

Article

# Applying for Higher Education from Shanghai International Schools: Information Sources, Key Factors, and the Consideration Process

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**Abstract:** Higher education, or studying in colleges or universities, has begun to offer an increasing range of choices for high school students around the world. A common consequence of this greater range is the more nuanced process of collecting, reviewing, and assessing different information sources on schools and locations, along with a multifaceted decision-making process that involves a myriad of factors, ranging from living environments to teaching quality. This study focuses on examining these processes for students from an international school in Shanghai, China. Students from the school were interviewed, and their data was processed through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis. Participants discussed topics such as their intended study directions, trusted and untrusted information sources, and the key factors that influenced their final decisions as to where to study. The results of this study concluded that while students tended to rely on professional counselors or experienced peers for information on schools' subjective traits like culture and values, their evaluation of information sources was not completely fact-based and showed signs of confirmation bias. Moreover, this investigation also found that students often took the living environments of schools and their respective geographic locations as significant factors of consideration, and they did so largely due to negative past experiences related to such factors. Ultimately, this study provided newfound insights into the complex mechanisms behind an increasingly ubiquitous occurrence of high school students' pursuit of higher education in the global context.

**Keywords:** higher education; international schools; decision making; information sources; student choice

## 1. Introduction

Following the rise of globalization and international education in the 21st century, an increasing number of high school students now consider a wider range of locations for pursuing higher education, including undergraduate programs at colleges or universities. As many of these options involve studying overseas, students commonly engage in research and information gathering about institutions worldwide [1]. Selecting a destination for higher education has become a multifaceted decision influenced by factors such as financial considerations, personal safety, academic resources, and cultural environment. Consequently, students critically evaluate diverse information sources and develop nuanced perspectives on preferred study destinations.

This trend is evident in China, where the number of high school students studying abroad has stabilized at over 500,000 annually in recent years. However, within the East Asian context, scholarly attention to how international high school students assess information and make decisions about higher education remains limited [2]. This study therefore examines these processes within Chinese international schools, with a specific focus on Shanghai—home to the largest concentration of such schools in the country.

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Within this focused context, the study addresses two research questions: first, how students select and interpret information sources when evaluating higher education opportunities; and second, how they formulate decisions regarding preferred regions and institutions after reviewing such information [3].

Given the growing participation of students in international higher education pathways, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the underlying factors shaping student decision-making. Furthermore, insights into how students evaluate university and college options can support educational institutions in refining guidance frameworks and institutional support systems [4].

## **2. Literature Review**

Prior to data collection, this study reviewed existing literature on Chinese high school students' evaluation of information and their subsequent decision-making regarding higher education. Analyzing prior findings on these aspects enabled refinement of the research focus to more precisely address current gaps in understanding [4].

### *2.1. Literature on Information Assessment*

Past literature has highlighted the role of college counselors as a prominent information source for students. A recent study indicated that Chinese students sometimes relied on counselors' training and feedback to navigate differences in expression, resource utilization, and cultural values when considering applications to overseas institutions. Further, it was observed that students often received higher education information through counselors as an interpretive filter, which significantly shaped their evaluation of such information [5].

Previous research also revealed students' susceptibility to media-based information sources, including social media platforms, institutional tier lists, and informal word-of-mouth channels. College rankings disseminated through mass media were identified as a key influence on students' information assessment. Additionally, studies examining Chinese students' information literacy noted their active engagement with time-sensitive international updates—such as public health developments—during periods of restricted mobility. More recently, findings suggested that students' evaluation of college-related information occurred under conditions of temporal constraint, alongside notable influence from prevailing social opinions and media narratives [2].

While existing studies provide valuable insights into how Chinese students prioritize counselors and media in information evaluation, they offer limited explanation of the underlying reasons. Specifically, there remains insufficient exploration of why these sources are perceived as credible or authoritative by international students [4]. This study therefore shifts focus toward identifying the foundational motivations shaping such evaluations, broadening the scope beyond counselors and media to include other influential figures—such as parents and teachers—as potential information sources.

