



IMPACT OF DIRECT PROMOTION ON UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT INTENTIONS: ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROMOTIONAL METHODS IN SRI LANKA'S ODL SYSTEM

M.B. Sakalasooriya*

Regional Educational Services Division, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

This study investigates the effectiveness of direct promotional strategies in shaping students' intentions to enroll in public universities, specifically focusing on rural districts in Sri Lanka. Amidst growing competition and limited awareness of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), institutions like the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) face significant outreach challenges. Guided by the Higher Education Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), the research analyzes how social media, websites, advertisements, peer initiatives, and financial messaging influence university choice.

A quantitative, survey-based design was adopted, collecting data from 239 respondents aged 19 to 24 via random sampling across four rural districts. The research instrument demonstrated strong construct validity and acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.747$). Hierarchical multiple regression was employed to assess the incremental impact of seven promotional constructs on enrollment intentions.

The results indicate that "Awareness by University Students" is the most significant predictor of enrollment intention, followed by social media engagement, university websites, financial motivation, and institutional awareness campaigns. Together, these predictors accounted for 69.4% of the variance ($F = 38.923$, $p < .001$). Diagnostic tests confirmed the model's robustness, showing no issues with multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, or autocorrelation. Interestingly, traditional methods—including parental influence, mass media, and physical banners—did not yield statistically significant effects. These findings offer critical implications for higher education policymakers. Public universities, especially those utilizing ODL modalities, should shift toward targeted, cost-effective strategies that leverage peer advocacy and digital platforms to engage underserved rural populations. By emphasizing evidence-based outreach tailored to rural realities, institutions can better facilitate equitable access to higher education in developing countries.

Keywords: Enrollment Intention, Promotional Strategies, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Rural Higher Education, Higher Education Choice Model

**Corresponding Author: mahindass@gmail.com*



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M.B. Sakalasooriya*

Regional Educational Services Division, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

In a landscape of intensifying global and domestic competition, higher education institutions (HEIs) must adopt strategic promotional approaches to attract prospective students (Marginson, 2024; Musselin, 2018). This is particularly critical for the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), which utilizes open and distance learning (ODL) to expand access to rural areas (Sakalasooriya, 2025). Despite its vital role, OUSL faces significant barriers, including limited infrastructure and public misconceptions regarding the ODL model (Rumble, 2012). While the university employs diverse strategies—such as social media, websites, banners, and peer-led initiatives, their effectiveness in rural districts remains under-examined. This research gap is concerning given the rise of digital platforms and mobile technology, which offer unevenly distributed opportunities for outreach (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Perera, 2024).

Applying Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of predisposition, search, and choice, this study evaluates how various promotional channels influence enrollment intentions. The research objectives include assessing the effectiveness of direct strategies, comparing digital versus physical methods, evaluating the interaction between peer influence and mass messaging, and identifying significant predictors via multiple regression analysis. By investigating which methods most significantly influence students, this research aims to provide actionable insights for equitable, evidence-based recruitment within Sri Lanka's resource-constrained education sector.

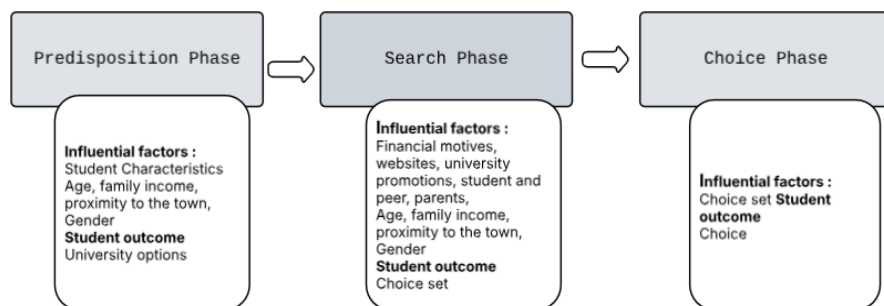


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Three-Phase Model of College Choice.
Source: Hossler & Gallagher (1987).



