
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Localizing Global Trends: Examining Regional Influences on Student Choices and Diversity at Regional Public Universities

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| ABSTRACT

Regional public universities expand equitable access but may concentrate enrolment among nearby populations. This study analyzed the impacts of spatial accessibility, social influence, institutional attributes, global priorities, campus diversity, student choice and advocacy in regional public universities of Bangladesh. The number of respondents in a cross-sectional multi-site survey was 710, and the coverage of sites and academic fields was equal. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlations, multivariable ordinary least-squares models, and content analysis were used. The students' reason for enrolling was mostly proximity to home (41.27%), and the lowest was their current university (10.28%). Students appreciated diversity and international educational trends, but evidenced lower levels of inclusion and institutional integration. The constructs of academic and institutional pull and local-global alignment predicted commitment to choice, and inclusion satisfaction and choice strength predicted recommendation. To enhance diversity, institutional attractiveness and student advocacy, a combination of open enrolment and supporting a diverse group of students, seen in the academic programmes, the digital and research capacity of regional universities, their engagement with the world and their preparation for employment is required.

| KEYWORDS

Spatial Accessibility; Diversity and Inclusion; Global Educational Trends; Institutional Attractiveness; Student Advocacy.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The growing scale of higher education has encouraged more people to participate, but also shown that inequalities in participation, entry and success in higher education institutions remain. The public universities in the regions play a pivotal role in this shift, as they are responsible for spreading publicly funded opportunities beyond capital cities and established metropolitan centres. But their role goes beyond just growing enrollment. The challenge for regional higher education institutions is to balance the conflicting demands of accessibility, academic excellence, diversity, local relevance and the widely cited international standards that are used to evaluate higher education (OECD, 2025; S. Marginson, 2016). This mix creates a choice issue for students, not just an individual choice. This is made even more complex by internationalisation.

The contemporary global engagement embodies research collaboration, digital learning, academic exchange, multicultural curricula, and preparing students for labour markets beyond the local community (J. Knight, 2004; M.

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Tight, 2022). However, internationalisation without a local dimension also has the potential to broaden inequalities, favouring the students and institutions best equipped with financial, cultural, and mobility resources. Inclusive internationalisation and contextually appropriate institutional approaches have become the focus of scholarship in recent years, in contrast to the replication of metropolitan and Western approaches (C. Van Mol & A. Perez-Encinas, 2022; H. Cunningham et al., 2025; M. Jeon, 2023). About regional universities, localization means adapting to the region and making the translation affordable, accessible and relevant to the communities around them.

This is the same interplay of aspiration and constraint that influences the choice of university. The factors which students take into account are programmes, reputation, facilities, career prospects and perceived academic quality, and these coexist with factors such as distance, journey time, cost of living, safety, family expectation and the probability of admission (A. Usman et al., 2025; H. Ke et al., 2022). The financial and social costs of relocation may be lower and of particular significance when the household has fewer resources, limited access to transport, has limited housing space, or family norms limit mobility. Empirical findings on the effects of distance on enrolment and attainment show that the choice set of possible options that prospective students can consider is modified by distance (R. K. Acton et al., 2025). The geographic distribution that results from these decisions affects the learning environment once enrolled. Exposure to new viewpoints and the enhancement of collaborative learning may be facilitated by regional, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences.

These benefits do not automatically accrue and must be claimed. Students need to be treated with respect, be able to participate in curriculum with inclusive programs, be assessed fairly, and be mentored and supported to participate across backgrounds (T. L. Trolan & E. T. Parker III, 2022). A campus can thus host students from a variety of regions, but fail to generate a sense of belonging or limited interaction. Diversity, inclusion and educational benefit are different but related institutional outcomes (A. S. Dias-Broens et al., 2024; D. P. Fernández et al., 2023). The situation in Bangladesh is an illuminating context for exploring these connections. The geography of higher education has increased outside the capital, although the question of affordability, family decisions and regional disparities in development have remained significant, as has been the mobility issue. Previous research highlights that access and social inclusion remain an issue and that students' choices, as well as the reputation of the programme, its cost and the influence of the household, affect the university's decision to accept the student (K. T. Islam et al., 2024; M. M. H. Emon et al., 2023). There is less evidence around how these determinants work together in multiple regional public universities, how students view their local-global balance in their institutions, and whether diversity and inclusion is a positive influence on recommendation.

Therefore, in this study, the student evidence is aggregated on ten region public universities without ranking and comparing each of them. The goals are to: Characterize the composition of the sample regionally and academically; Identify the most important regionally and institutionally influential factors for enrolment; Understand perceptions of diversity, inclusion, learning, reputation and global educational alignment; Understand associations with choice strength and recommendation; Interpret priorities articulated in open responses. The central contribution is an integrated description of proximity as an access route, academic and institutional pull as a source of commitment and inclusion and global alignment as conditions that can turn enrolment into belonging and advocacy.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Choice Architecture in Regional Higher Education

University selection is a staged decision in which students recognize the possibility of higher education, develop a feasible set of institutions, compare alternatives, and enrol under imperfect information. Programme relevance, academic quality, facilities, reputation and career prospects are institutional 'pull' factors that may attract or repel students to certain locations, while household expectations, mobility constraints, limited local options and financial pressures can push students to or away from locations. The push–pull approach can be helpful since it embeds the attraction and constraint in the same decision, rather than assuming choice is an unconstrained preference (T. Mazzarol & G. N. Soutar, 2002). This logic is widely used in international mobility research, but also in national systems where the regional institutions are competing for students, and there are significant differences in the conditions of transport, residence and information.