### *2.2. Literature on Decision-Making*

Research on the decision-making process of Chinese high school students pursuing overseas higher education has identified multiple influential factors. Some students perceive international study as a complementary pathway to domestic education, while others prioritize opportunities for cultural engagement and social integration in the host environment. Earlier investigations indicate that pressures associated with domestic academic assessment systems also contribute to the preference for international educational pathways [2]. Additionally, financial considerations—including both the direct costs of study abroad and anticipated long-term economic benefits—have been consistently reported as significant determinants in students' choices.

Collectively, these findings highlight several recurring themes in students' decision-making. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the underlying mechanisms that shape the relative weight and interplay of these factors. This study addresses that gap through qualitative inquiry aimed at uncovering the deeper motivations and shared patterns that inform such decisions [6].

### *2.3. Expectations After Literature Review*

Based on existing research concerning high school students' information evaluation and decision-making in higher education, several expectations regarding this study's findings can be formulated: students may prioritize certain informants—such as college counselors and educational agencies—due to perceptions of professional expertise; they may also regard information sources as credible when those sources incorporate personal narratives, including user-shared content on digital platforms [2].

Furthermore, regarding the attributes and shared characteristics that render particular factors especially salient, it is anticipated that students' selection of study regions and institutions will be significantly influenced by anticipated living experiences [7]. Specifically, factors directly tied to daily life—such as cultural adaptation and long-term financial outcomes—will likely receive heightened attention.

## **3. Methodology**

This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis, a qualitative approach centered on participants' lived experiences of specific events or conditions. Originating in psychological research, this method relies on semi-structured interviews guided by the researcher to elicit in-depth reflections on aspects participants deem personally significant to the research topic. A total of ten participants were interviewed [2]. Each interview explored intended fields of study, preferred institutions or geographic regions, information sources consulted, and key factors shaping decisions about where to apply.

### *3.1. Sampling*

This study recruited participants exclusively from a single international high school in Shanghai, ensuring consistency in teaching and counseling resources across the sample and minimizing potential confounding effects arising from inter-school variation. The selected institution exemplifies key characteristics of international education in China, including mandatory bilingual instruction in Chinese and English, internationally accredited curricula such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme and Advanced Placement courses, and a consistent record of students receiving admission offers from overseas higher education institutions [1]. Ten students—five male and five female—were interviewed, all enrolled in Grades 10 and 11 (aged 15 to 17). The narrow grade range ensured that all participants were actively engaged in or preparing for the college application process. At the time of data collection, none had accepted an offer from any overseas institution nor finalized their post-secondary enrollment decision, thereby ensuring that each participant had undertaken substantive reflection on higher education pathways while remaining open to diverse considerations and options.

Although all participants attended the same school, they exhibited notable diversity in socioeconomic status, cultural background, and family educational expectations. Each student articulated distinct academic interests and intended fields of study, and geographic preferences for future institutions showed minimal overlap across the sample [8].

### *3.2. Data Collection*

Interviews were conducted via Tencent Meetings, with each session recorded individually [9]. Recordings were transcribed using a data-secure AI transcription system, yielding highly accurate initial transcripts. Subsequent manual editing ensured grammatical correctness, spelling accuracy, and logical coherence.

To safeguard participant privacy and uphold confidentiality agreements, names of specific universities cited by participants were replaced with anonymized pseudonyms enclosed in square brackets (e.g., "[Norhaven University]"). Each unique pseudonym corresponds to a distinct institution [7].

### *3.3. Data Analysis*

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Codes were systematically extracted from each finalized transcript, each representing a distinct point, claim, or observation made by the participant and anchored to verbatim excerpts from the transcript. Variations in participant responses yielded distinct codes.

