



PATHWAYS OF INDIAN STUDENTS TRANSITION THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION: WHY DO THEY DIFFER?

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Differential pathways followed by the students deserve more attention due to the development of school education in general and higher education in particular during the last two decades in India. Due to the consistent efforts by the Indian government at the school education level, students arriving at the doors of higher education institutions are no longer homogeneous. As a result, the diversity of students in higher education institutions leads towards diversification of pathways followed by the heterogeneous segments of students. There is a real shortage of studies which have researched the students' differential pathways through higher education in general and specifically in the Indian context from the micro perspective. This study examines the decision-making process and differential trajectories followed by the students during the transition from secondary to higher education. The methodology of the present study involves a mixed-method approach and data was collected from a sample of 900 senior secondary students. A Self-structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used for the collection of data. The findings reveal that the decision-making process of transition through higher education is complex and involves different stakeholders and timelines in the Indian context.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Decision Making, Differential Pathways, Transition

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Indian education sector holds a prominent position globally. In the last two decades, the Indian education sector has progressed massively in terms of enrolment and expansion of infrastructure not only at the school education level but also at the higher education level due to rapid economic growth, rising income and demographic bulge (British Council, 2014; Joshi & Ahir, 2016; Ravi et al., 2019). Indian higher education has experienced massive expansion not only in terms of enrolment but also in the number of institutions. As per the latest *All India Survey Report on Higher Education (2021)*, the gross enrolment ratio has increased to 27.3 as compared to 26.3 per cent in 2018-19 and thus constitutes 38.5 million students. Thus, the exponential growth which is happening in Indian higher education is due to the increased demand for higher education. With the massification of Indian higher education, more and more students opt to enter higher education nowadays, many continue to be left behind, and inequalities persist in access to higher education, in general, and particularly in admission to elite institutions (Sabharwal & Malish, 2017; Tilak & Choudhary, 2019). The most vulnerable and distressed individuals belong to the scheduled caste, females, from the low-income group and rural areas and their population is more dominated who failed to participate at higher education level (Sinha, 2018; Tilak, 2015; Tilak & Choudhary, 2019; Varghese et al., 2019; Wadhwa, 2017). The prevailing data highlights that the difference in the gross enrolment ratio across caste, sector and income quintiles is significant. Specifically, the gross enrolment ratio for Muslim students is only 16.4% which reflects the intensity of inequality which is prevailing across minority groups. So, the statistics on the disparity concerning the gross enrolment ratio at the secondary and higher education levels provide a reasonable basis for the investigation of the issue of the decision-making process and differential pathways followed by the students during the transition through higher education. From the policy context, the proposed study is timely as to realize the target set by the Indian government to achieve the gross enrolment ratio of 50% by 2035 and to make the Indian higher education system more inclusive and equitable requires identifying the factors that lead some people not to enter higher education. Moreover, within the Indian context, there have been limited attempts to study the differential pathways of students' transition to higher education. So, the present research study has examined the differential pathways followed by the students based on their intentions and actual entry.

THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The transition rate from school to higher education has increased in India in the last few years due to targeted policies and schemes launched by the Indian

government at the elementary and secondary education levels. Therefore, an understanding of the differential trajectories followed by the individuals for transition through higher education is very important. Moreover, in the Indian context, limited studies (Azam & Blom, 2004; Basant & Sen, 2010; Tilak, 2015; Tilak & Choudhary, 2019) have researched this domain of knowledge. However, none of these studies have shed light on pertinent questions like how the choices have been made by the students at the transition juncture. Against this backdrop, this research primarily aims to understand the decision-making process and differential pathways followed by students during the transition from secondary to higher education. The article is organized as follows: a literature review on the different domains of decision-making is conducted in the next section. In the third section, the conceptual framework and methodology are discussed. In the fourth section, the results are presented. The discussion of the main findings and implications concludes the article.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To understand the differential pathways of students' transition through higher education, the schematic framework as given in Figure 1 has been used for the literature review. One strand deals with the dynamics of the decision-making process, the second strand deals with the main stakeholders involved in the decision-making process and the third strand deals with the timeline involved in the decision-making process of transition through higher education.

