

Determining Selection Criteria for Hospitality and Tourism Programs in Higher Education in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

Given the vital role of the tourism industry in Thailand's economy, many higher education institutions now offer hospitality and tourism (H&T) programs. However, a steady decline in the number of students entering higher education has increased competition within the sector. This study identifies the factors that influence students' decisions when selecting H&T programs. Focusing on Southern Thailand, 29 selection factors were examined through a survey of 539 grade 12 students. Factor analysis revealed three key dimensions: academic, non-academic, and career prospects. Academic factors significantly influenced program choice in most H&T fields, with the exception for airline programs, while non-academic factors strongly influenced all program choices. Career prospects, however, primarily influenced the selection of wellness programs. This study makes a theoretically contribution by adding new factors to existing dimensions and by highlighting regional differences between students from the South and those from other regions. In addition, the findings provide valuable practical implications for strategies and development to attract students to H&T programs.

Keywords: Decision-making; Program Selection; Hospitality and Tourism Program; Higher Education; Southern Thailand

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การกำหนดเกณฑ์การเลือกหลักสูตรการบริการและการท่องเที่ยว ในระดับอุดมศึกษาในภาคใต้ของประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

เนื่องจากอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยวมีบทบาทที่สำคัญต่อเศรษฐกิจของประเทศไทย ทำให้สถาบันอุดมศึกษาจำนวนมากเปิดหลักสูตรด้านการบริการและการท่องเที่ยวขึ้นเป็นจำนวนมาก อย่างไรก็ตาม การลดลงของจำนวนนักศึกษาที่เข้าสู่ภาคการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาอย่างต่อเนื่อง เพิ่มความเข้มข้นในการแข่งขันต่อสถาบันการศึกษา ดังนั้น งานศึกษานี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อหาปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อการตัดสินใจของนักศึกษาในการเลือกศึกษาต่อหลักสูตร กระบวนการและภาระท่องเที่ยว โดยมุ่งเน้นที่ภาคใต้ของประเทศไทย พิจารณาปัจจัยการเลือก 29 ปัจจัย ผ่านการสำรวจนักเรียนชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 6 จำนวน 539 คน จากการวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบสามารถระบุปัจจัยได้ 3 กลุ่ม ได้แก่ ปัจจัยทางวิชาการ ปัจจัยที่ไม่ใช่วิชาการ และปัจจัยด้านโอกาสทางอาชีพ ปัจจัยทางวิชาการมีอิทธิพลอย่างมากต่อการเลือกหลักสูตร ยกเว้นหลักสูตรด้านการบิน ขณะที่ปัจจัยที่ไม่ใช่วิชาการมีผลกระทบต่อการเลือกทุกหลักสูตร ส่วนปัจจัยด้านโอกาสทางอาชีพส่งผลต่อการตัดสินใจเฉพาะต่อการเลือกหลักสูตรด้านส่งเสริมสุขภาพ เท่านั้น การศึกษานี้ชี้ว่ายังส่งเสริมด้านทฤษฎีทางวิชาการโดยการขยายกลุ่มปัจจัยด้วยการบูรณาการปัจจัยย่อยและชี้ให้เห็นถึงความแตกต่างระหว่างนักเรียนในภาคใต้กับภูมิภาคอื่น ๆ นอกจากนี้ ผลการวิจัยยังเสนอการประยุกต์ใช้จริงในแง่ของกลยุทธ์และการพัฒนา เพื่อดึงดูดนักเรียนให้เข้าศึกษาในหลักสูตรด้านการบริการและการท่องเที่ยว

คำสำคัญ: การตัดสินใจ; การเลือกหลักสูตร; หลักสูตรการบริการและการท่องเที่ยว; การศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษา;
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Introduction