The perceived risk and the expected cost are affected by distance. Having a nearby institution can help to reduce travel and lodging costs, preserve family support and minimize relocation uncertainties (N. Crawford & L. McKenzie, 2023). However, geographical proximity can be less important when programmes are considered to be less available, less good, less equipped or less likely to lead to work. Recent research has established that geographic nearness influences enrolment and achievement in college, and research on learning in a localised context has demonstrated that connection and continuity can be a viable form of participation for those who may be face-to-face constrained by socioeconomic factors. Limited first-hand experience of universities can also shape the interpretation of information provided by family and peer networks (D. Ürer Erdil, 2021; T. D. Le et al., 2020).

The feasible opportunity set is determined by the level of affordability, the likelihood of admission and the relevance of the programmes. Then it's reputation or word of mouth that helps students identify acceptable options. The decision that follows may then be a choice of preferred institution, a compromise of convenience or the best possible alternative. First Choice status, choice confidence, willingness to choose the same institution again, preference for a higher ranked alternative, and recommendation are analytically important as they are not necessarily correlated with enrolment and can be either strong or weak (A. Juhaidi et al., 2024; S. Mitić & D. Mojić, 2020).

2.2 Regional Universities as Access and Mobility Infrastructures

Regional public universities are access universities as they are in a location that decreases the geographical and financial distance that may be a deterrent for students attending metropolitan public universities. Their value is particularly high if mobility is constrained by income, gender expectations for mobility, parenting duties, transportation or housing. The institution becomes a part of a regional opportunity infrastructure: it links schools, families, local labour markets, and public investment and provides students with a familiar social and cultural setting (J. V. Tomás-Miquel & J. Capó, 2022; N. Crawford & L. McKenzie, 2023).

Geographical concentration is, however, possible from accessibility. Geographical concentration is possible from accessibility, however. When nearby students respond most strongly to lower travel cost and family proximity, enrolment may reproduce surrounding settlement patterns. Concentration itself is not a bad thing and it can achieve equity in the services that it provides to populations that would otherwise not be served. The policy challenge is ensuring that this access mission is maintained, but does so bring students from a broader set of districts, expands the residential support, and links programme portfolios with regional, national, and global opportunities. Hence, there is no competition between local relevance, cross-regional relationships and wider reach (J. V. Tomás-Miquel & J. Capó, 2022; Y. N. Soysal & R. D. Baltaru, 2021).

2.3 Diversity, Learning, Belonging and Reputation

Higher level of education diversity involves regional origin, language/culture, socioeconomic status, gender and educational experience. Classrooms and group work may include a diverse group of students, which can broaden the classroom or group work perspective, but diversity is not a guarantee of interaction or learning. Educational difference can turn into an educational resource when it is shaped by difference, pedagogy, assessment, student services and informal relations (G. Moreu et al., 2021; T. L. Trolan & E. T. Parker III, 2022). There need to be diverse examples, learning activities that are accessible, clear assessments, and opportunities for students to contribute without being cast as the representative of a group (J. Tai et al., 2023; L. Stentiford & G. Koutsouris, 2021, 2022). Equality of treatment also has the potential of reproducing disadvantage when students face different barriers to demonstrating learning in the process of inclusive assessment research (J. H. M. Tai et al., 2023; J. H. Nieminen, 2022).

The relationality of these practices is the belonging. They can be formally included but are not sure they are respected, supported or able to participate. There is evidence in recent reviews that belonging is conceptualized and quantified in many ways, and that when the coherence of scales is not strong, the interpretation at item level is important (A. S. Dias-Broens et al., 2024; D. P. Fernández et al., 2023). Support for students coming from far away

regions, treatment across backgrounds and satisfaction with diversity practices should then be separated from that of perceived regional representation and learning benefits.

Diversity may also impact one's reputation and recommendations. Schools with inclusive environments and expansive geographic appeal may gain an advantage in recruiting families and prospective students. However, as recommendation is a lived experience, it is also an anticipated prestige. A student may feel that diversity benefits a school's reputation yet not personally endorse it due to low commitment to choice, expectations that were not met, or weak services. This distinction lies between institutional image and behavioural advocacy not that they are the same thing, but that positive attitudes don't necessarily translate into recommendations. Institution-based research on multicultural and institutional strategies highlights the need for ongoing support within the organisation, and curriculum partnerships and institutional reporting demonstrate the importance of putting inclusion into practice. Pathways for marginalised and displaced learners further underline the need to have access, but also belong [33].

2.4 Translating Global Trends into Regional Practice

The expectations placed on the regional universities are more likely to be influenced by global educational trends. Digital learning, research collaboration, exchange, multicultural curricula and wider employment are no longer limited to internationally mobile students (J. Knight, 2004; M. Jeon, 2023). Inclusive internationalisation is available to all students, including those staying at home, and involves questioning whether programmes, teaching and support systems make international engagement accessible for all (H. Cunningham et al., 2025). There is also evidence of differences in benefits and participation across groups of students and settings for international classes and mobility (K. De Witte & M. Soncin, 2021; Y. H. I. Huang et al., 2023). These developments can be reflected in the university's activities through virtual participation, local research with international standards, multilingual and multicultural education, as well as curriculum that links local problems with broader disciplinary knowledge, which can be achieved at the regional level.

It is important to note the difference between the perceived importance of a global practice and the reported current integration of the practice. The alignment gap is identified when aspiration is high, implementation is low. This does not mean that the regional identity should be eclipsed. Rather, universities can maintain a connection to the community and develop digital resources, research clusters, employability and exposure to diverse viewpoints. Context-sensitive internationalisation acknowledges that there are social and environmental consequences to global engagement which should be assessed in relation to local access, equity and institutional resources (M. M. Roshid et al., 2023; W. Shen, 2022).

2.5 Bangladesh and the South Asian Evidence Gap

Choices about higher education among South Asians are often a family affair. The institutions that are feasible are determined by financial capacity, safety, residential arrangements, family approval and social acceptability of relocation. Despite the regional inequalities and differential institutional resources, the universities outside metropolitan centres have expanded participation in Bangladesh. The evidence available suggests that programme availability, cost, reputation and family influence are important, however, inclusion research emphasizes the linkage of expansion with meaningful participation (A. Usman et al., 2025; K. T. Islam et al., 2024; M. M. H. Emon et al., 2023).