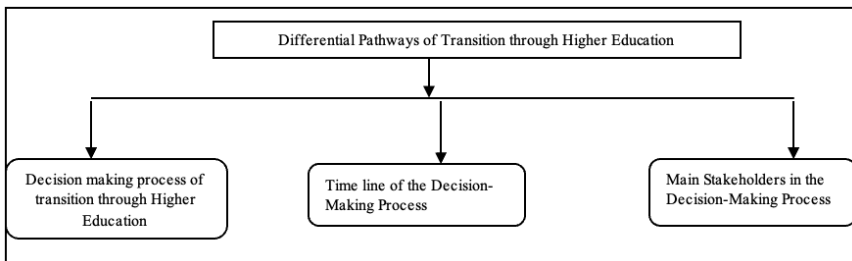


Figure 1. Schematic Framework for Review Of Literature.

Decision- Making Process of Transition through Higher Education

For every Indian student, the transition from school to higher education is very crucial. This decision is a major life decision as it impacts almost every aspect of an individual's future life. The choice at this transitional juncture is not as simple as selecting one alternative over another. Several decisions are involved

in this transition. The decision to transition through higher education is treacherous because this decision must be made by persons in their adolescent age. Moreover, long-term planning is required because the whole world of students is shifting. Transition through higher education involves a process in which a variety of factors become determinants over time (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982). Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) highlighted that decision-making is a complex nexus in which habitus, personal identity, life history, social and cultural contexts, actions and learning are interrelated.

There is no universal experience of transition (Gale & Parker, 2014). The transitional journey from school to higher education may well be a time of anxiety, stress and risk for some students but not necessarily be experienced as a problem for other students. This transitional journey will be different for all the students (Donnell et al., 2016). Transition necessarily need not be a period of crisis for every individual but at the same time may not be any more or less critical than other times keeping in view the given complexities and uncertainties of everyday life. There is a strong need to frame the discussion around transition altogether because the term simply “does not fully capture the fluidity of our learning or our lives” (Quinn, 2010).

The decision-making process of transition through higher education by an individual is not a conventional economic decision but a social decision (Akerlof, 1997). It may reflect to a certain extent the assumptions of rationality of economic models (Wadhwa, 2017). However, considering the decision-making process of transition through higher education as purely an economic decision may not be enough to explain the differentials of decision among students. Other factors may turn the transition through higher education into more of a social decision (Gandara, 2002; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007). Thus, the decision-making dynamics of the transitional journey from school to higher education is a complex process in which a variety of factors become determinants over time.

Active Players Involved in the Decision-Making Process

The decision-making process of transition through higher education may be the independent decision of the individual, the independent decision of parents or it can be the joint decision of both individuals and parents. There exists evidence from the literature that parents play a more important role in the predisposition stage in general and specifically in the Indian context (Cabrera & Nasa, 2000). It can be inferred from the school choice literature that as the child moves up the ladder in the schooling process, he/she gains a more prominent role in the decision-making process. At the stage of higher education, although the individual plays a prominent role, the role of parents can't be ignored. By the age of 16, the direct role of parents in choice has been substantially

reduced (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Findings of the literature where parents indicate that their child has played an important part in the choice process, but has, in effect, chosen from a short list derived jointly by parents and child (Davies, 2005).