In today's competitive higher education environment, universities are adopting proactive, business-like strategies to attract prospective students, focusing on marketing efforts aimed at high school students (Jarvis, 2000). Thailand is globally renowned for its diverse tourist attractions, including mountain villages, historical sites, national parks, and beaches (Drillinger, 2024), which contribute significantly to its economy. As tourism plays a key role in the national economic development (Senbeto & Hon, 2020), the industry currently accounts for about 20% of the country's GDP, with projections to rise to 30% by 2030 (Theparat, 2019). This growth has led to an increase in universities offering hospitality and tourism (H&T) programs, creating decision-making challenges for students. Currently, Thailand offers at more than 53 institutions higher education programs in hospitality and tourism, including public and private universities, as well as colleges, with over 150 H&T programs available (Admission Premium, 2017; Office of the Permanent Secretary, MHESI, 2024). However, the increase in programs contrasts the decline in the number of students, as the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (2020) noted. A continuous decline in the number of students pursuing higher education is due to a decreasing birth rate. As a result, universities need to adjust their strategies to attract students, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors, by identifying key factors that influence students' decision-making while selecting H&T programs.

Recent research in Thailand has focused on political science (Norkaew, 2018; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024), health science (Singweratham & Nawsuwan, 2021), and communication arts (Glinsukon, 2020), but not on tourism related programs. This creates a knowledge gap, as tourism programs differ from other fields due to their interdisciplinary nature. Tourism programs combine business fundamentals with cultural and environmental studies, while emphasizing on service management (Airey & Tribe, 2005). Additionally, tourism education emphasizes real-world engagement and hands-on training (Dredge et al., 2012), unlike more theory based programs.

Southern Thailand is renowned for its international tourist destinations, which contributed 42.38% to the non-capital city tourism revenue during the post-COVID-19 recovery (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023). This highlights the opportunity for effective marketing strategies to attract students to tourism programs in this region. Recent research in Thailand has mainly focused on other regions, including the north (Norkaew, 2018), northeast (Budda & Boongthong, 2021; Khantaku et al., 2020; Srisontisuk et al., 2020), east (Kiniman et al., 2021; Thuengnaitham et al., 2023), and Bangkok (Singweratham & Nawsuwan, 2021; Thongnoppakun et al., 2022).

The absence of clear decision-making factors for high school students while selecting tourism programs, particularly in the southern region, remains a challenge for universities.

Research Objectives

This research aims to identify the factors influencing students' decision making while selecting hospitality and tourism programs, and through this supporting higher education institutions in developing effective marketing strategies.

Literature Review

Multiple-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM)

Decision-making is a process of choosing the optimal action based on analyzing available information, and resulting in decisive actions (Patton, 2000). Decision-making in higher education involves evaluating options and making a choice from various competitive study programs. This highlights the value of multi-criteria decision making, which provides guidelines for students while selecting their best educational path (Belton & Stewart, 2002). Recent studies have focused on analyzing the decision-making process to provide unique and tailored strategies. Nanath et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive literature review and categorized key determinants into three domains: Academic, Non-Academic, and Career prospects.

Academic factors affecting university choices

University and faculty rankings have become vital for educational institutions, with various organizations establishing ranking systems (Liu, 2021). The reputation of educational institutions significantly influences students' decision-making (Koenings et al., 2020), though perceptions may have shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nanath et al., 2022). Program quality is vital, however, further factors influencing students' choices at European HEIs, like English-taught programs, scholarships, facilities, and accreditations (Skvarciany et al., 2020). High school students prioritize academic quality, program availability, and job prospects when selecting institutions (Busta, 2018).

In Thailand multiple studies indicated that university ranking and quality, program quality, and lecturer qualifications are common selection criteria for students across all regions (Budda & Boongthong, 2021; Glinsukon, 2020; Khantaku et al., 2020; Kiniman et al., 2021; Norkaew, 2018; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024; Srisontisuk et al., 2020; Thianngoen et al., 2022; Thongnoppakun et al., 2022; Thuengnaitham et al., 2023). Scholarship availability is one factor for Thai students when considering a program (Phunturad et al., 2023; Singweratham & Nawsuwan, 2021).

Non-academic factors affecting university choices

Students also consider financial factors, including tuition fees and living expenses, when making decisions about educational programs. Research shows a varying impact of these costs on university choices (Nicholls, 2018), with possible debt as one main factor (Callender & Jackson, 2008). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of education has shown various effects on students' decisions (Nanath et al., 2022). Infrastructure and extracurricular activities also influence student's decisions. Le et al. (2019) found that students often seek information about student life when considering universities. Environmental factors, such as campus size and location, also play a crucial role, with urban campuses generally preferred over rural ones (Bailey et al., 2018).