Subsequently, codes across participants were organized, compared, and clustered into sub-themes reflecting shared conceptual content [10]. These sub-themes were further synthesized into broader themes, each capturing a central dimension of higher education decision-making and information evaluation. The seven resulting themes are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1.** A List of the 7 Themes and Their Explanations.

| Themes and Explanations |                                    |                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No.                     | Name of Theme                      | Explanation                                                                                     |
| 1                       | Important information: takeaways   | What participants learned from the sources they relied on to inform higher education choices    |
| 2                       | Important information: reliability | Why participants trusted or relied on certain information sources                               |
| 3                       | Less-trusted information sources   | Sources which the participants relied less on in higher education choices                       |
| 4                       | Deciding locations: key factors    | Important factors considered by participants when deciding which locations to apply for         |
| 5                       | Deciding locations: reasons        | Why the key factors regarding participants' prospective locations of application were important |
| 6                       | Deciding schools: key factors      | Important factors considered by participants when deciding which school to apply for            |
| 7                       | Deciding schools: reasons          | Why participants felt that certain factors were important when choosing schools                 |

These seven themes encompassed a total of twenty-one sub-themes, all of which were subject to detailed analysis [11].

#### 4. Results

Interview data were divided into two analytical sections, each addressing one of the two research questions: first, how students select and interpret information sources when evaluating higher education options; and second, how they formulate decisions regarding study regions and institutions after reviewing such information. Themes 1–3 address the first question, while themes 4–7 address the second [9].

##### 4.1. Answering Question 1: Selecting and Interpreting Information Sources

Before deciding where to pursue higher education, participants consulted a wide range of information sources about colleges and universities. This section examines the types of sources or informants participants relied upon, and how each was evaluated in terms of perceived credibility and relevance [12].

To inform their higher education choices, many participants consulted college counselors and teachers who provide structured guidance to high school students on building competitive academic profiles for university applications [13]. From these advisors, participants obtained insights into the institutional cultures and values reflected across different colleges and universities, as outlined in sub-theme 1 of Table 2:

**Table 2.** "Important Information: Takeaways" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme #1 and Sub-themes |             |             |             |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Theme name              | Sub-theme 1 | Sub-theme 2 | Sub-theme 3 |

| Important information: takeaways                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | College counselors offered information on schools' cultures and values | Peers described student life and facilities in certain schools | Peers discussed the college application and school selection processes |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>"[My counselors told me] what kind of vibe the colleges have [14]. They helped me avoid some colleges, such as how I wouldn't be a good fit for schools like [Kelvarn University] and [Thornbury University]."</p> <p>Rather than relying solely on objective, publicly available data—such as institutional rankings or standardized test requirements—participants sought trustworthy information about subjective dimensions, including campus atmosphere and prevailing cultural norms (i.e., the "vibe"), which they found primarily through advisor consultations [15].</p> <p>However, participants' assessments of institutional "vibe" were not strictly evidence-based or systematically empirical [16]. Some acknowledged that their judgments incorporated intuitive or impressionistic elements:</p> <p>"I take the vibes pretty seriously [15]. And, like, vibes can be considered as... will I enjoy school life there? [Interviewer: Where did you get information on these 'vibes'?] Well, my brain. It's pretty intuitive, really."</p> <p>Thus, the research and decision-making process regarding higher education involved an interplay between factual evaluation and personal intuition [1, 11].</p> <p>Student life experiences and campus facilities were also frequently discussed topics [8]. In these cases, participants often turned to peers for input:</p> <p>"The alumni or [some peers], they give more personal, they give more advice from personal experience, so it's more special and more specific [11]. For example, [one of them] told me about his experience at [Norhaven University] and what it was like, the school culture, and the things like that."</p> <p>Additionally, participants leveraged the firsthand experience of peers who had already completed key steps—including university applications, major selection, and essay writing—and used those insights to inform their own decisions:</p> <p>"[I talk to those peers] from time to time... learning about what their process of writing the [college application], applying to different colleges, picking their colleges and writing their essays."</p> <p>Overall, when gathering and evaluating information about higher education options, participants predominantly relied on college counselors and peers, especially for subjective aspects such as institutional culture and application strategy [9].</p> <p>Participants cited several reasons for trusting their counselors and peers [5, 11]. Regarding counselors, participants emphasized their professional experience and demonstrated success in supporting students through university admissions:</p> <p>"I think there's much credibility for my college counselors, because they work in this field, and they have past students that got into good universities [13]. They showed me."</p> <p>Other participants explicitly noted the alignment between counselors' professional responsibilities and participants' outcomes, as reflected in sub-theme 1 of Table 3:</p> |                                                                        |                                                                |                                                                        |