The Timeline Involved in the Decision-Making Process

The decision-making process of transition through higher education is not an instant one but is long-term. For many people, the decision to enter higher education is, therefore, effectively taken several years beforehand (Gorard & Smith, 2007). The time dimension involved in this process also varies from individual to individual. Payne (2003) notes differences in the timing of decisions. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) think that decision-making is highly unstable. They found in their longitudinal study that only 45% of the 69 people we were able to track were doing what they had originally chosen in Year 11. A further 5% who had been undecided when first interviewed, had eventually selected one of the options. Some individuals take this decision in the early years and others take it in the later years.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The differential pathways of transition from school to higher education may be viewed as the by-product of the social and cultural capital of the individual. Differences in socioeconomic status lead towards differences in social and cultural capital. Family income, an important aspect of a family's socioeconomic status, directly affects students' transition from school to higher education. Moreover, the interaction of family income with other factors such as the cost of educational materials hampers the academic performance of the students and thus has a direct bearing on the transitional decision of students (Bhorkar, 2023). Most of the students from low socio-economic status occupy a disadvantaged position due to the lack of financial capital which leads towards limiting access to cultural and social capital at the primary and secondary school levels. The economic background provides a direct connection to the cultural and social capital of an individual. Individuals with high cultural capital usually use their capital to make contacts with others who are of the same economic group. This enhanced social capital proves advantageous especially in the case of subsequent generation students to advance their career (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Literature confirms the importance of cultural and social capital in a student's initial aspirations for transition into higher education (Hossler et al., 1999). A higher level of aspiration leads to greater educational achievement. Moreover, the hierarchical, unequal schooling structure in the Indian education system does not provide a level playing field and thus

leads towards unequal educational outcomes for the different segments of the students (Bhorkar, 2023; Wadhwa, 2017). As a result, differential academic ability and aspiration lead towards the differential pathways opted by different segments of students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the differential pathways of Indian students transitioning through higher education. The present research has tried to answer the following research question:

1. What are the differential pathways followed by Indian students for transition through higher education?
2. Who decides entry to higher education?
3. When the decision of entry to higher education has been taken?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The present research falls under the domain of descriptive survey research. The concurrent nested mixed methods procedure was embraced for this study to have a profound understanding of concerns related to the decision-making process of transition through higher education and differential pathways followed by the different students. During interviews, the voices of the students regarding their opinions on investment in higher education and the decision-making process of transition through higher education have been captured. Given the subjective understanding of the value individuals placed on higher education and their variation in choice and attitude to higher education, the study gave greater importance to the meaning of participants' lived experiences, social interactions, and processes through which attitudes and the exercise of higher education decisions were constructed.

SELECTION OF LOCATION FOR DATA COLLECTION

The geographical setting of the study was selected based on some of the development indicators. Data was collected from the Fazilka district of the Punjab region in Northern India. This district falls under the Malwa region of Punjab. The district sharing a border with Pakistan has traditionally been devoid of facilities in general and specifically in the context of education. The area of the study covers five villages from the Fazilka district for the collection of the sample.

SAMPLE FOR THE STUDY

The stratified random technique was used for the collection of the sample. Strata were made by dividing the sample into rural and urban strata. A total of ten schools which constitute five schools from rural areas and five from urban areas had been taken. Thus, the total sample size was 930 students. Out of 930 senior secondary students, 332 students have been taken from five schools located in rural areas and 598 students from five schools located in urban areas.