Additionally, several studies in Thailand indicated that factors such as university environments, social life, and education costs influence students' decision-making (Glinsukon, 2020; Khantaku et al., 2020; Kiniman et al., 2021; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024; Singweratham & Nawsuwan, 2021; Thongnoppakun et al., 2022; Thuengnaitham et al., 2023).

Career prospects factors affecting university choices

As students align higher education with their future career paths, post-graduation job prospects significantly impact university selection (Busta, 2018), with factors like employment accessibility and potential earnings linked to job opportunities and availabilities in specific industries (Clarke, 2007). Key program-acquired skills also impact students' decisions (Adefulu et al., 2020). In addition, Busta, (2018) found that recommendations from family and friends play a significant role in university selection of students because family members share their career experiences with realistic informations. Both of them, family and friends can create networking opportunities and through that improving chances of getting a job.

In Thailand, career factors such as job position, job security, and compensation significantly influence students' decision-making processes (Glinsukon, 2020; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024; Phunturad et al., 2023; Thianngoen et al., 2022). Social acceptance and family opinions also have an effect on students' choices regarding job selection after graduation, which relates to the study program (Norkaew, 2018; Singweratham & Nawsuwan, 2021; Thuengnaitham et al., 2023).

Conceptual framework

Based on the literature review, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study to determine the decision factors influencing high school students while choosing a H&T program at higher education institutions. The main hypotheses are outlined below, each with sub-hypotheses for specific programs labeled from (a) to (g) as shown in Figure 1.

H1: Academic factors affect the decision-making of selecting H&T programs
 H2: Non-academic factors affects the decision-making of selecting H&T programs
 H3: The career prospect affects the decision-making of selecting H&T programs

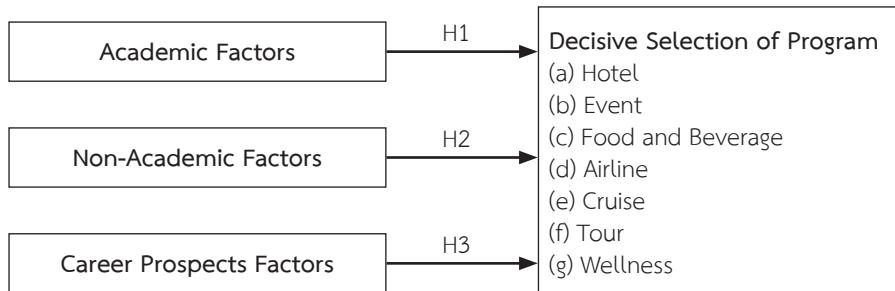


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach with a questionnaire survey asking Grade 12 students in Southern Thailand. The population included 26,747 Grade 12 students who took the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) in 2022, which is required for admission to public universities in Thailand (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2023). By choosing students from prominent provinces based on O-NET scores and student population size, the sampling frame included students from following five provinces: Phuket, Trang, Surat Thani, Nakorn Si Thammarat and Songkhla, totaling 10,205 students as shown in Table 1. Following Saunders et al. (2019) for sample size estimation, a sample of 370 respondents was chosen, ensuring a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. To enhance response rates and study coverage, random sampling was used, with questionnaires distributed across provincial schools in five provinces.

Table 1. Average O-NET scores for prominent provinces based on sampling frame criteria

Province	Students	Average O-NET Scores
Trang	1,909	33.10
Phuket	378	31.61
Surat Thani	1,952	31.01
Nakorn Si Thammarat	3,063	30.60
Songkhla	2,903	29.48
Total	10,205	

Source: Adopted from National Institute of Educational Testing Service (n.d.)

Measurement scale

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: (1) respondent demographics, (2) decision factors, covering 29 items across academic, non-academic, and career prospect categories, and (3) willingness to study in seven H&T programs: hotel, event, food and beverage, airline, cruise, tour, and wellness. Except for demographics, all items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Prior to data collection, three experts validated the questionnaire using the index of item objective congruence (IOC), and a pretest with 45 Grade 12 students was carried out to confirm accuracy and clarity, resulting in minor language adjustments based on their feedback.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the revised questionnaire was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 10 June 2022. The approval number is PSU IRB 2022-ST-FHT004 (Internal).

