related factors in educational decision-making. Another promising direction would be to examine the long-term effects of educational choices, particularly in the context of graduates' entry into the labor market.

8. Conclusion

The study confirmed that decisions to pursue higher education are primarily motivated by the desire to improve career prospects as well as the need to acquire knowledge and develop personal interests. Polish students are more often guided by pragmatic considerations, whereas Ukrainian students emphasize cognitive and intellectual motivations. These differences are also evident in the types of information sought and in the hierarchy of factors influencing the choice of university, which validates all the hypotheses and is consistent with findings reported in the international literature.

The results have important practical implications: they indicate the necessity of differentiating recruitment communication depending on candidate groups, highlight the role of social media and peer recommendations, and emphasize the need to align the educational offer with genuine institutional support.

The study also contributes to research on student decision-making processes in Central and Eastern Europe, confirming the relevance of classical models of higher education choice while also highlighting the importance of national and cultural contexts in shaping educational decisions at the tertiary level.

Ethical approval and consent:

The study did not require formal approval from a research ethics committee, as it involved an anonymous and voluntary survey of students and did not collect sensitive personal data. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their informed consent prior to participation.

Use of generative AI:

Generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript in accordance with the Taylor and Francis AI Policy. Specifically, OpenAI's *ChatGPT (GPT-5, 2025)* was employed to:

1. Polish language and translate content from Polish to English to ensure academic clarity and style.
2. Format references and headings to align with APA and journal requirements.

All analysis, interpretation of results, and substantive contributions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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