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A self-constructed questionnaire and semi-structured interviews have been used as the tools for data collection. The first questionnaire focused on understanding the decision-making process of transition through higher education specifically active stakeholders and the timeline involved in the decision-making process along with all the socio-economic indicators. The questionnaire was divided into different sections. The first section deals with the student profile about the educational background of the student i.e. present education status and their future educational plans. The second section gathered information regarding the family profile i.e., socio-economic background of the student i.e. parents' qualification, parents' occupation, income etc. to find the relevance of socio-economic determinants in building the aspirations of the students. The third section deals with questions related to the educational decisions of senior secondary students and the factors influencing such decisions. The second questionnaire focused on understanding the factors determining actual entry. The second questionnaire focused on understanding the differential trajectories followed by the students during the realization stage. The questionnaire has been validated by considering the opinion of the experts and the reliability coefficient is 0.86. Detailed semi-structured interviews of students were used to understand the differential pathways of the individuals' transition through higher education.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Data has been collected twice in the present research. In the first phase, senior secondary students from their schools were approached to learn about their plans and their decision-making process of transition through higher education. During the second phase, the same set of students were traced after a gap of six months to know who followed which pathway at the transitional juncture and why.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Descriptive statistics revealed that the decision-making process of transition through higher education involved two stages. The decision to enter (planning) was the first stage and actual entry (realization) was the second stage as highlighted in Figure 2. Depending on the response of the students, three categories were identified at stage I. Figure 2 reflects that 88 per cent of the students planned to go for higher education right after completing their higher secondary and falls under category one. Category two comprises 2.5 per cent of the students who had planned not to enter higher education. 9.5 per cent of the students were indecisive regarding their entry into higher education and thus formulated the third category. At stage II, four categories of students have been identified based on the responses of students. The first category comprises 65.4 per cent of the students who planned and entered higher education. 22.8 per cent of the students had planned in senior secondary but didn't actualize their plan which falls under category two. Category three comprises 10.1 per cent of the students with no plan in 12th grade yet they entered higher education. 1.7 per cent of the students didn't plan in the 12th grade and thus did not enter higher education falls under the fourth category.

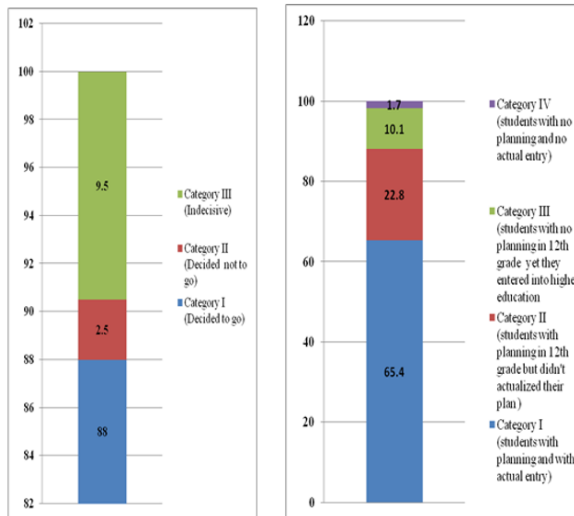


Figure 2. Differential Decisions Of Transition Through Higher Education.

Stage I: Decision to Enter (Planning) and Stage II: Actual Entry (Realization)

Different categories of students were analysed with the help of semi-structured interviews to get a comprehensive understanding of the differential pathways of transition through higher education. Differential characteristics have been identified in the different segments of the students and the influential factors which the students mentioned in their semi-structured interviews have been discussed below. Some students could be placed in different groups due to some overlapping. However, within each group, generally, the motives of the students for transition through higher education were similar.

1. "I Knew That the Entry into Higher Education Was the Subsequent Step."

Students who felt that the transition to higher education was the usual next step after finishing higher secondary saw it as an anticipated, predictable and linear next step. These students did not think about the trajectory of not opting for higher education. The trajectory which leads towards higher education was rather a non-decision in their life, as one of the participants mentioned:

Simran: Transition from school to higher education was the subsequent step. It doesn't involve any conscious decision-making.

Gurpreet: Not going for higher education was not there in my case. But the real decision was where to go and which subjects to study.

Sonia: During my school days, it was clear that I would pursue higher studies but the clarity regarding the subjects was not there.

The absence of decisions regarding transition through higher education was present in the narratives of the students who fall under the first cluster. During the interviews, these students voiced their opinions about how they chose a particular stream/subject or institution where real decision-making comes in. The students in this cluster entered higher education because of embryonic expectations from their families or schools. The transition from school to higher education is part of a "normal biography" for these students (Bois-Reymond, 1998; Wadhwa, 2017). Students who follow the trajectory of the normal transition pathway of higher education are grouped into three clusters based on their differential motivations and influential factors. These are (I) the Pathway of higher education: as a clear and natural step, (II) the Pathway of higher education: as something necessary to have, and (III) the Pathway of higher education: due to career choice. Narratives of students who fall under each of these groups have been discussed below in detail to understand the differential pathways followed by the individuals across the different socio-economic groups.