Research Results

Data were collected from June to October 2023 and a total of 561 questionnaires were collected, with 22 incomplete responses excluded, resulting in a final sample of 539 respondents: 27% from Trang, 25% from Songkhla, 20% from Surat Thani, 15% from Nakorn Si Thammarat, and 13% from Phuket. Academic program distribution was 41% Sci-Math, 25% Art-Math, 20% Art-Language, 6% English Program, and 8% others.

Factors of Selecting H&T Programs in Higher Education

The dataset was imported into a statistical software for analysis using factor analysis and linear regression. Reliability testing on the 29 decision factors yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.966, surpassing the 0.7 reliability threshold (Saunders et al., 2019). For each factor the Cronbach's alpha value was above 0.7, by this confirming reliability. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was then applied to identify underlying dimensions. During the analysis, six items showed cross-loading and were excluded from further analysis:

1. "Recognition in the H&T industry"
2. "Scholarships for international exchange programs"
3. "Study alongside international student peers in classrooms"
4. "A significant proportion of international lecturers"
5. "The H&T industry shows a positive trend of expansion"
6. "Occupations in the H&T industry are stable"

Following the item removal, a second-factor analysis was performed, retaining factors with eigenvalues of 1.0 or higher (Pallant, 2016). A factor loading cut-off point of

0.45 (Absolute Value) was used, consistent with criteria from previous studies (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019).

The analysis results showed that the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.956, indicating a sufficient sampling adequacy within the acceptable range of 0 to 1, and surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.6. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(231)=8367.778$, $p<0.001$), supporting the suitability of the data for factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). A factor analysis of 23 decision factors related to program selection in higher education identified three dimensions, Academic, Non-academic, and Career Prospect factors, based on Nanath et al. (2022). This explained 64.21% of the total variance, as detailed in Table 2. The average score of items within each dimension was calculated for further analysis to determine factors influencing the selection of H&T programs in higher education.

Table 2. Factor analysis of selecting the H&T program in higher education

Factor	Loading	Eigen Value	% Variance explained	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1 – Academic factors		11.914	51.80	0.794
University Reputation	0.845			
Faculty reputation	0.825			
Location as a significant tourist destination	0.547			
Cost of living during studies	0.471			
Tuition fees	0.475			
Factor 2 – Non-academic factors		1.723	7.492	0.828
International program with English-language instruction	0.640			
BBA in H&T Management	0.821			
Qualifications of lecturers specializing in H&T management	0.798			
Factor 3 – Career prospect factors		1.132	4.920	0.956
Scholarship opportunities	0.521			
Internship opportunities in well-established businesses	0.606			
State-of-the-art laboratories available	0.694			
Practical-focused teaching and learning	0.712			
Opportunities to work part-time while studying	0.700			
Diverse job positions are available	0.747			
Guarantee job positions after graduation	0.826			
Immediate employment upon graduation	0.827			
Ability to start a personal business	0.770			
Not necessary to work in the H&T industry	0.619			
Opportunities for high-remuneration job	0.828			
Various benefits from works	0.763			
Opportunities for appropriate career advancement	0.814			
Opportunities for international works	0.727			
Total		64.212	0.954	

Hypothesis testing

The hypotheses were tested using linear regression to assess the impact of three factors on students' decisive selection of each of the seven H&T programs. The results showed that the explanatory power of the three factors across the seven H&T programs

ranged from 0.132 to 0.200, indicating a moderate level of variance (Cohen, 1988). To test the hypotheses, for each program a linear regression of the three factors was performed and the outcomes were presented in Table 3.

