Article

Decision Strategies and Influencing Factors of International Students' University Entrance in Japan

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ABSTRACT: *International students need to consider multiple constraints simultaneously in their decision-making for university admission. However, most of them face the problems of lacking knowledge of the decision-making process and making decisions on where to go before they become familiar with the university. This study focused on international students who planned to study at a Japanese university, proposed the factors influencing career decision strategies, and examined each factor via exploratory factor analysis. Based on the exploratory factor analysis results, we construct a decision-making model and employ SEM analysis to investigate how international students in Japan overcome constraints and ultimately make decisions, identifying common behavioral patterns among them.*

INTRODUCTION

In our daily lives, we often face situations that require us to make decisions after considering various factors. This is also the case for international students who want to enter a university in Japan. As of May 1, 2024, the number of international students in Japan had reached 330,000, marking the largest number and growth rate on record. Over 80% of these students have already enrolled in or plan to enroll in higher education institutions (JASSO, 2024). On the other hand, there are several problems in the process of studying abroad, such as the lack of competition after studying abroad; the lack of references and standards for self-assessment; the difficulty of making a more objective and absolute evaluation; the selection process for university entrance, which is not clearly defined and depends on the independent judgment of each host institution; and the existence of different preferences for the method of selection for university entrance (Dong & Inuzuka, 2019; Nishihara, 2011; Nishigori & Kuramoto, 2010). For international students, these issues place an undue burden on them in preparing for the Japanese University Entrance Examination. The increasing difficulty year by year in objectively recognizing their academic ability and choosing the right university may ultimately be one of the factors that make them hesitate to study in Japan or give up on entering a Japanese institution of higher education. A feasible solution to alleviate this burden is to analyze the different school decision strategies adopted by international students during the university selection process due to various antecedents, summarize them into several classic patterns and tendencies, and thus provide future international students planning to pursue university education in Japan with a reference framework based on past experiences. However, previous research in this field has been conducted primarily through interviews with specific cases, lacking quantitative analysis based on large datasets, and often yields conclusions that are limited in their typicality and specificity. Therefore, this study aims to explore the decision strategies adopted by international students in the university admission process and their related factors through exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling and to draw conclusions that can be generalized and extended to a wider group of international students.

Literature Review

The first antecedent used to define and distinguish international students is their future plan. Feng et al. (2021) and Jiao (2025) noted that the main characteristics of international students are their younger age and tendency not to participate in their home country's university entrance exams; instead, they plan to study abroad at an earlier age. Their motivations are closely linked to enjoying youth and campus life. Huang (2015) noted the existence of a group of students motivated by the pursuit of high-quality education. These students have typically completed high school education and choose Japan because of its academic and vocational training advantages. Hidayatullah and Csíkos (2023) proposed that a stronger sense of autonomy helps students set personal goals and plan their

learning environment, and this positive approach encourages them to independently complete their plans and reduce their willingness to seek help from others. Therefore, we can conclude that some students hold positive motivations and attitudes toward their plans. They are regarded as an elite group of international students, characterized by strong academic abilities, clear academic goals, well-organized study plans, and a greater emphasis on academic performance. On the other hand, Chuang (2012) and Wang et al. (2025) noted that parents were especially convinced of the existence of pathways to upward mobility: that hard work would lead to high grades, advanced degrees, and ideal careers. This parental indoctrination has contributed to the negative future plans of some international students. Sakai (2015), Jiang (2024) and Tran (2025) noted that the difficulty of finding employment, various social changes and the solidification of social classes in the home countries of international students have created vague or negative future plans. Feng et al. (2021) noted that some students entered international schools at an early stage under their families' arrangements with the premise of studying abroad. The admission models, learning contents and systems of overseas education differ significantly from those of domestic universities, leaving students with no way to "Turning Back" even if external circumstances change. This further contributes to negative Future Plans among some students. However, previous studies have classified international students' attitudes toward the future plans and relied on semi-structured interviews with specific cases, resulting in conclusions that are heavily influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewees. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct quantitative analysis to clarify how future plans specifically influence international students' decision strategies and which decision strategies are affected, thereby providing a systematic and comprehensive analysis that can be applied to a broader population of international students.