No reasons were mentioned for opting for the pathway for higher education, and no explicit influence could be detected. But the influence of her elder sister is very clear in the narratives of Meenu, whom she would be following.

Meenu: My elder sister is pursuing further studies at Punjabi University, and I always wanted to be there because I heard a lot from her, and I always wanted to be where she is.

Shonal: Both parents are government employees. I have two elder brothers and I am the younger one. One of my brothers is pursuing engineering and the other one is pursuing his degree in agricultural sciences. I have always looked towards my brothers, and they have always guided me.

Kavita: I belong to an educated family. My father is a doctor, and my mother is a teacher. Since childhood, it was embedded in my mind that I would pursue higher studies at a good institution.

The narratives of Shonal and Kavita explicitly reveal the significant role played by their family during this transition process and depict how higher education is part and parcel of the 'normal biography' of these students. The familiarity with the field of higher education because of the rich habitus and predominant social and cultural capital mark makes their transitional journey smooth. The decision-making process of transition from school to higher education for these students is rational, but at the same time, it is not. These middle-class students 'move in their world as a fish in water' and 'need not engage in the rational computation to reach the goals that best suit their interests' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 108).

The influences of school and parents have been highlighted in the whole journey of transition into higher education by the students in this cluster. But in contrast to the above two clusters, these students had a heightened sense of agency. These students had opted for the pathway for higher education to achieve what they planned.

Rakesh: I wanted a law degree.

Sumesh: I always wanted to become a doctor from an early age...

Manish: I never questioned myself...regarding pursuing higher studies.

The time perspectives concerning the decision-making process also vary among students across clusters. For the first two clusters, the decision was embedded in the familial or school context whereas, for the last cluster, the decision was firmly connected to the future by recalling the past. Table 1 depicts the characteristics of students who follow the 'Normal Transition Pathway' through higher education.

The students who follow the trajectory of normal transition pathways

Table 1

Characteristics of Students Who Follow the ‘Normal Transition’ Pathway.

NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY	
NORMAL / NATURAL TRANSITION PATHWAY	The decision to go for higher education is taken for granted
	Embedded choosers
	Thrusting Choosers
	The choice is part of a cultural script, a ‘normal biography’
	Finance is not an issue
	Extensive support (cultural and social capital)
	The choice is based on extensive and diverse sources of information
	The choice is specialist/detailed
	A diverse array of variables is deployed
	Choosing is long-term and often relates to vivid
	Embedded in a ‘deep grammar of tradition of higher education aspiration’ which makes higher education normal and necessary
	Parents as ‘strong framers’ and active participants
Moving away from home is seen by many as part of the experience of higher education	

belonging to the middle and higher ends of socioeconomic origin have a good stock of social and cultural capital and, in general, prefer to opt for higher education (McDonough, 1997). Such students are subject to subtle and “diffuse incitements” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to further study. Students who fall under this group were from private English medium schools, and they never thought of not opting for higher education.

2. “I Decided To Enter Into Higher Education Because...”

The students under this cluster made a conscious decision to transition from school to higher education and exhibited characteristics like the ‘choice biographies’ (Bois-Reymond, 1998). Bois-Reymond (1998) regarded the ‘choice

biographies' as marked by the "tension between option/freedom and legitimation /coercion". Students in their narratives highlight the multiple and divergent motives of choosing the trajectory of higher education along with the factors that influenced their decisions. These students carefully analysed their decision on available choices and chose their pathway. A higher level of agency has been exhibited in the narratives of the students under this cluster.

Ramesh: ...both my parents do not have the experience of higher education... so they wanted me to work in the village on our shop...in this situation, I cannot afford to go for higher education... not to do one because my mother and my father also did not. I want to go to the city and pursue my higher education over there and want to work there. I don't even want to hear about working and staying in the village for my whole life.

Shyam: I am pursuing higher education because this is what I wanted. I want to "do something more, and to do something higher education is needed."