Research is divided into separate strands of research on choice, mobility, internationalisation and inclusion. A multi-site regional analysis of these themes can bring them together without categorizing institutions as league tables. Pooled evidence is particularly beneficial when site-to-site variation is removed by the statistical controls, and can be helpful for identifying system-level relationships between accessibility, academic pull, diversity, global alignment, choice strength and recommendation.

2.6 Integrated Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The push-pull approach describes how institutional attractions and constraints interact to shape the feasible choices (T. Mazzarol & G. N. Soutar, 2002). There are factors that can lower the cost and risk of enrolling in programs, such as proximity, affordability, safety, and family expectations, and factors that can draw students to specific programs,

such as academic quality, facilities, and reputation and career prospects. Theory of Planned Behavior introduces a decision mechanism, attitudes towards institution, perceived social expectations, perceived behavioural control contribute to intention and then to enrolment and advocacy (I. Ajzen, 1991). Family influence is associated with subjective norms, and affordability, admission probability and travel feasibility to perceived control.

The hierarchy of needs is complemented by Maslow's hierarchy, which may serve as a description of needs that can be triggered during the selection and enrolment process (A. H. Maslow, 1943). The elements of safety; affordability; accommodation; continuity of family support; belonging through respectful relationships and inclusion; esteem, linked to programme quality, reputation, academic recognition; and self-development, linked to research, digital learning, multicultural exposure and career readiness address the needs of security. The framework is completed by a constrained-preference perspective, which accounts for the fact that actual enrolment could be different from ideal enrolment. First-choice status, choice strength, and willingness to choose the same university again thus represent varying degrees of commitment. These explanations are combined within a conceptual framework in Figure 1, without assuming that they are mutually exclusive. Feasibility is shaped by regional and household attributes, evaluation by institutional and global attributes, experience by inclusion, learning and belonging, and choice strength, reputation and recommendation by these processes. While the model suggests that access can play a supportive role in enrolment, the factors of academic pull, inclusion and local-global alignment may be more meaningful in terms of sustained commitment and advocacy.

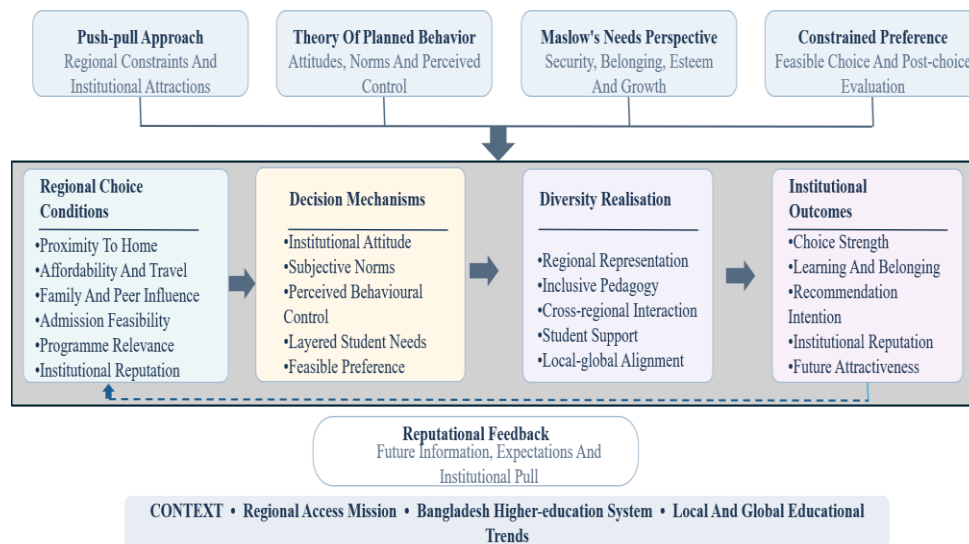


Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework linking regional access, institutional attributes, diversity and student advocacy

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The cross-sectional multi-site survey design was employed to investigate student choice, regional influence, diversity, inclusion and local-global educational alignment. The design was comprised of a quantitative questionnaire with one open-ended question that provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their priorities for institutional improvement. Pooled descriptive and multivariable analyses were supported by quantitative measures and the open response offered an additional qualitative description of the changes students felt were most important. University clusters rather than comparison or ranking clusters were involved and served as a sort of statistical control. The unit of analysis was the individual undergraduate student and the focus of analysis was on the relationships seen across the combined regional public-university population [42].

3.2 Study Sites

The study area consisted of 10 public universities, which were spread across the main regions of Bangladesh namely University of Chittagong, University of Rajshahi, Khulna University, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology,

Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, Pabna University of Science and Technology, University of Barishal, Begum Rokeya University of Rajshahi, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, and Noakhali Science and Technology University. The sites were chosen to expand geographical area coverage beyond one campus and to maintain a common theme of large regional populations served by public institutions. The spatial distribution of the selected sites is presented in Figure 2, which is descriptive, and the analysis aggregates respondents rather than attempting to estimate institutional differences.