The second antecedent used to define and distinguish international students is their goal selection. Dong and Inuzuka (2019) reported that international students, when preparing for the Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students (EJU), have a strong subjective will to avoid academic failure given the tough external competitive environment and thus tend to consider the "probability of acceptance" as an important consideration when choosing a university. Ye (2021) proposed that providing students with precise information about admission probabilities influences their university choice behavior. Such information can effectively improve the academic match between students and universities, increasing the likelihood that students will choose universities that align with their abilities. Eric P. Bettinger. et al. (2009) and Hakimov, R. et al. (2023) noted that the ability to accurately estimate one's ranking within the score distribution and admission probability directly impacts students' performance in university applications. Wu (2021) reported that universities exhibit different admission preferences during the selection phase on the basis of the importance they place on external conditions. For example, "emphasizing EJU scores," "emphasizing internal university exams," and "comprehensive consideration." However, these preferences are not publicly disclosed, leading to information asymmetry between international students and universities. As a result,

international students often rely on more accessible information, such as the university's external reputation and their own economic conditions, to make relatively suitable choices. Laaro, M. D. (2020) and Wut, T.-M. et al. (2022) reported that university rankings and reputation significantly influence students' university choices. Redd, K. E. (2004) and Callender, C. (2021) noted that students consider their economic conditions when choosing a university, particularly in terms of tuition fees and living costs. However, most previous studies have treated goal selection as the endpoint of analysis. Given the current lack of reference standards or criteria for self-assessment among international students, conducting more objective and absolute evaluations is challenging in the short term. Therefore, this study aims to determine the relationships between the key factors influencing goal selection and the resulting decision strategies, enabling international students to develop a more scientific relative evaluation framework by analogy with similar pathways and leveraging extensive data.

Concerning decision strategies, Shimomura (1998) proposed "subjective expected utility (SEU)," which refers to situations where decision-making objectives are very clear and where there is a strong personal desire to utilize one's outstanding advantages to achieve those objectives. This approach is similar to that of international students' in their pursuit of maximizing the benefits and effects of external exam scores. Hu and Zhang (2017) noted that most students, having been raised in a collectivist cultural context for an extended period, are accustomed to passively accepting information and lack autonomy, often relying on instrumental or control-oriented motivations. The desire to pursue national universities with lower tuition fees or to remain in major cities for better career prospects are typical examples of such external motives (Redd, 2004; Zhang, 2012; Zhai & Gao, 2021; Ye, 2021). Gomes (2022) proposed that, due to the dual constraints of visa restrictions and limited admission opportunities, when objective conditions become disruptive and time-sensitive, international students' career and life plans can be suspended. Actively adapting and compromising while shifting toward self-development as a compromise strategy is a viable solution. In previous studies, both a summary description of the representative decision strategies adopted by international students and research findings on the intertransfer of decision strategies have been lacking. Considering the uniqueness of international students, they are unlikely to adhere to a single decision strategy without adjustments. Therefore, when a particular decision strategy fails, how international students proceed next and the interplay between different decision-making strategies are worthy areas of further research.

Research Questions

This study, drawing on the factor structure of various previous studies and considering the actual situation of international students' enrollment, proposes two factors — "future plan" and "goal selection" — as antecedents for international students to determine their target universities. Decision strategies can also be categorized into several specific decision types and matched with their antecedents. As mentioned earlier, the potential relationships between these

factors and decision strategies remain unclear. The following questions will guide this study.

1. What are the specific dimensions of "future plan" and "goal selection," and how do these dimensions relate to decision strategies as antecedents?
2. How do decision strategies vary under different antecedents, and can they be classified into several typical trends and behavioral patterns?

METHODS

Survey Subjects and Period

The survey was conducted online via Google Forms in November and December 2024. We requested the cooperation of Japanese language schools and extracurricular training institutions for international students and collected questionnaire data from past and current students at these institutions. A total of 301 valid responses were obtained. This study involved 301 international students who were preparing to take university entrance exams in Japan and were ultimately admitted to university. The participants were distributed as follows: 190 students from the metropolitan area (including Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa Prefectures), 33 from Aichi Prefecture, 72 from the Keihanshin metropolitan area (including Kyoto，Osaka，and Hyogo Prefectures), and 6 from other areas.

Question Items

This study addresses three key areas: plans, goal selection, and decision strategies.

Regarding plans, we analyzed the outcomes of pursuing education based on students' attitudes toward the future using Urakami's (1992) expectation scale and Yagi et al.'s (2000) framework for university admission motivation. Additionally, we incorporated findings from Nishimaru's (2019) study on the correlation between reasons for university admission and entrance exam performance, creating 15 questions and revising them to better reflect the realities faced by international students.