Excluding the airline program, the academic factor significantly influences all programs: hotel ($\beta=0.284$, $p<0.05$), event ($\beta=0.430$, $p<0.001$), food and beverage ($\beta=0.337$, $p<0.05$), cruise ($\bar{\chi}=0.228$, $p<0.05$), tour ($\beta=0.268$, $p<0.05$), and wellness ($\beta=0.545$, $p<0.001$). Therefore, six sub-hypotheses of H1 (H1a, H1b, H1c, H1e, H1f, H1g) were supported, indicating that the academic factors influence decision-making for H&T programs, except for the airline program.

In addition, the non-academic factors significantly influence all programs: hotel ($\beta=0.433$, $p<0.001$), event ($\beta=0.281$, $p<0.001$), food and beverage ($\beta=0.249$, $p<0.05$), airline ($\beta=0.436$, $p<0.001$), cruise ($\beta=0.396$, $p<0.001$), tour ($\beta=0.407$, $p<0.001$), and wellness ($\beta=0.408$, $p<0.001$). Thus, all sub-hypotheses of H2 (H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d, H2e, H2f, H2g) were accepted, indicating that the non-academic factors strongly influence decision-making for H&T programs.

Career prospect factors showed a significant effect only on the wellness program ($\beta=-0.229$, $p<0.05$). Thus, only sub-hypothesis H3g was supported, indicating that career prospect factors influence decision-making only for the wellness program and not for other H&T programs.

Table 3. Hypothesis decisions of the research

Programs	Sub-hypotheses	Hypothesis (H1) Academic Factors			Hypothesis (H2) Non-Academic Factors			Hypothesis (H3) Career Prospect Factors		
		β	Sig.	Decision	β	Sig.	Decision	β	Sig.	Decision
Hotel	a	0.284	0.002	*	0.433	0.000	**	-0.058	0.467	Rejected
Event	b	0.430	0.000	**	0.281	0.000	**	-0.082	0.330	Rejected
FB	c	0.337	0.001	*	0.249	0.001	*	0.061	0.496	Rejected
Airline	d	0.207	0.057	Rejected	0.436	0.000	**	0.065	0.506	Rejected
Cruise	e	0.228	0.023	*	0.396	0.000	**	0.001	0.992	Rejected
Tour	f	0.268	0.006	*	0.407	0.000	**	0.040	0.645	Rejected
Wellness	g	0.545	0.000	**	0.408	0.000	**	-0.229	0.007	*

* = Accepted with $p<0.05$; ** = Accepted with $p<0.001$

Discussion and Implications

This study examined factors influencing high school students' decisions to choose H&T programs in higher education institutions across five major provinces in Southern Thailand. The factor analysis identified three primary factors, academic, non-academic, and career prospect, aligning with categories outlined by Nanath et al. (2022).

The academic factor is crucial for high school students' selection of H&T programs, aligning with prior research (e.g., Koenings et al., 2020; Liu, 2021; Nanath et al., 2022). It highlights the importance of university reputation and ranking in attracting students. These elements signal academic excellence and education quality, positively affecting graduates' career prospects. Similar findings were observed in Thailand (Kiniman et al., 2021; Khantaku et al., 2020; Srisontisuk et al., 2020; Thianngoen et al., 2022; Thuengnaitham et al., 2023). A strong faculty reputation fosters a positive learning environment and boosts program credibility, attracting students (Busta, 2018; Kabak & Dağdeviren, 2014; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024). In addition, this research extends Nanath et al. (2022) by integrating non-academic factors, including educational costs and university location, into the academic dimension. Location can influence university choices (Bailey et al., 2018; Busta, 2018). Universities in popular tourist areas offer students real-world exposure to tourism, enriching their learning experience (Nicholls, 2018). However, such locations often come with higher living expenses, which may impact students' budgets and reduce program appeal (Callender & Jackson, 2008). Additionally, high tuition fees can deter students, especially when similar academic quality is available elsewhere. This suggests that students weigh academic quality against costs based on their personal priorities and financial capability (Glinsukon, 2020; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024; Singwera-tham & Nawsuwan, 2021; Thongnoppakun et al., 2022; Thuengnaitham et al., 2023).