Sachin: My father is working as a farmer and my mother is a homemaker. In my family, no one has ever gone to college or university. But they want me to go to college. They are ready to support me in my journey of life.

Sunaina: Parental pressure is the most significant factor which drives me to go for higher education. My mother strongly values higher education and encouraged me to go for higher education. She always stated, "I wanted to go to college when I was a high school student, but I was unable to attend college because I grew up in a poor family. I want you to go to college and want you to expand your horizons.

Ramesh had carefully chosen for a different pathway in contrast to what his parents opted. He considered the trajectory of higher education as a crucial step to secure a better future. Moreover, he wanted to go to a different place and not planning to come back to his village, so success is highly place-dependent in his context. Place perceptions within this cluster of students were divergent. The home appeared as a place they wanted to escape from, while school was the place where they gained strength and support to opt for the higher education route. They connected their past and future. The narratives reveal that these students considered higher education as an essential milestone towards their journey for a better future. Table 2 depicts the characteristics of students who follow the 'Choice Transition Pathway' through higher education.

The second category consisted of the group of students who failed to stick to their planning and thus failed to make a successful transition from school to higher education. These students fall under the heading of 'negative shifters'. A lot of external factors either in the form of financial constraints or low academic achievement acted as roadblocks and thus compelled these individuals to drop their original plans.

Table 2**Characteristics of Students Who Follow the ‘Choice Transition Pathway’.**

	CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY	The decision to go for higher education involves a deliberate act
	Includes both embedded and Contingent choosers
	Trusting choosers
	The choice is part of the ‘choice biography’
	Finance is a concern
	Minimal support (social capital) is used
	The choice is based on extensive and diverse sources of information
	A diverse array of variables is deployed
	Choice is general
	Choosing is long-term and often relates to vivid Rational choices

Chandini: I have a large family. My father is an agricultural labourer, and my mother is a housewife. I have two elder sisters. My father is worried about their marriage, so they want me to help him financially rather than pursue higher studies.

The roadblocks either in the form of structural constraints or financial constraints discouraged their individuals from treading on the path of higher education. This category predominantly constitutes first-generation learners. The support which these students receive in the form of cultural and social capital is little or none. Sometimes the parents are supportive, but they fail to help their children in their transition journey because of a lack of experience and knowledge. One other major roadblock identified from the narratives is the low ability of the students. These students have been identified in the literature as “unstable choosers” who were easily swayed (Macrae et al., 1996).

The third category consisted of the group of students who failed to stick to their plans of not going to higher education but made a successful transition from school to higher education. These students fall under the heading of ‘positive shifters’. The transition from secondary into higher education of these students is due to a happenstance event. Macrae et al. (1996) called them ‘choice avoiders’ who tend to delay the choice process and were low achievers. For them, the choice was threatening, highlighting their marginalised status, and

they observed it more comfortable to inhabit a position of vagueness, indecisiveness, and drift.

Sahildeep: I belong to a family with no higher education experience, but my parents wanted me to go for higher education. Apart from my family background, my friends and teachers are guiding me towards the higher education route. I am worried about the grades in the senior secondary examination which are necessary to pursue higher education. I will go for higher education once I achieve the desired grades. My teachers have also motivated me to pursue higher studies.

Hasanpreet: My family's financial situation is not good, so my parents are not able to finance my higher studies. If I receive a scholarship from any of the institutions, then I shall pursue my studies as my goal is to become independent and to support my family. I can do this only when I have a degree in higher education. Even I talked with my uncle, and he promised me to support in my studies. So, I am very hopeful now. I shall take the admission in the college near to my home.

Table 3 depicts the characteristics of students who follow the 'Happenstance Transition Pathway' through higher education.

Table 3

Characteristics of Students who Follow the 'Happenstance Transition Pathway'.

HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY	
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY	The decision to go for higher education involves a happenstance event
	Contingent choosers- First-time choosers with no family history of higher education
	Trying choosers
	Finance is a key concern and constraint
	The choice used minimal information
	The choice is distant or 'unreal'
	Few variables are called up
	The choice is general/abstract
	Minimal support (social capital) is used
	Choosing is short-term and weakly linked
	Parents as 'onlookers' or 'weak framers'
	Avoid risky decision
Geographic limitation is present in decision-making	

The role played by significant others is determining their pathway. The aspirations of these students warmed up in the transition period and the

role played by the teachers is quite significant as highlighted in the literature (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). This category named '**negatively focused**' constitutes those students who have no initial intention to follow the transitional journey from school to higher education and thus follow their planned pathway. This category is primarily first-generation students. Narratives of the students highlight that structural and financial constraints played an important role in the student's decision-making at the transitional juncture of school to higher education level.

Active Players Involved in the Decision-Making Process

Figure 3 highlights that 63.4 per cent of the students themselves decided to enter higher education. 2.1 per cent of the students stated that their parents had decided on their entry to higher education. The decision to enter higher education was the joint effort of both student and parent and constituted 34.5 per cent.

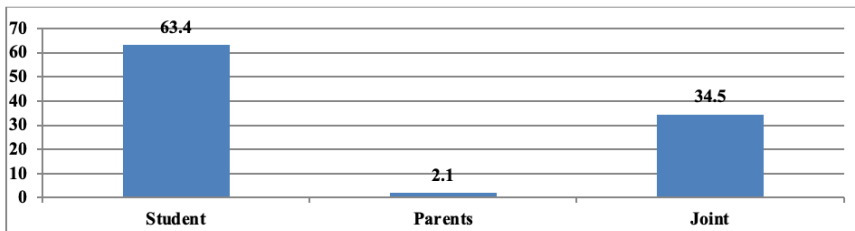


Figure 3. Active Players Involved in the Decision-Making Process.

Although expected, this statistic represents a significant swing of the pendulum of choice towards the individual pupil. Parents also play a significant role in the children's decision of entry to higher education and literature supports the finding of the present study (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Ceja, 2006; Chapman, 1981).

The Timeline Involved in the Decision-Making Process

The descriptive analysis reveals quite an interesting scenario regarding when a student decides against going into higher education. Figure 4 highlights that 8.8 per cent of the students had decided to enter higher education at the elementary level or before. 26.7 per cent of the students decided to go for higher education at the lower secondary level. At the senior secondary level, 64.5 per cent of the students decided to enter higher education. An analysis within, the senior secondary level reveals that 60.2 per cent of the students

decided during the first year and 39.7 per cent of the students decided during the second year for entry into higher education.

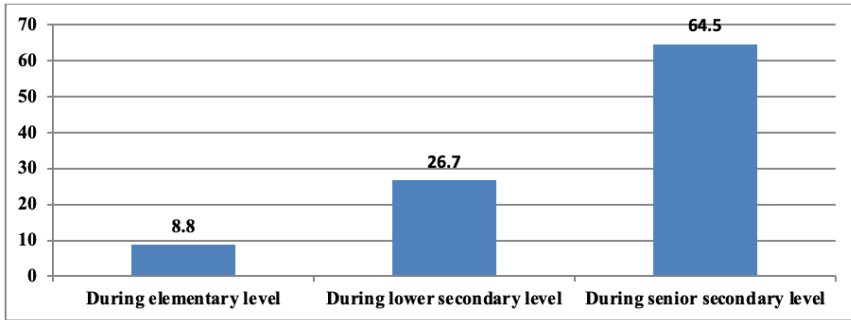


Figure 4. Timeline of the Decision-Making Process.

The cross-tabulation of the timeline of the decision and previous academic achievement highlighted that most of the low and medium achievers decided to go for higher education at the senior secondary level in contrast to high achievers who decided at the earlier stages. Moreover, the cross-tabulation of the timeline of the decision-making and educational level of the father highlights that the education of the parents specifically the father's education played a significant role in the decision-making process of student transitional juncture.