In terms of goal selection, we drew on Eric P. Bettinger et al. (2009), Hakimov, R. et al. (2023), Laaro, M. D. (2020), Wut, T.-M. et al. (2022), Redd, K. E. (2004), and Callender, C. (2021), among others, we identified constraints that students consider when selecting a university. Additionally, we referenced questions and data from surveys conducted over the past three years among international freshman students at five universities. On this basis, we developed 12 questions.

In terms of decision strategies, we draw on the practical decision-making strategies proposed by Shimomura (1998), as well as the practical challenges faced by international students in the decision-making process mentioned by Zhang (2012) and Feng et al. (2021). Ultimately, 12 questions related to decision strategies were identified.

Prior to the questionnaire survey, we informed participants of the experiment's purpose and data usage and clarified that participation was entirely voluntary, with no rewards offered and no adverse consequences for nonparticipation. Only data from participants who fully understood and agreed with these terms were recorded. A mechanism was also established allowing participants to freely withdraw at any time during the questionnaire survey, with their responses not being recorded, and a final confirmation was made at the end of the survey regarding whether their responses would be used in this study. To answer the questionnaire, the students were asked to recall their experiences in preparing for the university entrance exam and the actual decision-making process for university admission. The answers were rated on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "Totally disagree" and 5 means "Totally agree."

Statistical Analysis

First, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the 301 valid responses and confirmed that they conformed to the factor structure observed in previous studies. Second, we constructed a multifactor model using the extracted factors. The goodness of fit of the constructed model was assessed via SEM analysis. The observed variables included the variables with high factor loadings determined in the factor analysis, which were analyzed via the maximum likelihood method.

RESULTS

Results of Factor Analyses

Prior to conducting structural equation modeling, exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted separately on the future plan, goal selection, and decision strategies constructs to examine their underlying dimensionality and verify measurement validity. Sampling adequacy and factorability were first assessed. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values were .81 for the future plan, .75 for goal selection, and .77 for decision strategies, each indicating meritorious to middling adequacy (Kaiser, 1974; Field, 2013). All individual item-level KMO values exceeded the minimum threshold of .60. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant for all three constructs (future plan: χ^2 (105) = 3200.77, p < .001; goal selection: χ^2 (66) = 2092.50, p < .001; decision strategies: χ^2 (66) = 2217.80, p < .001) confirming that the correlation matrices were appropriate for factor analysis (Table.1).

Factor analyses were conducted via maximum likelihood and Promax Rotation for the following factors: future plan, goal selection, and decision strategies. For the future plan, a three-factor solution was extracted, accounting for 58.6% of the total variance (SS loadings: 3.25, 3.05, 2.48). For goal selection, EFA revealed a three-factor structure explaining 60.7% of the variance (SS loadings: 2.83, 2.39, 2.06). For decision strategies, a four-factor solution was retained, with a cumulative explained variance of 68.2% (SS loadings: 2.66, 2.08, 2.03, and 1.42) (Table 1).

Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis Summary for Three Factors

Factors	KMO	Bartlett χ^2 (df)	Bartlett p	Factors Extracted	Cumulative Variance Explained (%)	SS Loadings
future plan	.81	3200.77 (105)	< .001	3	58.6	3.25, 3.05, 2.48
goal selection	.75	2092.50 (66)	< .001	3	60.7	2.83, 2.39, 2.06
decision strategies	.77	2217.80 (66)	< .001	4	68.2	2.66, 2.08, 2.03, 1.42

These factor structures aligned well with theoretical expectations and were used to inform the construction of the latent variables in the subsequent structural model. The detailed factor loadings for each construct are presented below.

The analysis of the plan revealed three distinct factors: "Positive," "Negative," and "Vague." That is, students are subjectively motivated to pursue their plans and have a strong desire to achieve them. Alternatively, they may view their plans negatively because external influences, such as others or pressures, shape their rebellious attitudes. Alternatively, they may feel indifferent or unconcerned about their future and lack specific plans (Table 2).