Unlike other H&T programs, the academic factor does not significantly influence airline program selection. Airline programs prioritize industry-specific skills and certifications, with aviation employers focusing on regulatory compliance and qualifications. This aligns with Adefulu et al. (2020), who emphasize industry standards and certifications. Skvarciany et al. (2020) identify industrial accreditation as more influential than university reputation. Programs with strong airline partnerships that provide internships and job opportunities tend to be more attractive to students (Busta, 2018; Phunturad et al., 2023; Thianngoen et al., 2022).

Secondly, non-academic factors play a significant role for students in Southern Thailand when choosing H&T programs. Due to the international nature of tourism, students prioritize English-language instruction, valuing global perspectives and diverse learning experiences (Skvarciany et al., 2020). The qualifications of lecturers are also essential, as they reflect program quality and alignment with curriculum outcomes, consistent with previous research (Brown & Kosovich, 2015). Lecturers with international degrees provide broader insights, and students prefer programs led by lecturers with both academic and industry experience, providing a practical focus (Budda & Boong-thong, 2021; Thongnoppakun et al., 2022). The BBA programs also play an influential role in this dimension as they can prepare students for leadership roles in the H&T industry,

and by this enhancing their employment prospects after graduation (Busta, 2018; Clarke, 2007; Kabak & Dağdeviren, 2014).

Thirdly, the career prospect factors expanded Nanath et al. (2022) work by integrating non-academic benefits during study and career-related post-graduation factors into this dimension. Students value facilities, laboratories, scholarships, and student diversity (Skvarciany et al., 2020; Kabak & Dağdeviren, 2014) as well as employment opportunities, industry skills, and salary expectations (Busta, 2018; Clarke, 2007; Adefulu et al., 2020). However, unlike students in Bangkok (Glinsukon, 2020; Thianngoen et al., 2022), and the northeast (Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024; Phunturad et al., 2023), where career prospects influence students' choices, students in Southern Thailand prioritize university reputation and quality due to confidence in local tourism industry employment. However, career prospect factors strongly influence wellness program selection among southern Thai students, reflecting uncertainty in wellness career pathways and prompting close consideration of job opportunities, career growth, industry standards, and personal development (Busta, 2018; Kabak & Dağdeviren, 2014; Adefulu et al., 2020).

Theoretical Implication

This study broadens the understanding of factors affecting southern Thai students' decisions in selecting higher education programs, expanding Nanath et al. (2022) three decision-making dimensions. First, non-academic factors, like university location (Bailey et al., 2018; Nicholls, 2018) and the educational costs (Glinsukon, 2020; Phattasiriphuwadol, 2024) are significant as students weigh costs against the quality offered. Secondly, unlike in other regions like Bangkok and the northeast, career prospect factors are less influential for students in southern Thailand, except for wellness programs, where students consider career opportunities.

Practical Implication

For the competitive educational sector, this study offers practical insights for H&T programs to align with students' preferences in academic, non-academic, and career factors. Programs can enhance academic appeal by updating curricula to meet industry standards (Adefulu et al., 2020) and seeking international accreditation (Skvarciany et al., 2020). Building local industry partnerships can provide internship and job opportunities, especially in tourist regions (Singweratham & Nawsuwan, 2021; Thianngoen et al., 2022). Marketing needs to highlight unique campus settings, cultural sites, and offering scholarships to increase accessibility (Phunturad et al., 2023). H&T programs need to incorporate global perspectives, recruiting lecturers with both academic and industry expertise, and forming partnerships with international universities. While career prospects are less decisive, emphasizing employability and growth in fields like wellness can enhance program appeal.

Conclusions

With tourism being vital to Thailand's economy, higher education institutions are expanding H&T programs while having intense competition and an imbalance between supply and demand. To attract students, universities need to focus on the factors influencing program selection. This study examined key factors affecting H&T program choice among high school students in Southern Thailand, showing that students prioritize academic quality and educational costs, including tuition fees and living expenses. Internationalization also plays a major role, as students view tourism as a global industry. However, career prospects specifically influence decisions for wellness programs, unlike other H&T programs.

Recommendations

This research has several limitations, including its focus on a specific region, which may restrict the applicability of findings to a broader context. The region's economic emphasis on H&T programs could also introduce bias, potentially impacting the results. Future studies should aim to expand this framework to include diverse regions and academic programs, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing students' decision-making in selecting higher education institutions.

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