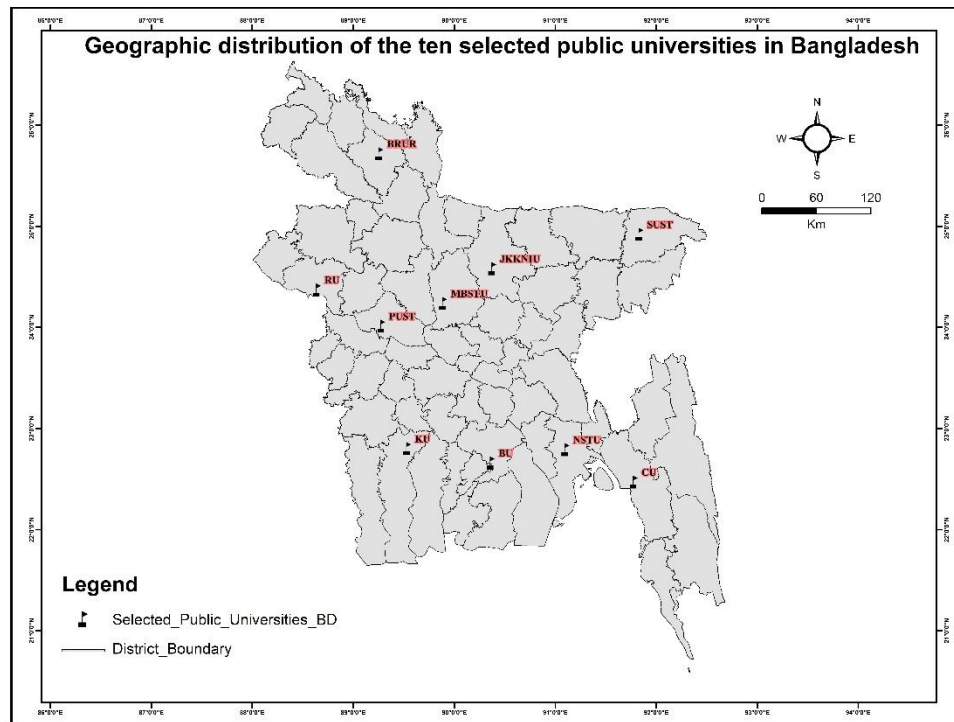


Figure 2. Study-area map showing the ten selected regional public-university sites

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The analytical sample comprised 710 undergraduate students, with 71 records allocated to each of the ten sites. Eligibility variables were identified as current undergraduates and having attended for at least 1 semester. There were 142 records for each of five broad academic fields (arts and humanities, social sciences, business studies, natural and life sciences, and engineering and technology) within each of the five sites, with 14 or 15 students attending each site representing each academic field. This is a quota-based system in practice, as it did not depend on the assumption of identical departmental structures at the universities. Balanced geographic coverage was found due to the equal site allocation, which was not taken to be proportional to the number of institutional enrollments. Background data and controls included for analysis were gender, academic year, residence before university, and distance from home to university.

3.4 Instrument and Measures

The questionnaire had screening, demographic, choice, accessibility, social-influence, academic-pull, global-orientation, diversity, inclusion, and advocacy variables. University site, broad academic field, semester, year, age, gender, home district and division, pre-university and current residence, home-university distance, travel time, parental education, and household income were recorded as background items. First choice items were recorded as being awarded first choice, the number of institutions considered, the main reason for choosing to attend, level of confidence in decision, willingness to choose the same university again, recommendation (on a 0-10 scale), and preference for a higher-ranked alternative.

The six multi-item constructs, with five-point agreement scales, were regional accessibility (eight items), family and social influence (seven items), academic and institutional pull (seven items), global educational priorities (eight items), current local-global alignment (six items), and regional representation (five items). Students' support for students from distant regions, treatment with respect, satisfaction with diversity and inclusion, learning benefit, a richer educational environment, belonging, and the perceived reputational benefit of diversity are measured at the item level for outcomes. Scores were collated to composite scores, which were the mean of each item. Inadequately internally coherent constructs were not aggregated; instead, their elements were left in the form of separate entities so that they would not be reported as unreliable summary measures.

3.5 Data Quality Assurance

Before analysis, range, completeness, duplication, allocation and logical-consistency checks were performed. This file had no duplicate records, no cells with missing values, and no values outside the specified scales. A total of 71 observations were made at each site (14 to 15 observations per field within a site). Academic-year and semester combinations were self-consistent. The factor was judged to be reliable via Cronbach's α , and where this was not found to be sufficient, each item was reported separately.

3.6 Data Analysis

Categorical variables were summarised in terms of frequencies and percentages, and continuous and scale variables using means and standard deviations. Bivariate relationships between the main constructs were analyzed using Pearson correlations. Two OLS models with a multivariable outcome were estimated: one model with choice strength as the outcome, and one model with the 0–10 recommendation score as the outcome. Standardisation of continuous outcomes and substantive predictors was included to allow coefficients to be interpreted in standard deviation units. Heteroskedasticity-consistent HC3 standard errors and 95% confidence intervals are reported. The two models were both fitted for age, gender, home-university distance, broad academic field, and site fixed effects, and the recommendation model was also fitted for choice strength. Site coefficients were also considered as controls but not reported, as a comparison of institutions was beyond the scope of the study. Variance-inflation factors were examined to assess multicollinearity.

The open-ended answers to the proposed change item were analyzed with a structured content-analysis method based on the principles of contemporary qualitative analysis [43]. The responses were grouped into a single dominant theme, the categories were tabulated and illustrative statements were kept for interpretation. The findings were brought together narratively to see if the stated priorities made clear the gaps in accessibility, inclusion, global alignment and advocacy that were observed.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The structure of the questionnaire was such that it did not involve the individual or site-level identities of respondents beyond the selected study sites, with consent and eligibility screening, and with the use of non-identifying codes. For field implementation, institutional ethical clearance, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality procedures, and secure data management should be documented prior to data collection and publication.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics and Regional Composition