**Table 3.** "Less-trusted Information Sources" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme #2 and Sub-themes                                                                                                      |                                                                      |                                                                                 |                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme name                                                                                                                   | Sub-theme 1                                                          | Sub-theme 2                                                                     | Sub-theme 3                                                               |
| Important information: reliability                                                                                           | College counselors are trusted due to experience and professionalism | Firsthand experience with applications makes information from peers trustworthy | Trusted informants who provided knowledge on previously unfamiliar topics |
| <p>"Yeah, [I trust them because] they are literally paid to do this. The success of their program hinges on my success."</p> |                                                                      |                                                                                 |                                                                           |

With regard to peers, participants valued their firsthand involvement in the application process, which enabled them to share concrete examples, nuanced reflections, and context-specific observations:

"I think having someone who's lived through this experience is very helpful, and so is being proactive about asking them."

Importantly, participants' level of trust in an information source was also influenced by their own familiarity with the subject matter. For instance, when participants lacked prior knowledge about higher education institutions in certain regions—such as Northern Europe—they were more likely to defer to advisors with greater expertise on those institutions:

"For [Pemberly University and Crovane University], I took [my counselors'] opinion seriously because I think they have more experience and information about those universities than I do."

Accordingly, participants' reliance on informants varied according to factors including professional background, experiential depth, and domain-specific knowledge.

Notably, participants identified several information sources they approached with caution or assigned lower priority, as summarized in Table 4. Social media content—including videos, posts, and articles—was among the least trusted when shared indirectly by teachers or parents:

**Table 4.** "Less-trusted Information Sources" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme name                       | Theme #3 and Sub-themes                                                    |                                                                                            |                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                  | Sub-theme 1                                                                | Sub-theme 2                                                                                | Sub-theme 3                                                                                  |
| Less-trusted information sources | Trusts information from social media less when it is forwarded from others | Skeptical to teachers' advice when they discussed topics like affordability and employment | Less trust for parents' advice when it did not align with participant's personal preferences |

"I think I tend to assume that I know a little more about colleges than they do because I have more resources right now than their WeChat Channels [social media]."

Participants generally treated social media content with skepticism when it was relayed secondhand, presuming diminished reliability [4]. However, this skepticism did not extend to social media content accessed directly by participants themselves:

"I'd say [I do take social media information seriously], because it offers another insight, you know? Multifaceted analysis."

Thus, the pathway through which information reached participants—whether directly sourced or mediated by others—significantly shaped its perceived credibility. Information from social media retained greater weight when accessed independently rather than transmitted through intermediaries.

Furthermore, participants expressed reservations about advice concerning highly personal circumstances, particularly financial considerations:

"I also keep in mind that I think, especially financially, I know a lot of teachers don't really take into account your finances or whatever you're paying [for higher education]."

Due to limited awareness of participants' individual socioeconomic contexts, advice from educators or counselors was sometimes viewed as impractical or irrelevant [11]. Similar skepticism applied to prescriptive recommendations about future career paths:

"If they give me advice like, for example, 'you should take this career path and become an accountant because it'll make you more money', I'll say, no thanks. Because that's a lot more personal, I think."

Trust in informants diminished when advice became overly directive or restrictive, implying narrow pathways for higher education choices.

Interestingly, participants also exhibited reduced trust in parental input when it conflicted with their own educational aspirations—for instance, preferring U.S.-based institutions despite parental concerns about tuition costs:

"I didn't take their opinions very seriously because I'm confident enough that I can either get a scholarship, if it's not a good enough [US] school for them, or that I can get in my dream school."

Ultimately, participants' assessment of information credibility remained inherently subjective, shaped by the mode of transmission, the degree of personalization, and alignment with their own goals and preferences [6, 14].