Table 2. Factor Pattern Matrix of Each Factor (Promax Rotation, N = 301)

		Vague	Positive	Negative
F1. future plan	A12. I went to my current university because there is nothing else I want to do.	**.87**	.05	.01
	A13. I went to my current university because I thought I would attend college because others attended university.	**.82**	.14	.03
	A14. No specific purpose, but consider a university degree as a matter of course, went to a current university.	**.81**	.18	.02

A11. I went to my current university because it is not too late to think about the future after entering university.	.73	-.16	.03
A15. I went to my current university because a college degree is fundamental to whatever I do in the future.	.71	.21	.00
A9. went to the current university because they were afraid to go out into the world.	.58	-.29	-.03
A8.Attended college to avoid having to find a job, so I went to my current university.	.56	-.25	-.04
A3. Went to current university in order to earn more money after employment.	.02	**.92**	.00
A2. I went to my current university in order to obtain a higher position after employment.	-.03	**.88**	-.01
A5. I went to my current university in order to find a suitable profession.	.01	**.74**	.10
A1. I went to my current university in order to be accepted by society.	.01	.71	-.07
A4. I went to my current university because I want to have more free time in the future.	.09	.69	-.03
A6. I went to my current university because my parents and others around me recommended it.	.03	.17	**.81**

		Probability of Acceptance	Economic Consideration	University Brand
	A10. went to current college because parents were forced to go to university.	.21	-.04	**.76**
	A7. I went to my current university to be filial to my parents.	-.17	-.13	**.62**
F2. goal selection	B11. I chose my current university because the difficulty level of the on-campus secondary exam suited me.	**.91**	.06	-.12
	B9. I chose my current university because the entrance examination system and subjects suited me.	**.82**	.04	.03
	B8. I chose my current university because the difficulty level of acceptance suited me.	**.81**	.01	-.25
	B12. I chose my current university because the timing of the entrance examination fit my plan.	.43	-.03	.28
	B2.I chose my current university based on the appropriateness of the admission fee, tuition, and endowment.	.02	**.95**	-.07
	B10. I chose my current university because the tuition was appropriate.	.09	**.86**	-.08
	B7. I chose my current university because of its excellent scholarship program.	-.02	**.78**	.11

	B1. chose the current university based on the overall visibility, plant and image of the university.	-.04	-.10	**.95**
	B5. I chose my current university based on its evaluation in various university rankings.	.06	-.09	**.89**
	B6. I chose my current university based on its curriculum and class structure.	-.13	.19	.45
	B3. I chose my current university based on commuting time and route to school.	.04	.01	-.07
	B4. I chose my current university because of its campus location and surroundings.	-.01	-.04	.01

		Priority to Major Cities	Public Aspirations	Scoring Utility	Compromise Principle
F3. decision strategies	C1. Universities located around metropolitan areas will be preferentially selected, even if they are lower ranked.	**.96**	.04	-.02	-.05
	C4. When deciding on a university, they only choose universities located in large metropolitan areas.	**.91**	-.01	.04	.03
	C11. Would preferentially choose a university in a large metropolitan area, even if tuition and other expenses are high.	**.90**	-.02	.01	.10

C2. Think that national universities are a preferred choice compared to private universities, even if they are lower ranked.	.13	**.93**	-.01	-.01
C10. anything can be compromised if it is a national or metropolitan university.	.00	**.83**	-.09	-.11
C5. When deciding on a university, only national or metropolitan universities are chosen.	-.14	**.65**	.12	-.02
C9. Select a suitable university based on EJU scores.	-.01	-.02	**.91**	-.12
C3. I want to maximize the effect of EJU scores when deciding on a university.	.04	.01	**.81**	.06
C12. If there is a chance to get into a prestigious university, majors, location and tuition fees can be compromised.	-.31	.28	.72	-.05
C6. Can compromise on college and major if it is advantageous for the future.	-.03	.34	-.19	**.93**
C7. I do not care what kind of university I enter as long as I get in.	.05	.10	.24	**.86**
C8. It is more important to stay in Japan than to go to an ideal university.	.29	.38	-.14	.72

Three factors related to goal selection were identified in the items. The first factor was "Probability of Acceptance, " which was subjectively assessed by each student on the basis of the timing of the entrance exam, the subject of the exam and the results of previous entrance exams. The second factor was "University Brand," which was influenced by the university's overall popularity, brand influence, and public perception of the school. The third factor is "Economic

Considerations," which includes overall expenses related to attending college such as tuition, transportation, and living expenses (Table 2).