The pooled sample represented a broad academic and residential profile. Table 1 shows the mean values and standard deviation of valid participant characteristics: age (19.98 years with SD 1.31); gender (54.79% female); and academic fields (5 fields were equally represented). Almost half of all respondents lived within the rural zone prior to university (48.03%), and 56.20% lived within 150 km of the present university. It was decided to cover the academic year from 1st to 5th year, the highest percentage being 28.17 % in the second year.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N = 710)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	389	54.79
	Male	310	43.66
	Another identity	10	1.41
	Prefer not to say	1	0.14
Academic year	First	163	22.96
	Second	200	28.17
	Third	176	24.79
	Fourth	152	21.41
	Fifth	19	2.68
Broad academic field	Engineering and Technology	142	20.00
	Natural and Life Sciences	142	20.00
	Business Studies	142	20.00
	Social Sciences	142	20.00
	Arts and Humanities	142	20.00
Pre-university residence	Rural area	341	48.03
	Semi-urban area	185	26.06
	Urban area	184	25.92
Home-university distance	Less than 50 km	181	25.49
	50-149 km	218	30.70
	150-299 km	187	26.34
	300-499 km	81	11.41
	500 km or more	43	6.06

Home-division coverage was distributed across all eight divisions rather than being dominated by a single origin. The percentage contribution from Rajshahi was highest (18.03%), followed by Chattogram (15.77%) and Dhaka (13.94%) and Sylhet was the lowest (9.30%). The range from largest to smallest was 8.73 percentage points, which meant that there was wide and balanced coverage and still kept regional variation.

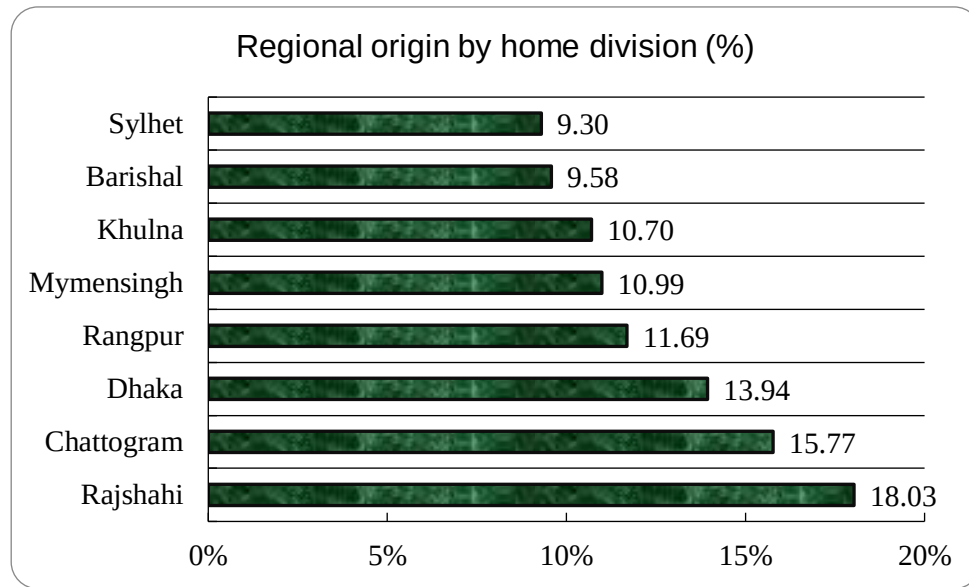


Figure 3. Regional origin of respondents by home division (%)

4.2 Regional Accessibility and Primary Choice Factors

Regional accessibility was the most visible determinant at the point of enrolment. Figure 4 shows proximity to home was the primary reason for 41.27% of respondents, more than the combined shares citing academic programme at 14.65% and family influence at 12.25%. Affordability was rated as 10.14%, followed by admission probability at 5.1%, institutional reputation at 5.6%, career prospects at 5.5%, accommodation at 5.3%, regional familiarity at 5.2%, safety at 5.1%, and other reasons at less than 6%. The pattern highlights a new proximity-based access approach, while revealing that other factors such as academic and household factors continue to be part of the choice architecture.

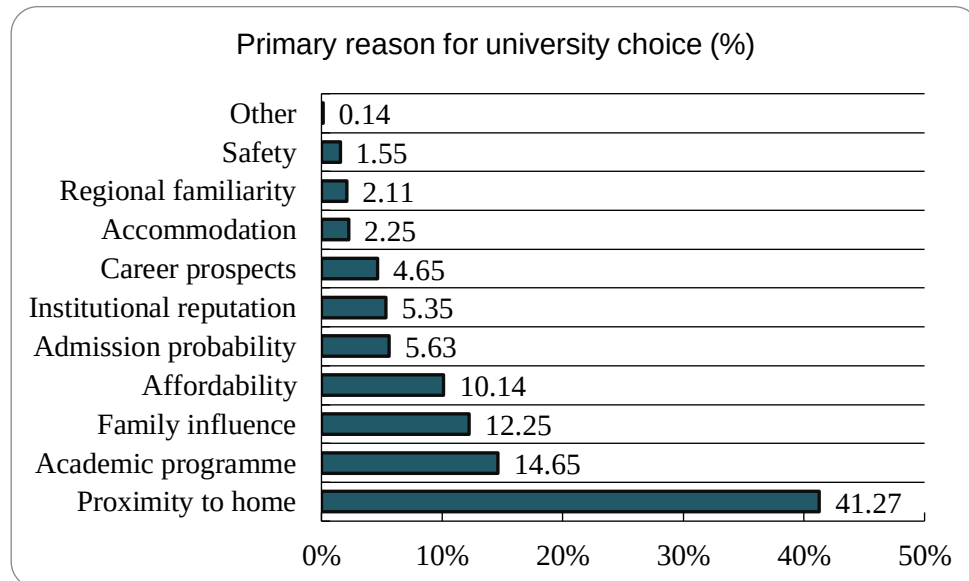


Figure 4. Primary reason for selecting the current university (%)

4.3 Choice Strength and Student Advocacy

Enrolment did not consistently indicate strong preference or advocacy. As seen in figure 5, 10.28% of the respondents indicated that this is their first choice of institution, 11.83% indicated that they would strongly or very strongly be confident about their choice of institution and 11.83% indicated that they would probably or definitely choose the same institution for subsequent enrolment. In contrast, 73.38% would most likely or definitely select a

preferred higher ranked alternative and only 0.42% would give a high recommendation rating of 8–10. The mean score for the recommendation was 3.14 (SD 1.69), indicating that access-based enrolment was not necessarily an active endorsement.