#### 4.2. Answering Question 2: Making Decisions on Higher Education

After viewing and evaluating diverse information sources in their search for higher education institutions, participants identified several key factors that played an integral role in their decision-making process for selecting a study destination and specific institutions. These factors were not necessarily derived solely from the information sources reviewed earlier; some reflected personal background, prior educational experiences, or upbringing [10].

When deciding the approximate geographic region where they wished to study, participants primarily considered demographic and cultural factors, as outlined in Table 5. Many regarded the primary language of the region as an important consideration:

**Table 5.** "Deciding Locations: Key Factors" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme #4 and Sub-themes         |                                                                      |                                                                    |                                                                   |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme name                      | Sub-theme 1                                                          | Sub-theme 2                                                        | Sub-theme 3                                                       |
| Deciding locations: key factors | Language for academic and daily communication is an important factor | University location (in the city or countryside) is also important | Cuisines and eating style are significant in the decision process |

"I prefer to study and be in a place where I can speak English in my everyday life. And also, with professors."

As indicated by this participant's response, language influenced both prospective academic engagement and daily personal life during higher education.

Participants also cited the distance of institutions from urban centers as a significant factor in choosing locations [2]. This included considerations related to employment prospects, availability of amenities such as shopping malls and public plazas, and access to extracurricular activities:

"I tend to prefer universities in a larger city... with access to an urban environment for future employment options and these kinds of things. If you take a college like [Threvis University], it's much more rural, but then, you have a lot less access to different activities outside."

Participants' evaluation of institutional locations also extended to lifestyle-specific conditions, including local food culture:

"I would say the eating style and cuisines are also fairly important because I can't really deal with burgers and fries all the time."

Overall, when determining a geographic location for higher education, participants emphasized living conditions and environmental attributes—particularly language environment, proximity to urban infrastructure, and culinary diversity [1].

Participants paid close attention to the living environments of schools' locales, largely informed by their own prior experiences [2]. For instance, most expressed preference for an English-speaking environment, reflecting their long-term enrollment in predominantly English-medium international schools, as shown in sub-theme 1 of Table 6:

**Table 6.** "Deciding Locations: Sources" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme #5 and Sub-themes |             |             |             |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Theme name              | Sub-theme 1 | Sub-theme 2 | Sub-theme 3 |

| Deciding locations: reasons                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Prefers English environment due to experience in international school | More accustomed to living in an urban environment | Firsthand experience with cuisines in many cities |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <p>"I feel like because I've been in an international school for this long such that, for most of my studies, especially the subjects I'd be taking [in college], I don't think I can understand them in [another language]."</p> <p>Personal experience also shaped preferences regarding a school's proximity to city centers:</p> <p>"I think it's because of the upbringing; I'm more used to being in a more urban environment."</p> <p>This reliance on firsthand experience parallels participants' approach to evaluating higher education information: they demonstrated greater confidence in self-sourced information than in content forwarded by others. Similarly, personal familiarity with food variety informed location preferences, as illustrated by a participant who previously resided in Singapore:</p> <p>"I think in Singapore, you have a lot of Chinese food and different cuisines to choose from... I remember the variety of food."</p> <p>Overall, participants' decisions about study locations were grounded in personal experience, reflecting a high degree of self-reliance and confidence in their own judgment [5].</p> <p>After articulating preferences for geographic location, participants elaborated on criteria for selecting specific institutions. As presented in Table 7, these criteria spanned academic offerings, campus facilities, and faculty characteristics.</p> |                                                                       |                                                   |                                                   |

