University Location Choice*

Sahber Ahmadi-Renani (TEIAS)
Sepehr Ekbatani (TEIAS)
Sepehr Hasanvand (TEIAS)

First Version: November 10, 2025
This Version: November 10, 2025

[Please click here for the most recent version.]

Abstract

This paper investigates the determinants of students' choice of location for higher education using two complementary surveys of university entrants in Iran. Higher university quality and the opportunity to study in their preferred major are the most motivating factors to study in another city. The main discouraging factors are high living and travel costs and limited dormitory availability. Female students express lower willingness to migrate for education, reinforcing existing gender gaps in access to higher-quality universities. They also report receiving less parental support to do so, and they perceive economic costs as the primary reason for their parents' opposition—consistent with weaker incentives to invest in daughters' human capital. However, we find no evidence that girls attribute their parents' disapproval to social control or conservative gender attitudes. In evaluating commuting and city characteristics for the location of higher education, safety is especially important to female students. Finally, a rank-ordered logit model based on hypothetical university choice scenarios is estimated to understand the willingness to relocate based on city attributes. The results show high willingness to pay for the opportunity to study in preferred majors, live in university-provided dorms, and enjoy large metropolitan amenities when deciding the location of higher education.

Keywords: major choice, university choice, migration, survey

*We are grateful to Gozineh 2 educational institution and Hojjat Fahimi for helping us with the execution of the survey. We thank Narges Darvish for her helpful comments. All the errors are ours.

1 Introduction

Starting higher education is an important step in a young person's life that can strongly influence their future academic, economic, and social outcomes. Choosing a university and a field of study reflects students' goals and expectations and plays a key role in shaping their career paths. Many studies have shown that the distance to university often creates a barrier, especially for students with fewer resources or limited ability to move. Figure 1 shows that students tend to rank geographically closer universities higher on their preference list. The gap is especially pronounced for female students, who consistently prefer universities closer to home than male students.

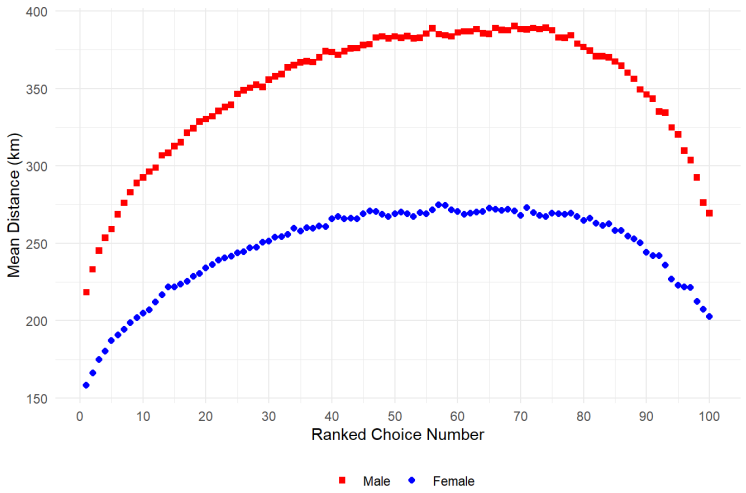


Figure 1: Average distance by ranked choice and gender, based on 2012 (1391) Iranian university entrance data.

While the negative effect of distance on university choice is well-documented, the underlying reasons why students prefer closer cities remain largely unexplored in the literature. Understanding this issue is crucial for addressing educational inequality, as distance may disproportionately restrict access to higher education for specific groups. Students—particularly girls—from families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face multiple constraints that limit their mobility and, consequently, their academic opportunities. These constraints can reinforce existing disparities in access to quality education and social mobility.

This paper investigates the underlying factors driving students' preference for geographically proximate universities, asking why many students prefer to study closer to home and how they value the amenities and characteristics of potential destination cities. Possible explanations include a mix of financial limitations, cultural and familial expectations, perceptions of safety and comfort, and differences in available information about universities in other regions. However, it remains unclear which of these factors play the most

significant role in shaping students' preferences and how their relative importance varies across gender and socioeconomic groups.