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study highlight that the decision-making process of transition through higher education is complex and involves different stakeholders and timelines in the Indian context. The three differential pathways of transition through higher education have been identified and highlighted the characteristics associated with each trajectory group. Four different categories of students were identified while analysing the differential pathways of transition through higher education: Positively Focused, Positive Shifters, Negative Shifters and Negatively Focused. Table 4 highlights the pathways followed by the different segments of students during the transition through higher education along with the timeline and the main stakeholders involved during this transitional juncture.

Under the positively focused category, two routes could be identified. For the first set of students, transition through higher education is often linked to the career trajectories and taking admission into those streams/courses which opens the door for prestigious professions or highly paid commercial occu-

Table 4**Differential Pathways of Transition Through Higher Education.**

Alias	Differential Pathway	Decision Maker	Timeline of the Decision
Meenu			
Shonal Kavita Rakesh Manish Sumesh	Normal (Positively Focussed)	Joint Decision	During Elementary Level
Sachin Sunaina Ramesh Shyam	Choice (Positively Focussed)	Joint Decision	During Elementary Level
Sahildeep	Happenstance (Positive Shifters)	Individual	During Senior Secondary Level

pations. Another set of students comes under the umbrella of the 'Positively Focused' category and follow the choice transition pathway through higher education and displayed characteristics like the 'choice biographies' identified by Bois-Reymond (1998). The students in this group described the multiple, sometimes divergent, motives and factors that influenced their decisions, but ultimately highlighted that it was a choice, usually their choice to study further. These students did not refer to transition through higher education as a straightforward step, like the students presented in the previous part, but rather mentioned that they reflected on their options and decided to enter higher education, consequently displaying higher levels of agency than the previous group. Some of the students ended up with higher education due to a happenstance event, not because it was a natural step and neither because they opted to go and be labelled as 'Positive Shifters' in the present study. This category constitutes first-generation students primarily. These students have been identified as 'contingent choosers'. Spatial horizons of action are limited for these students, partly for reasons of cost and partly because of structural constraints.

Another pertinent finding is how students reconstruct their involvement in the decision-making process of transition through higher education. Senior secondary students, even though they admitted being influenced by their parental background, they also tended to highlight their involvement more in shaping their lives especially who are the first in their family to choose the pathway of higher education. Students under the 'Shifters' category which comes predominantly from low socio-economic status decided to enter higher education by themselves. The findings of the present study are well supported by literature which suggests that amongst working-class families the decision is often delegated much more to the children themselves (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Reay, 1998). In Contrast, in the case of the 'Positively Focused', category the decision-making process of transition through higher education was the joint decision of the student and the parents. Concerning the timeline involved in the decision-making process, the 'Positively Focused' category of students decided to go for higher education during the early stages of life, i.e. at the elementary and lower secondary levels. Students who fall under the 'Shifters' category decided to opt for the pathway of higher education at the later stages, i.e. at the senior secondary level.

Some of the important implications have emerged that should be considered within the context of the current study's limitations. The sample in the present study was limited to the Fazilka district of the Punjab region in Northern India. Despite this limitation, implications for the Indian government and institutional leaders are quite pertinent. First, the conceptualization of access needs to be broadened by considering the decision-making process. By focusing on the enrolment in higher education as the outcome variable, we may be missing an important step in this process. A lot of factors such as socio-economic status, academic preparation, family expectations, parental encouragement and peer influence play a significant role in the transitional journey from school to higher education. It is important to understand the long-term vulnerability as well as turning points and disruptions of the segment of students which fall under the shifters category through their social context and the competing demands on them. Second, the existing homogenous approach is not going to work to deal with the heterogeneous segment of students. The diversity of students that is increasing in higher education institutions is leading towards the diversification of pathways followed by the heterogeneous segments of students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Hass & Hadjar, 2020; Weiss & Roska, 2016). The need of the hour is that more knowledge about their differential trajectories is required if the Indian government want to achieve the goals and targets set in the National Education Policy 2020.

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