Four factors emerged in students' decision strategies for higher education: "Score Utility," in which students sought to maximize the utility of their EJU scores and other external examinations; "Public Aspirations," in which students actively sought higher education at public universities; "Priority to Major Cities," in which students prioritize universities located in or near metropolitan areas over the specific attributes of the institution; and "Compromise Principle," in which students reconcile their desires with reality, considering that if they cannot meet all the requirements, they will gradually lower their requirements in anticipation of gaining something, thereby avoiding being rejected by all universities and facing the dilemma of having to return home countries when their visa expires (Table 2).

We also calculated descriptive statistics for each factor derived from the exploratory factor analysis (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Each Factor (N=301)

Factors	mean	sd	raw alpha	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4
F1.future plan													
1.1.Vague	1.46	2.13	.822	1.00									
1.2.Positive	1.31	2.80	.947	-.10	1.00								
1.3.Negative	.85	1.60	.756	.21	-.12	1.00							
F2.goal selection													
2.1.Probability of Acceptance	2.54	2.03	.871	.29	.09	.07	1.00						
2.2.Economic Consideration	1.09	1.60	.870	.02	.15	-.14	.18	1.00					
2.3.University Brand	1.37	2.22	.897	-.19	.47	.03	-.16	-.01	1.00				
F3.decision strategies													
3.1.Priority to Major Cities	1.18	1.62	.935	.27	.16	.17	.37	-.12	.09	1.00			
3.2.Public Aspirations	.80	1.27	.825	-.06	.11	-.01	-.23	.17	.30	-.28	1.00		
3.3.Scoring Utility	1.64	1.88	.903	.05	.31	.25	.19	-.11	.43	.37	.32	1.00	
3.4.Compromise Principle	.65	1.77	.822	.20	-.34	-.07	.23	.18	-.73	-.08	-.25	-.42	1.00

Correlation coefficient between Factors

Results of SEM Analysis

Using the factors identified by exploratory factor analysis, we drew a path diagram to illustrate the multiple factors that affect the decision strategies of international students. The goodness of fit of the constructed model was evaluated via SEM analysis. The observed variables with high factor loadings identified in the exploratory factor analysis were used as observed variables. The analysis included a total of 19 observed variables, and the maximum likelihood method was used. The statistical software used for this analysis was R, version 4.4.3.

To evaluate the overall validity of the model, we calculated the goodness-of-fit index, and the model showed a good fit (chi-square=265.886, *df*=157, *p*<.001, CFI=.973, TLI=.964, RMSEA=.048, SRMR=.049). The data indicate that Scoring Utility, Prior to Major Cities, Public Aspirations, and Compromise Principle could be explained by future plan and goal selection. The total variance was 33% ($R^2 = .33$), 38% ($R^2 = .38$), 30% ($R^2 = .30$), and 59% ($R^2 = .59$). (Figure 1)
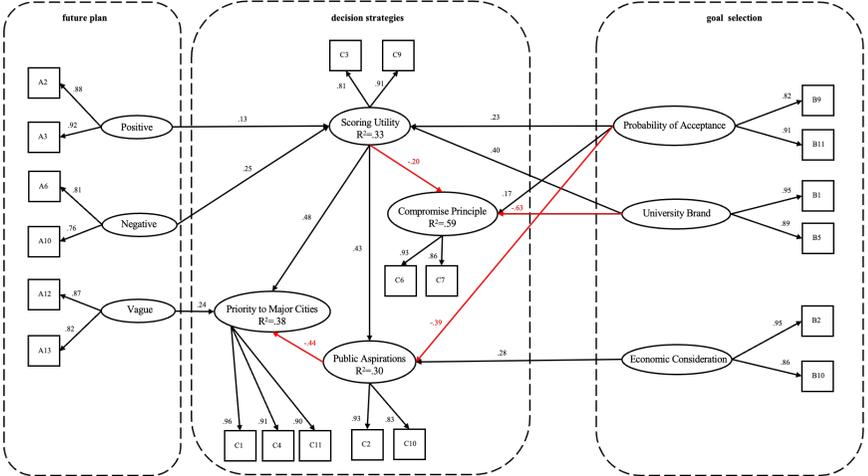

Figure 1: Path Diagram of Career Decision Strategies for International Students (chi-square=265.886, *df*=157, *p*<.001, CFI=.973, TLI=.964, RMSEA=.048, SRMR=.049)
Note1: Negative correlations are shown in red
Note2: All paths shown in the figure have been tested by the Wald test and are statistically significant. (*p* < .001)