We designed a survey consisting of two separate but simultaneously administered questionnaires. Participants, who were students actively preparing their university and major preference lists for the national entrance exam (Konkur), were randomly assigned to one of the two survey groups. The first survey collected qualitative information on students' attitudes, preferences, and contextual factors. This survey included questions on the perceived importance of urban amenities, commuting conditions, dormitory characteristics, parental influence, motivating and discouraging factors for studying away from home, field-of-study preferences, preferred housing arrangements, and their willingness to relocate. In addition, we gathered information on their risk aversion, personality traits (Big Five), gender attitudes, expected labor market outcomes, and the nature of relationships with parents.

Extending the approach of (Florida, 2009) to educational migration, this study examines students' willingness and ability to relocate for higher education, accounting for possible conflicts between children's and parents' preferences. Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) are classified as mobile—that is, willing to study in another city if an opportunity arises—though a clear gender gap persists: 59 percent of male students versus 43 percent of females. Female students are more likely to describe themselves as rooted (not willing to move, but able to do so if desired) or stuck (willing to move but unable due to parental opposition or financial barriers).

Asking students regarding their own and their parents' motivating and discouraging reasons to study in another city, we find that both economic constraints and parental considerations are key in shaping educational mobility, with notable gender asymmetries. Financial and logistical barriers—especially travel costs and housing availability—are the most important discouraging factors, while parental opposition plays a secondary but gendered role. Girls report receiving less parental support for relocation and are more likely to be classified as "stuck" for parental reasons instead of other reasons. The evidence suggests that parents' hesitation is rooted primarily in economic concerns rather than stricter social control, as financial costs are cited as the main reason for opposition. This pattern is consistent with families perceiving weaker economic returns to daughters' education, leading to lower willingness to support their relocation for higher education.

Looking at the decision-making process for choosing where to study, university location choices are typically collective: about 39 percent of both male and female students report full family agreement, while roughly 30 percent describe the decision as a joint outcome reached after discussion. Only around 17 percent report that one person made the final decision after discussion—most often the student rather than a parent—and decisions made without prior discussion are rare.

Regarding commuting conditions, students assign the highest importance to intercity travel cost and

travel safety, indicating that affordability and security dominate relocation concerns. Gender differences emerge mainly in priorities: female students value travel safety substantially more, whereas male students emphasize travel time. In evaluating urban features, students rank urban safety and welfare amenities above lifestyle factors like cultural or recreational activities and green spaces. Female students rate safety as particularly critical, while male students place relatively greater weight on cultural and recreational opportunities. Regarding housing preferences, we find that two-thirds of students prefer university dormitories, but this share rises to 74 percent among females compared with 59 percent of males, who are more open to renting or using non-university dorms. For dormitory characteristics, proximity to campus ranks as the top priority for both genders, followed by everyday amenities and room density. Despite common restrictive dormitory rules for female students in Iran, dormitory rules such as curfews matter similarly across genders.

The second survey, administered to a separate group of respondents, included a stated-preference ranking experiment featuring a different set of hypothetical choice scenarios for different locations of higher education. In these scenarios, seven key attributes were examined: total monthly living cost, dormitory availability and quality, commuting time, field-of-study availability, urban amenities, expected income, and marriage prospects. Importantly, the total monthly living cost in the city was included as a common attribute in all scenarios, allowing for the calculation of marginal willingness-to-pay (WTP). This design enabled us to recover the relative importance of each attribute in students' decision-making.

Our rank-ordered logit estimates show that students place the high value on economic and locational attributes when choosing where to study: lower living costs, better income prospects after graduation, shorter travel time from home, higher-quality dormitories, strong academic match, and better urban amenities all significantly increase the likelihood that a university–city option is ranked more favorably. Willingness-to-pay estimates reveal large monetary valuations for premium dormitory quality, access to preferred majors (especially for first-choice fields), and strong metropolitan amenities. Gender differences are limited but meaningful: while most attributes influence male and female students similarly, males exhibit substantially higher willingness to pay for large-city amenities and for exact academic match, whereas women place relatively more emphasis on dormitory conditions.

To analyze students' preferences over university options, we employ a Ranked-Order Logit model, which allows us to estimate the utility contribution of each attribute in the ranking decision. In this model, each student ranks a set of alternatives from most to least preferred, and the effects of the attributes on overall preference are estimated. The estimated coefficients reflect changes in latent utility and are not directly interpretable in monetary or tangible terms. To provide a more interpretable metric, we convert these effects into marginal willingness-to-pay (WTP), expressing the impact of non-monetary attributes in monetary terms. This approach allows us to quantify the amount of money a student is willing to trade off for a

one-unit increase in a non-monetary attribute and to assess the relative importance of each attribute in students' decision-making.