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, survey-based design using hierarchical multiple regression to evaluate the incremental impact of promotional factors on university enrollment intentions, guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. The target population included students aged 19–24 from four rural Sri Lankan districts: Matale, Monaragala, Badulla, and Ratnapura. Employing stratified random sampling, the study collected 239 valid responses from 300 distributed questionnaires. This 80% response rate exceeds Green's (1991) rule for seven predictors and satisfies Cohen's (1992; see Brooks & Barcikowski, 1994) threshold for statistical power and external validity.

The structured questionnaire, based on Pawar (2024), was translated into Sinhala and Tamil and pilot-tested. It measured seven constructs—social media, websites, peer awareness, mass media, financial motivation, banners, and institutional awareness—using 7-point Likert scales. Validity ($r > 0.30$) and reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.747$) were confirmed. Data analysis verified regression assumptions, including multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$), autocorrelation (Durbin–Watson = 1.715), and homoscedasticity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the Demographic Profile of candidates (N=239). Nearly half of the respondents (47.3%) belonged to the Rs. 27,000–56,000 income bracket, indicating a concentration in the lower-middle income range with limited higher-income representation.

Table 1. Demographic profile of candidates (N=239).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	19–20 years	160	66.9%
	21–24 years	79	33.1%
Gender	Male	53	22.2%
	Female	181	77.8%
Family Income category	<Rs.17,000	21	8.8%
	Rs.17,000 - 27,000	37	15.5%
	Rs.27,000 - 56,000	113	47.3%
	Rs.56,000 -	63	26.4%
	Rs.200,000<	5	2.1%

Validity of the Questionnaire Items

To ensure the construct validity of the instrument, a correlation-based test was conducted (Table 2), confirming that all items appropriately measure students' intention to join a university. Internal consistency was verified with a Cronbach's α of 0.747, exceeding the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978; Ahmad et al., 2024), which deems the instrument reliable for statistical analysis. Diagnostic



tests supported the model's stability: the Normal P-P Plot (Figure 2) indicated a normal distribution, while the scatterplot of standardized residuals (Figure 3) confirmed homoscedasticity. Although a Breusch-Pagan-style secondary regression suggested minor heteroscedasticity for financial motives, websites, and social media, no severe violations were detected. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson value of 1.715 suggests no strong evidence of autocorrelation, and multicollinearity remained non-problematic, with VIF values well below the threshold of 5 (highest VIF = 2.763) and tolerance values above 0.2.

Table 2. Validity of the questionnaire items

Item (Variable)	Rcount (Correlation with Total	Rtable (0.05, df = 199)	Conclusion
Intention to join a university	0.840	0.038	Valid
Financial Motives	0.723	0.038	Valid
Websites	0.759	0.038	Valid
Social media	0.724	0.038	Valid
Mass Media	0.443	0.038	Valid
Awareness of University Students	0.779	0.038	Valid
Cut-outs and Banners	0.423	0.038	Valid
Family and External Influences	0.395	0.038	Valid
Awareness of the University- Open	0.458	0.038	Valid

The hierarchical multiple linear regression (Table 3) evaluated predictors across five models. In Model 1, "Awareness by University Students" was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.718$, $p < 0.001$). As social media (Model 2), websites (Model 3), financial motives (Model 4), and general institutional awareness (Model 5) were

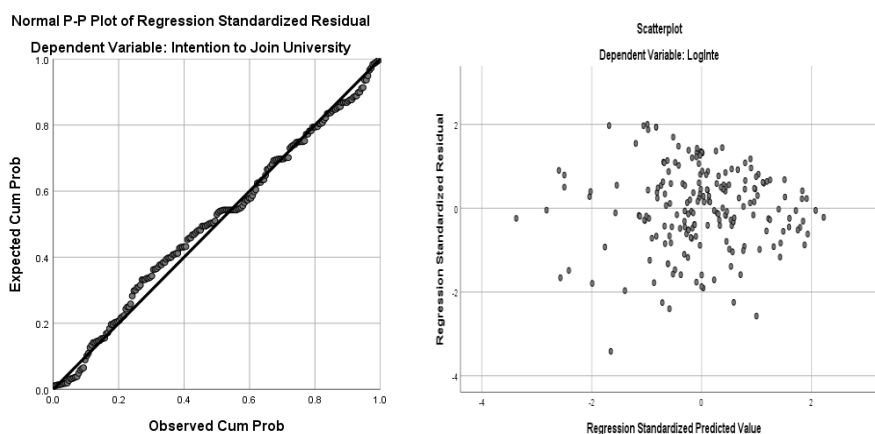


Figure 2. Normal P-P plot of standardized residuals. Figure 3. Scatterplot showing homoscedasticity