Next, we discuss the path coefficients between the latent variables. Through the Wald test, the following path coefficients in the model were confirmed to be significant. Scoring Utility was associated with Positive (β= .13, *p*<.001), Negative (β= .25, *p*<.001), Probability of Acceptance (β= .23, *p* < .001), and University Brand (β = .40, *p* < .001). Priority to Major Cities was associated with Vague (β=.24, *p* < .001), Scoring Utility (β= .48, *p*<.001), and Public Aspirations (β= -.44, *p*<.001). Public Aspirations was associated with Scoring Utility

(β= .43, *p*<.001), Probability of Acceptance (β= -.39, *p* < .001), and Economic Consideration (β= .28, *p* < .001). Compromise Principle was associated with Scoring Utility (β=-.20, *p*<.001), Probability of Acceptance (β= .17, *p* < .001), and University Brand (β= -.63, *p* < .001).

DISCUSSION

According to Figure 1, future plan and goal selection play a significant role in the career decision-making process of international students. These factors directly determine where students are willing to allocate more resources and attention when pursuing higher education, thereby further influencing the transition of choice decision strategies and the final decision. Ou et al. (2023) and Wu et al. (2024) suggested that the clarity of career plans, the strength of educational motivation, and the influence of external environmental factors combine to shape an individual's career choice. This study combined the latent variables summarized by exploratory factor analysis with path analysis of structural equation modeling to summarize several typical career decision-making trends to reveal how international students make their final choices in light of multiple factors.

Score Came First

The first typical trend is named "Score Came First." Including Four of the six observed variables, Positive and Negative from the future plan, as well as the Probability of Acceptance and University Brand from goal selection, point to Scoring Utility as a decision strategy. First, the path from Positive to Score Utility (β= .13, *p*<.001) was significant. Zhang (2024) and Li et al. (2024) proposed that career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) is an important factor influencing the students' career decisions. Its mechanism lies in whether individuals possess a positive and clear career vision and are willing to formulate specific plans for it. The results of this study confirm that this "Positive" drives them to plan and prioritize fully utilizing their strengths. For example, international students' EJU scores and TOEFL scores when applying for university. Choosing the university with the best external reputation or university ranking that their current scores can enter, rather than their favorite university, to maximize the benefits of their scores is a decision with a clear purpose. Second, the path from Negative to Score Utility (β= .25, *p*<.001) was significant. This finding indicates that such negativity may lead international students to adopt more utilitarian Decision Strategies. Murakoshi (2011) and Hu and Zhang (2017) proposed that students who have long been in an environment where they passively receive information and rely on external and instrumental motivations during their previous educational stages (primary and secondary education) have deeply ingrained beliefs in their home countries that "Score centric." International students, as a group with limited access to information and negative attitudes toward future plans have even more restricted channels and methods for obtaining information (Zhang, 2012). The path from Negative to Score Utility identified in this study suggests that such

students did not preselect a few preferred universities but instead adopted a utilitarian mindset, following their home country's "Score Came First" perspective and making adaptive, passive choices on the basis of EJU scores. Third, regarding the path from Probability of Acceptance to Score Utility ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), many previous studies have noted that since most Japanese universities do not disclose their selection criteria during the admission process, international students find it difficult to make absolute evaluations when making decisions (Zhang, 2012; Dong & Inuzuka, 2019; Wu, 2021). As a result, quantifiable indicators such as EJU scores and TOEFL scores become more important for international students. The path from Probability of Acceptance to Score Utility found in this study indicates that the importance placed on the Probability of Acceptance leads these international students to rely on whether the universities they apply to are compatible with their scores, thereby ensuring the success of their university admission and maximizing the benefits of their scores to achieve their goals. Fourth, the path from University Brand to Score Utility ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$) was significant. As the most accessible reference information, most international students' understanding of Japanese universities is limited to external brand influence (such as university rankings and public evaluations), leading them to prefer universities with higher public evaluations and good reputations. International students who have long-term plans and study abroad in Japan after high school graduation seek high-quality education and have better academic performance. However, this also means that such students face more intense competition (Sheng & Chueh, 2013; Huang, 2015). The findings of this study indicate that maximizing external scores is a key factor in helping them stand out in competition. According to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), an individual's career goals are driven by self-efficacy and expected outcomes and are achieved through systematic learning and educational investment (Long et al., 2002; Lent et al., 2016). For such long-term systematic learning and investment, maximizing external scores to secure university admission is an important step. When external factors are considered comprehensively, the trend observed in this study, where international students tend to prioritize "Scoring Utility" across multiple dimensions, can be explained in two main ways. First, 92.5% of international students in Japan come from Asian countries (JASSO, 2024), and this tendency is particularly evident in the university choices of international students from Asian regions where education places a strong emphasis on academic performance (Huang, 2015; Hu & Zhang, 2017). Second, there are insufficient objective factors, such as external examination scores and rankings, that international students can use for reference and relative evaluation, while there are too many subjective factors, such as the Probability of Acceptance and the University Brand, which contribute to this tendency.