Related Literature

This paper is related to the literature on determinants of major and university choices. Several studies in this area have highlighted the role of expected earnings in university selection Beffy, Fougere, and Maurel (2012); Long, Goldhaber, and Huntington-Klein (2015); Wiswall and Zafar (2015). A couple of papers have examined the role played by parents on the choice of college major. Notably, (Zafar, 2013) addresses this question using subjective expectations data collected from a sample of sophomores from Northwestern University. (Zafar, 2013) finds that getting approval of parents is one of the most important factors underlying the choice of majors. According to students, the probability of parents approving a given major increases with the social status as well as the wage returns associated with the major. Socioeconomic status, or income, of both the student and their family has been recognized as a key factor influencing school choice in several studies Chapman (1981); Hearn (1984); Heller (1997). Another crucial determinant is the student's academic performance, often measured by high school grades or standardized test scores Braxton (1990); Chapman (1981). Gender Paulsen (1990) and race Hearn (1984) are also recognized as important factors in this decision-making process. Existing studies indicate that students don't make these choices alone; various external influences, such as parents, relatives, teachers, and peers, play significant roles in the school selection process Chapman (1981); Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999); Oosterbeek, Groot, and Hartog (1992).

We contribute to this literature by studying the determinants of university location choice—an important but understudied dimension of human capital investment. Location choice not only affects students' geographic mobility but also shapes their exposure to top university and major opportunities. From a policy perspective, our findings can inform decisions about where to establish new universities: whether efforts should focus on reducing regional disparities by investing in *education deserts* with limited access, or on strengthening existing higher-education hubs where distance appears to play a smaller role.

Another strand of literature related to our study examines the role of geographical distance and spatial accessibility in educational decision-making. For example, (Frenette, 2006) estimated the influence of distance from a young person's home to their nearest university on participation in Canada and found that potential students that live further away had a lower probability of enrolment. More specifically, students from lower income families were found to be particularly affected negatively by distance. (Spiess and Wrohlich, 2010) used German data to explore the relationship between travel distance and the decision of young people to attend universities. They find a significant distance effect and showed how this was driven mainly by so-called "transaction costs" rather than "neighbourhood effects". (Cullinan, Flannery, Walsh, et al., 2013), examining data for Ireland, find that travel distance had a significantly negative impact on participation for

those from lower social classes and that this impact grows stronger as distance increased.

We contribute to this literature by examining the demand-side determinants of university location choice, focusing on which amenities and local features students value in cities, universities, dormitories, and commuting environments. Our analysis highlights how these preferences vary across students with different socioeconomic backgrounds and genders, shedding light on the heterogeneous constraints and priorities shaping educational mobility. By identifying the key economic and non-economic factors influencing willingness to relocate, we extend the literature on spatial accessibility from measuring distance effects to understanding the underlying drivers of location preferences in higher education.

A substantial body of research has emphasized the importance of moving costs and distance-related barriers in shaping migration and location decisions. Studies such as (Bartik et al., 1992), (Kennan and Walker, 2011), and (Bayer and Juessen, 2012) provide evidence that high fixed and non-monetary costs substantially reduce internal mobility in the United States, thereby limiting individuals' responsiveness to regional opportunities. As noted by (Beaudry, Green, and Sand, 2014) and (Low, 2020), these non-monetary costs extend beyond financial expenses and include psychological attachment to one's residence, social networks, and the local environment—factors that discourage relocation even in the presence of economic incentives. Complementary evidence from international contexts, such as (Baláž, Williams, and Fifeková, 2016) for Slovakia and (Lagakos, Mobarak, and Waugh, 2018) for Bangladesh, indicates that non-financial factors such as familiarity, social belonging, and expectations about quality of life account for a large share of migration aversion. In this context, (Koşar, Ransom, and van der Klaauw, 2021) employ *elicited counterfactual choice probabilities* and a series of hypothetical scenarios to identify monetary and non-monetary determinants of migration decisions.