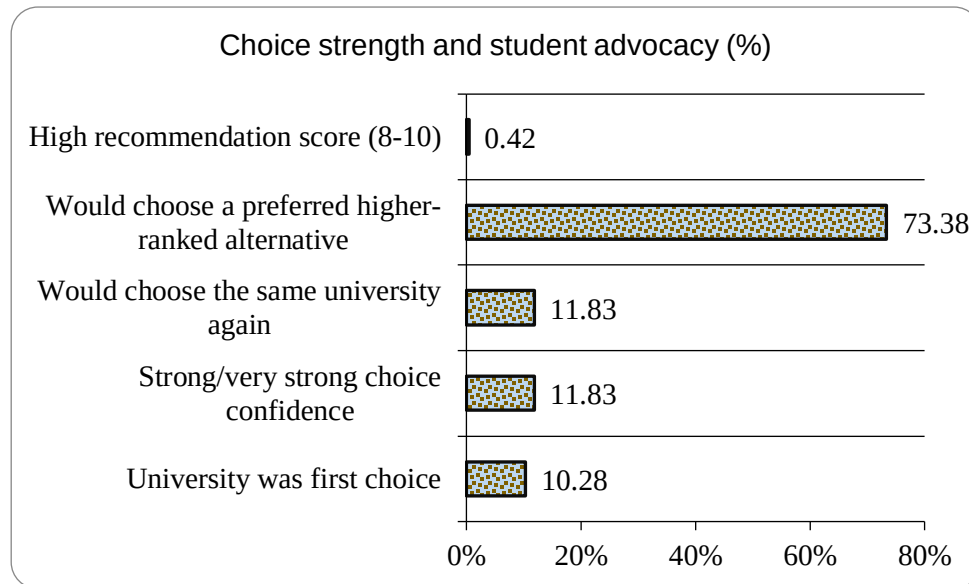


Figure 5. Choice strength and student-advocacy indicators (%)

4.4 Construct Reliability and Descriptive Profile

The multi-item constructs identified separate aspects of choice and institutional experience at the regional level. The internal consistency of the regional accessibility, family and social influence, and academic and institutional pull scales is acceptable, ranging from .714 to .765, as indicated in Table 2. The alignment of learning priorities with the global context had the highest mean score (4.04), while local-global alignment in current learning had the lowest mean score (2.92). The alpha values on the global-priority (.679), alignment (.682), and representation (.652) scales indicated low risk of interpreting the scores at the group level and high risk of interpreting them individually.

Table 2. Reliability and descriptive statistics for multi-item constructs

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Mean	SD
Regional accessibility	8	0.765	3.70	0.53
Family and social influence	7	0.714	3.17	0.54
Academic and institutional pull	7	0.747	3.23	0.58
Global educational priorities	8	0.679	4.04	0.41
Current local-global alignment	6	0.682	2.92	0.55
Regional representation	5	0.652	3.30	0.56

4.5 Diversity, Inclusion and Local-Global Alignment

Students distinguished the educational value of diversity from the adequacy of current institutional support. Figure 6 shows that 57.75% agreed that diversity improved learning, 65.92% agreed that it created a richer educational environment, and 77.32% expected it to strengthen institutional reputation. Current experience was less favourable: 40.70% agreed that different districts and divisions were represented, 40.85% reported cross-regional interaction,

34.79% expressed belonging, 19.15% considered support for distant-region students adequate, and 19.01% were satisfied with diversity and inclusion. The evidence therefore indicates stronger endorsement of diversity's potential than of the systems currently enabling it.

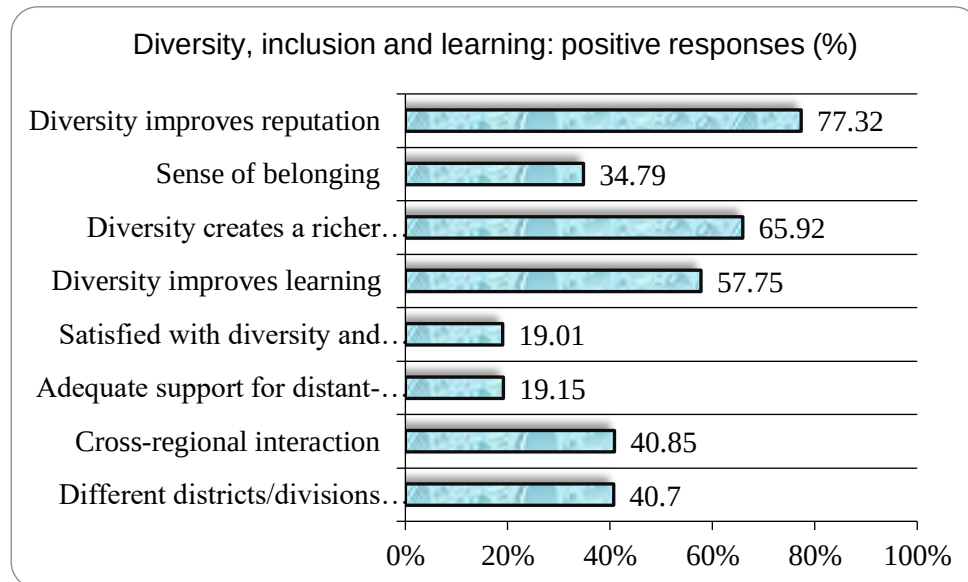


Figure 6. Diversity, inclusion and learning indicators: agree or strongly agree (%)

The importance attributed to selected practices was compared to reported integration to assess global orientation. High ratings have been registered for digital learning (78.17%), research collaboration (81.13%), international collaboration and exchange (78.59%), multicultural learning (74.79%), and wider employment preparation (80.99%), as evidenced in Figure 7. Reported levels of integration were significantly lower, at 18.03% for international collaboration and exchange and 33.10% for digital learning. International cooperation had the greatest gap at 60.56 percentage points, and the least gap for digital learning was over 45 percentage points.