Public University Chaser

We name the second typical trend "Public University Chaser," which better reflects the restrictive effect of economic considerations on decision-making. Redd (2004), Görgen et al. (2021) and Hatsor et al. (2024) reported that financial

burden is an important constraint on the career decision-making of international students. Especially in the context of the high cost of higher education, the abundance of economic resources can directly determine whether students are able to pursue higher education and career development opportunities. According to the SEM analysis of this study, "Economic Considerations" have a significant positive effect on "Public Aspirations" (β= .28, p < .001), which indicates that the high cost of studying abroad and the expensive tuition fees of private universities restrict some international students from pursuing high-cost career paths, whereas public universities with cheaper tuition fees perfectly avoid this problem. Compared with the established long-term plans, the practical problems that have to be considered in the short term have greatly shaken their choices. After further analyzing the changes in decision-making strategies for this path, we find that the impact of "Economic Considerations" does not act on only one decision-making strategy. Since the enrollment quota of state universities is much smaller than that of private universities and the number of state universities located near metropolitan areas is very limited (JASSO, 2024), when "Public Aspirations" do not work near metropolitan areas, students choose to study public universities in remote areas, which has a significant negative impact on "Priority to Major Cities" (β= -.44, p<.001). The lower cost of living and the competition rate for admission to universities ensure that international students can continue their studies at least in the short term without having to return to their home country due to failure in university admission or financial problems, even if these choices may not be optimal in terms of long-term career development. This phenomenon is consistent with the research of Shi et al. (2023), that is, students from low-income families may be forced to be "short-sighted" in career decisions, and they are more inclined to choose options with lower short-term financial costs rather than the path that best suits their career goals.

Face Considerations

The third trend is "Face Considerations." The attitudes of this group of students toward decision strategies stem from their pursuit of interpersonal relationships and social evaluation. This study revealed that even if they cannot maximize their score benefits, most students would still choose "Public Aspirations" (β= .43, p<.001) or "Priority to Major Cities" (β= .48, p<.001) as alternatives. This is because national and public universities have lower educational costs, whereas large cities offer better development prospects. However, some students' motivation to pursue higher education is less dependent on their own career aspirations or personal ambitions and more influenced by family, friends, or cultural groups. Guo et al. (2015), Zhang (2024) and Jiao (2025) noted that social capital, which is composed of family, friends, and cultural background, plays an important role in individual career decisions. Wang et al. (2025) reported that perfectionism and face culture from international students' parents transmit anxiety from parents to their children, creating a unique family-academic pressure in the East Asian cultural context. This leads them to develop a strong preference for the "University Brand" during the goal selection, tending

to choose universities that, despite being challenging, offer recognition from family and friends and significant social reputation gains upon admission. This decision-making approach not only has a significant adverse effect on the "Compromise Principle" (β= -.63, p<.001) but also, through the mediating effect of "Score Utility" (β= .40, p<.001), significantly negatively influences the "Compromise Principle" (β= -.20, p<.001). These students often choose universities and majors with high family and social recognition to enhance their social status, even if these choices may be challenging or beyond their capabilities, driven by "Face Considerations." During the decision-making stage, compared with students who base their university choices on their "Probability of Acceptance" to accept the "Compromise Principle" (β= .17, p<.001), they are willing to reject the "Compromise Principle" and tend to make more radical choices (β= -.63, p<.001). Such choices are not based on an objective assessment of their own strengths and conditions and thus carry significant risks and uncertainties. As a result, most international students who follow this path ultimately find themselves in difficult situations. While social capital can provide information support, resource connections, and psychological security in environments with high occupational uncertainty (Krezel, J., & Krezel, A. Z., 2017; Hasan et al., 2023), excessive emphasis on "Face Considerations", external evaluations, or vanity is the fundamental cause of these difficulties.