slightly as other variables were introduced, suggesting shared variance. Finally, the ANOVA results (Table 4) confirmed the model's overall significance ($F = 38.923$, $p < 0.001$), explaining approximately 69.4% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.694$)



in students' intention to enroll. This high explanatory power justifies the rejection of the null hypothesis and confirms that the combined promotional factors are strong predictors of student choice.

Table 3. Multicollinearity test coefficients

Model	Predictor	B	SE B	Beta	t	p	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	Constant	-0.124	0.053	—	-2.343	0.022	*	—	—
	Awareness by University Students	0.745	0.051	0.718	14.56	< 0.001	***	1	1
2	Constant	-0.107	0.048	—	-2.212	0.03	*	—	—
	Awareness by University Students	0.528	0.058	0.509	9.129	< 0.001	***	0.653	1.53
	Social media	0.372	0.058	0.355	6.372	<	***	0.653	1.53
3	Constant	-0.112	0.047	—	-2.412	0.02	*	—	—
	Awareness by University Students	0.429	0.061	0.414	6.997	< 0.001	***	0.542	1.845
	Social media	0.298	0.064	0.426	6.094	<	***	0.518	1.931
	Websites	0.258	0.066	0.249	3.909	<	***	0.465	2.151
4	Constant	-0.134	0.073	—	-0.239	0.81	—	—	—
	Awareness by University Students	0.273	0.073	0.263	3.756	< 0.001	***	0.376	2.662
	Social media	0.244	0.062	0.233	3.961	<	***	0.513	1.949
	Websites	0.241	0.064	0.233	3.762	<	***	0.463	2.163
	Financial Motives	0.258	0.069	0.231	3.731	<	***	0.458	2.182
5	Constant	-0.099	0.057	—	-1.74	0.084	—	—	—
	Awareness by University Students	0.278	0.071	0.268	3.925	< 0.001	***	0.362	2.761
	Social media	0.23	0.063	0.203	3.822	<	***	0.412	2.428
	Websites	0.236	0.068	0.211	3.487	<	***	0.459	2.177
	Financial Motives	0.236	0.068	0.211	3.487	<	***	0.459	2.177
	Awareness of the University	0.219	0.063	0.146	3.473	<0.001	**	0.946	1.057

Note: $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.001$ ***. Dependent variable: *Intention to Join University*.

Table 4. Model summary

Model	R	R Squared	Adjusted R	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin -	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	0.833	0.694	0.676	0.6058	1.715	Regression	11	14.29	38.92	0.00
						Residual:	18	0.367		
						Total:	20			

^a Predictors: (Constant), A/L Stream, Age Dummy, Cut-outs and Banners, Distance to University, Websites, Family Income, Awareness of the University, Financial Motives, Family and External Influences, Social Media, Awareness by the University Students

This study provides comprehensive empirical insights into the determinants of university enrollment intention. The research instrument demonstrated strong validity and reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.747). Hierarchical regression identified "Awareness by University Students" as the most significant predictor, alongside social media, websites, financial motives, and institutional awareness. The final model was statistically significant ($F = 38.923$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 69.4% of the variance.



These findings align with Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) and Perera (2024), emphasizing the power of peer networks. The dominance of student-led advocacy echoes Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011), while the significance of digital platforms supports Pawar (2024). Practically, public universities can utilize these insights to design cost-effective outreach strategies by prioritizing peer-driven and digital engagement. Although limited by its cross-sectional design and focus on four rural districts, this study offers a robust foundation for strategic recruitment. Future research should explore longitudinal data and broader geographic contexts to enhance generalizability.

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