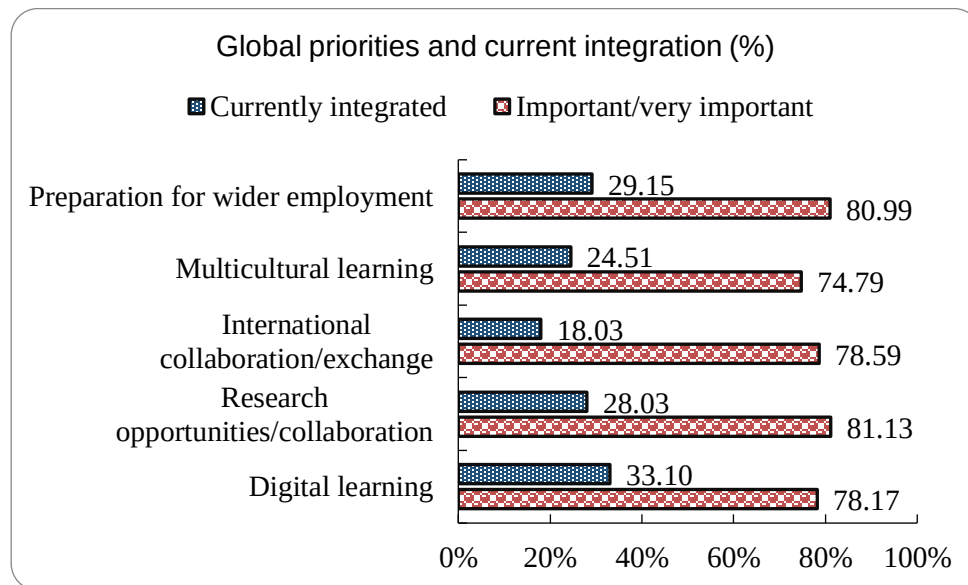


Figure 7. Importance of global educational priorities and reported current integration (%)

4.6 Statistical Relationships and Adjusted Predictors

Bivariate relationships were typically small, suggesting constructs were targeting related but not interchangeable dimensions. Correlations between academic and institutional pull and choice strength were $r = .163$ and $p < .001$

and $r = .127$ and $p = .001$, respectively, as shown in Table 3. The correlations between the different variables were: alignment with choice strength, $r = .084$, $p = .025$; inclusion satisfaction with recommendation $r = .117$, $p = .002$; and choice strength and recommendation with the largest correlation, $r = .544$, $p < .001$. The correlation between accessibility and choice strength was negative ($r = -.078$, $p = .038$), indicating that having an accessible location was not a strong enough sustained commitment indicator for students.

Table 3. Pearson correlation matrix for principal constructs

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Access	1.00								
2 Social influence	-0.093*	1.00							
3 Academic pull	- 0.118* *	-0.075*	1.00						
4 Alignment	0.022	0.007	-0.007	1.00					
5 Representation	-0.028	0.062	0.008	0.08*	1.00				
6 Inclusion satisfaction	0.001	-0.046	-0.017	0.05	0.019	1.00			
7 Learning benefit	-0.011	-0.001	0.045	0.049	-0.024	0.076*	1.00		
8 Choice strength	-0.078*	-0.063	0.163* **	0.084*	-0.031	0.087*	0.020	1.00	
9 Recommendation	-0.04	-0.026	0.127* **	0.071	0.033	0.117* *	0.037	0.544* **	1.00

Adjusted models distinguished the factors associated with choice commitment from those related to later advocacy. Current perception of local-global alignment was also positively associated with choice strength with a small β value, as presented in Table 4, and academic and institutional pull were also positive and significant. The model with recommendations had choice strength as the most important predictor, with $\beta = .529$, and satisfaction with being included as a further positive predictor. Adjustment for other predictors did not result in significant statistics. The institution's commitment was more important for student advocacy than accessibility alone, as the recommendation model explained 32.8% of the variance in the outcome.

Table 4. Standardised OLS models of choice strength and recommendation

Predictor	Choice β (HC3 SE)	p	Recommendation β (HC3 SE)	p
Regional accessibility	-0.061 (0.039)	.117	0.008 (0.033)	.808
Family/social influence	-0.067 (0.037)	.074	0.012 (0.033)	.721
Academic/institutional pull	0.157 (0.039)	<.001	0.042 (0.034)	.215
Current local-global alignment	0.084 (0.039)	.031	0.013 (0.033)	.683
Regional representation	-0.038 (0.038)	.317	0.048 (0.032)	.137
Support for distant-region students	0.061 (0.038)	.109	0.036 (0.035)	.298
Inclusion satisfaction	0.062 (0.038)	.105	0.065 (0.032)	.044
Learning benefit	0.003 (0.039)	.929	0.006 (0.033)	.845
Belonging	0.007 (0.038)	.855	0.014 (0.032)	.656
Choice strength	—	—	0.529 (0.034)	<.001
N	710		710	
R ² / adjusted R ²	.082 / .049		.328 / .302	

4.7 Priorities Identified in Open Responses

The open-response evidence was used to identify what students believed the institutional change was and how it strengthened their regional-university experience. The top themes identified in Table 5 were accommodation and transport support (22.96%), inclusive pedagogy and student support (21.69%) and outreach, scholarships and regional reach (20.85%). 17.46% highlighted research, digital learning and international engagement, with 17.04% focusing on balancing the regional needs with wider employability. These priorities link the quantitative gaps in access, inclusion and alignment to global priorities with institutional action.