Herd Mentality

The fourth typical trend, which we name "Herd Mentality," manifests primarily in the significant positive influence of "Vague" to "Priority to Major Cities" (β=.24, p < .001) and the significant positive influence of pursuing the "Probability of Acceptance" to the "Compromise Principle" (β=.17, p < .001). Many previous studies have noted that when students lack clear personal preferences or feel uncertain about the future but must make a decision within a specific deadline, following the Herd Mentality often helps them make a decision (Krezel, J., & Krezel, A. Z., 2017; Hasan et al., 2023). Wang et al. (2025) also mentioned in interviews with freshmen entering university that students experience "being so busy they don't know what to do, yet they don't know why they're busy" (Interview H1) and are influenced by information from social media highlighting success templates and "experience posts," which fuel FOMO and information silos, amplifying anxiety about learning and life (Interview Q).Although students recognize the potential for anxiety-inducing content in such information, those without clear future plans often choose to follow the footsteps of successful individuals. The two significant paths of Herd Mentality found in this study can be explained as follows. First, when international students lack clear future plans, they tend to prioritize universities in major cities. This is because such universities are the common choice of most international students and offer broader future prospects, making them more appealing to them. Second, while valuing their own "Probability of Acceptance", they do not emphasize maximizing "Score Utility" in decision-making but instead actively and directly accept the "Compromise Principle." This suggests that, compared with

prioritizing the probability of admission to a specific university and making long-term, systematic efforts and investments to maximize score-based benefits for admission success, international students influenced by "Herd Mentality" prioritize the "Probability of Acceptance" as a criterion for selecting target universities, thereby increasing the probability of avoiding admission failure.

CONCLUSION

This study provided a theoretically guided and empirically validated explanation of how international students negotiated the maze of decision-making when enrolling in a university in Japan. We modeled Future Plan and Goal Selection as preceding psychological and situational factors that influenced latent Decision Strategies via structural equation modeling; therefore, we promoted a deep understanding of student agency under constraints. The findings showed that the choice process could not be simplified as a single rational calculus; rather, it was made through elaborate negotiations between futuristic goals, sociocultural norms, and institutional resources.

The discovery of four different types of decision-making — Score Came First, Public University Chaser, Face Considerations, and Herd Mentality— emphasized the diversity and flexibility of international student behavior. It showed both converging patterns based on the education system (such as high regard for exam results and university reputation) and diverging paths influenced by economic insecurity and social capital. Of great importance was the role of Scoring Utility as a structural pivot around which other strategies were either amplified or supplanted, reflecting the symbolic and instrumental centrality of standardized scores in high-stakes educational mobility.

In terms of methodology, the study advanced the growing literature on decision-making by integrating exploratory factor analysis with SEM to unearth latent psychological mechanisms that descriptive or case-based approaches might have missed. The model attained excellent fit indices, thereby underscoring the robustness of the identified pathways while also revealing significant negative covariances between some pairs of strategies (for example, Public Aspiration and Priority to Major Cities), structural incompatibilities that theoretical attention in the future was required to resolve. This refined our understanding of decision-making as a process not only within individual cognition but also as a social process with structural constraints, economic rationality, and contingent adaptations.

The results indicated that, from a policy perspective, there was a need for an international student support system that was more differentiated—one that went beyond generic advisement and instead provided guidance more in tune with the multiplicity of strategic orientations. For example, students driven by Face Considerations might have benefited from interventions aimed at recalibrating unrealistic prestige-driven goals, whereas those demonstrating Herd Mentality might have required support in future planning and reflective decision-making. More openly communicated criteria for admission and easier access to admission

information resources would have lessened the extreme reliance on heuristic strategies such as Scoring Utility or Priority to Major Cities.

This study had several limitations. Causality could not be inferred because of the cross-sectional design, and the fact that successful university entrants were sampled introduced survivorship bias. Longitudinal studies were needed to model changes over time in the selection of strategies and how unrealized intentions, failed applications, or compromise experiences changed decision orientations. Comparative studies in host countries or cultural settings could have tested further whether these patterns were culturally contingent by extent and replicable globally.

In summary, this study examined the usual views of international students by explaining a structural–mental model that revealed the active link between personal attitudes, social forces, and system limits. In this way, it helped advance both theory and practice in the fields of learning science, cross-border student mobility, and higher education policy.

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