**Table 7.** "Deciding Schools: Key Factors" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme #6 and Sub-themes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                             |                                    |                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme name                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Sub-theme 1                                 | Sub-theme 2                        | Sub-theme 3                                                         |
| Deciding schools: key factors                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Accommodations of institution are important | Campus size is an important factor | Communicative ability of teaching faculty influences school choices |
| <p>"I want to get good dorms...so, if there's a bad quality of dorms, I would be discouraged."</p> <p>For some participants, concerns about living conditions extended beyond regional attributes to on-campus infrastructure [4]. Considerations regarding student housing directly shaped the types of information they sought from available sources. For example, the participant who referenced dormitory quality consulted peers for firsthand insights:</p> <p>"And I think now that [some peers] have gone to college, I can get more insider info on, for example, their canteens and their dorms."</p> <p>In addition to residential facilities, overall campus size emerged as a salient factor [14]. Some participants indicated that physical scale influenced their perception of the campus atmosphere:</p> <p>"I like big and pretty campuses with a lot of grass and trees and lakes. So that intrigues me a lot because I think that the vibe is more peaceful and relaxing when I go between classes."</p> <p>Participants further emphasized the importance of faculty members' clarity in communication—not limited to language proficiency alone:</p> <p>"I care a lot about accents because teachers that have an accent that's difficult to understand hinders my comprehension of the subject."</p> <p>Thus, key considerations in selecting institutions included on-campus quality of life and faculty communicative effectiveness—factors that also guided how participants evaluated and prioritized information sources.</p> |                                             |                                    |                                                                     |

When asked to explain why these factors held significance, most participants referred to personal, firsthand experiences directly tied to those aspects, as summarized in Table 8. Notably, many of the cited experiences were negative. For instance, the participant who highlighted dormitory quality remarked:

**Table 8.** "Deciding Schools: Sources" and Sub-Themes.

| Theme #7 and Sub-themes   |                                                     |                                    |                                                               |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme name                | Sub-theme 1                                         | Sub-theme 2                        | Sub-theme 3                                                   |
| Deciding schools: reasons | Firsthand experience of living on university campus | Experienced campus size with visit | Communicative issues with current teachers left an impression |

"Nope, [Dunmoor University] has really bad dorms, at least the one I lived in for summer school."

A similar pattern emerged in discussions about campus size:

"I like to have more [campus] space, but that's exactly the opposite of [Hallowmere University] because there, the spaces are cramped [15]. I went there this summer. It really wasn't a lot of space."

Importantly, participants' negative experiences were not confined to post-secondary settings. Regarding faculty communication, several noted challenges encountered in their current pre-university schooling:

"Even in our school right now... I find it challenging to follow some teachers' instruction due to pronunciation differences."

Collectively, these examples indicate that participants' negative personal encounters with specific dimensions of educational environments significantly shaped their priorities and expectations for higher education institutions [4].

## 5. Conclusion & Discussion

This study addressed two research questions: first, how students select and interpret sources of information when considering higher education options; and second, how they formulate decisions about which regions and institutions to pursue. Findings indicate that participants primarily relied on others' professional expertise or firsthand experience to assess subjective institutional attributes—such as culture or values—yet their evaluation of information sources was not strictly evidence-based and was influenced by intuitive judgments and confirmation biases. In determining where and at which institutions to study, participants prioritized living environments and teaching quality. Notably, heightened attention to these factors often coincided with prior negative experiences related to them—for instance, dissatisfaction with past learning environments or instructional quality.

These patterns align with earlier observations in the literature indicating that prospective higher education students frequently rely on interpersonal testimonies—particularly from peers and educators—in shaping their geographical and institutional preferences. Similarly, perceptions of universities have been shown to be shaped significantly by information obtained through personal networks.

The convergence between prior findings and those reported here suggests both the widespread engagement of high school students in deliberate, multifaceted planning for higher education and the cross-contextual consistency of their informational needs and decisional priorities.

The significance of this study lies in its identification of shared informational needs and evaluative criteria among high school students globally as they navigate higher education selection. For colleges and universities, these insights present an opportunity to refine institutional messaging and strengthen offerings aligned with student priorities—potentially enhancing recruitment outcomes. For international secondary schools, the findings may inform advising practices, enabling more effective support for

students pursuing preferred institutions. For students themselves, the study offers a reflective framework for critically assessing the rationale and balance underlying their own higher education decisions.

Although this study focused on a single institution with a relatively diverse student cohort, future work could extend inquiry to broader demographic dimensions—including cultural background, socioeconomic context, and geographic origin. Additional research might also examine the relationship between students' initial preferences and their final enrollment choices following offer receipt. Given that higher education represents a pivotal, non-repeatable life transition, deepening understanding of how it is anticipated, evaluated, and selected remains fundamentally important.

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