Table 5. Content-analysis themes from the suggested-change item

Theme	n	%	Representative response
Accommodation and transport support	163	22.96	Improve affordable residential accommodation and transport support.
Inclusive pedagogy and student support	154	21.69	Strengthen inclusive teaching, mentoring and student-support services.
Outreach, scholarships and regional reach	148	20.85	Expand outreach and scholarships for students from distant regions.
Research, digital learning and international engagement	124	17.46	Increase research, digital learning and international collaboration opportunities.
Regional-global balance and employability	121	17.04	Balance regional needs with preparation for national and global employment.

5. Discussion

5.1 Regional Accessibility, Choice, Commitment and Advocacy

The results of the pooled analyses also highlight proximity as a central element of enrolment and show that accessibility and commitment are separate. Over one-fifth of respondents said proximity was the main factor in the choice of their current institution, which is in line with studies showing distance is a factor in the limited number of higher education institutions a student can choose from (R. K. Acton et al., 2025). Regional universities are thus also playing an equity role in minimising the travel, relocation, and household expenses of those students with mobility needs. But, the proportion of first choice, repeat choice, and recommendation are quite low, suggesting that there is the possibility of access to enrolment and limited institutional attachment. Academic and institutional pull were still significant and regional accessibility was no longer significant when examined as an independent predictor of choice strength after adjustment was made. Push-pull theory, therefore, needs a temporal dimension: the nearness and ease of entry are matched by quality of the programme, facilities, reputation, and perceived academic value, which turn a potential enrollee into a confident preferer (T. D. Le et al., 2020). The strongest predictor emerged to be choice strength and showed that the recommendation was driven by accumulated academic and social experience, not by access.

5.2 Diversity, Inclusion and Educational Experience

Students were very positive about the educational and reputational benefits of diversity, but less positive about the existing support, interaction, belonging and inclusion. This is because the difference between compositional diversity and the questions of inclusion is different from the questions of learning benefit. Geographic heterogeneity does not necessarily equal reconfigured classrooms, therefore. Inclusive pedagogy, mentoring, transparent services, accessible accommodation, culturally responsive assessment, and structured cross-regional interaction are required to turn representation into meaningful participation (J. Tai et al., 2023; L. Stentiford & G. Koutsouris, 2021). Additionally, the positive and adjusted correlation between inclusion satisfaction and recommendation points to the effects of everyday institutional practices on the way university value is communicated. Thus, diversity policy evaluation should measure not just the origin of students but their sense of belonging, access to support, participation in the classroom, and satisfaction among regional and socio-economic groups.

5.3 Connecting Regional Mission with Global Educational Alignment

Overall, global educational priorities were consistently rated as being at a high level, while reported integration was significantly lower, especially regarding international collaboration and exchange, research partnerships, employability and multicultural learning. This aspiration–implementation gap is that there is a demand for internationalisation at home, meaning that students can learn about the world without having to move to another country. Scalable answers include virtual exchange, interdependent projects, visiting seminars, digital libraries, academic communication support and curricula that are externally benchmarked but locally relevant. The perceived local–global alignment was also correlated with the adjusted choice strength, thereby linking international engagement with domestic institutional attractiveness. This should therefore be reinforced by world activity, and not a world prestige project. Equity, local knowledge, institutional resources and environmental implications need to be taken into account in context-sensitive internationalisation (M. M. Roshid et al., 2023). A balanced model can enhance regional problem-solving and have the potential to broaden students' academic connections, technical skills, and job readiness.

5.4 Institutional Strategy and Policy Implications

The combined evidence supports a coordinated institutional strategy rather than isolated interventions. Accommodation and transport ensure mission access, targeted outreach and scholarship extend regional access, inclusive teaching and advising increase participation, and more robust programmes, research opportunities, digital capacity, and career preparation strengthen academic pull. These priorities also align with Maslow's pyramid of needs: belonging, recognition, competence and opportunity for the future are upper order needs, while security, affordability, and housing stability represent lower-order needs (A. H. Maslow, 1943). Regional public universities must then continue with a shared annual evidence system to include student origin, travel burden, accommodation,

programme demand, inclusion, choice strength and recommendation. Promotional messaging should not be the only motivation for recruiting outside of the immediate catchment areas, but rather information, safe homes, and financial support. Programme review should link disciplinary standards to regional development and employment pathways, staff development to the involvement of students in the disciplines across the different socio-economic groups, anti-discrimination procedures to students, accessible assessment to students, virtual collaboration to students and industry related projects to students across disciplines and socio-economic groups. This integration can maintain the public access to these sites but enhance institutional attractiveness, student advocacy and institutional reputational development.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that promoting public higher education access through regional access does not necessarily result in a strong level of institutional commitment. Nearly one in four (41.27%) stated that their university was close to home, while just one in ten (10.28%) said that their current school was their first choice. The contrast suggests that it is not necessarily an institutional preference, but more practical considerations that affect enrolment. The results also reveal the significance of academic and institutional attractiveness, educational experiences, and local-global alignment for the conversion of enrolment to choice commitment to and recommendation for the institution. In general, students understood the learning and reputational benefit of regional diversity, but were less positive about institutional support, belonging, inclusion, and integration of global educational practices. The most significant predictor of recommendation was choice strength and inclusion satisfaction also positively affected student advocacy.

Regional public universities should thus continue to comply with their mission to remain accessible and boost programme quality, accommodation, transport, inclusive teaching, student support, research opportunities, engagement with the global job market and digital learning. Recruitment efforts must be expanded regionally and must have effective on-the-ground supports to ensure that geographic representation becomes effective educational participation. Localisation does not mean isolation and withdrawal from international educational standards; educational standards must be tailored to the needs, resources and situation of students in a region. The cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions, and equal institutional allocation does not allow conclusions for population. Future research should be conducted using probability-based longitudinal sampling, administrative records, multilevel analysis, and qualitative interviews for the purposes of studying the development of student choice, student diversity experiences, and student recommendations.

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