We contribute to this literature by extending the framework of (Koşar et al., 2021) to a distinct yet economically important context—students' internal migration for higher education. Our study focuses on the decision to relocate to another city for university study—a formative migration choice that often precedes and shapes later-life mobility patterns. In doing so, our analysis links the migration literature with the economics of education, emphasizing how early-life mobility constraints can influence human capital formation and longer-term geographic mobility.

2 Institutional Background

In Iran, students select their academic track at the end of the ninth grade based on their academic performance, counseling, and available capacities. The main fields of study include Mathematics and Physics,

Experimental Sciences, Humanities. This choice significantly influences their path toward the Konkur, Iran's national university entrance exam. During the eleventh grade, students begin studying more specialized subjects in their field, and many start participating in supplementary classes and mock exams. In twelfth grade, they take final national exams, which, since 2023, directly impact their Konkur score. This year is also marked by intensive Konkur preparation through specialized courses and practice exams. Konkur is a multiple-choice exam conducted for different academic groups: Mathematics and Engineering, Experimental Sciences, Humanities, Arts, and Foreign Languages. Since 2023, general subjects have been removed, and only specialized subjects are tested, with the content varying across academic groups. Additionally, students' final exam scores contribute directly to their admission ranking. The exam is now held twice a year (January and July), and candidates can use their highest score for university admission or choose to take only one of the two exams.

After receiving their initial Konkur results, students select up to 150 choices, each representing a specific university and major (e.g., Electrical Engineering at Sharif University of Technology). University capacities are published in an official handbook, allowing students to estimate their admission chances based on previous years' data. Admission decisions depend on factors such as rank, personal interest, job market prospects, and university reputation. Once admitted, students enroll in public (daytime or nighttime) universities, Payam Noor University, non-profit universities, or Islamic Azad University. However, students accepted into tuition-free public universities who do not enroll are barred from taking Konkur the following year.

In Iran's educational system, schools are gender-segregated for boys and girls. This gender separation is implemented at all levels of education from elementary through the end of upper secondary school and includes public and private schools. In the national university entrance exam (Konkur), the test is administered jointly for male and female candidates. However, admission quotas for some university programs are announced based on gender. In the official selection handbook published by the National Organization of Educational Testing (Sanjesh), each university program may be labeled as "female," "male," or "open" (without gender restriction). Some programs accept only one gender.

Although schools in Iran are gender-segregated, most universities are mixed-gender institutions. Nevertheless, some universities or individual campuses remain single-gender. For instance, Alzahra University in Tehran is a prominent women-only institution. Similarly, certain branches of Islamic Azad University or private higher education centers may restrict admission to only one gender. Admission to certain specialized institutions, such as Farhangian University (teacher training universities), may also be subject to gender-specific regulations, regional needs, and dormitory capacity. In such cases, the gender-specific admission quotas are explicitly indicated in the official handbook.

3 Survey

In this section, we outline the data collection process and survey design. Two surveys were used: one with qualitative questions to capture respondents' perceptions, and another with hypothetical scenarios requiring them to rank alternative options.

3.1 Survey Design

The survey was conducted in two waves on October 11, 2025 and November 8, 2025, targeting approximately 60,000 high school students who shortly before made their major choice were and about to enter university. The survey was implemented in collaboration with *Gozineh 2* and the link to the survey was distributed via SMS. *Gozineh 2* is one of the largest educational organizations in Iran, in which high school students across the country are enrolled. It regularly administers nationwide mock exams that simulate the Iranian National University Entrance Exam (Konkur). Students in almost all cities of Iran participate in these exams to assess their performance relative to their peers and prepare for the national exam[1].

The questionnaire was designed using the Iranian online survey platform *Porsline*, and a unique link was generated for each student. *Porsline* is a well-known and widely used platform in Iran, employed by many large commercial companies for conducting online surveys and customer feedback studies. *Gozineh 2* sent the individualized survey links to students through their registered mobile phone numbers. In the SMS text and on the survey's introduction page, participants were informed that completing the questionnaire would take approximately 15 minutes, and that they would be entered into a lottery for 100 cash prizes of one million tomans each (approximately USD 10) as compensation for their time[2]. The number of observations and demographic characteristics for each survey version are reported in Table 1 showing close characteristic across two surveys[3].

[1] Approximately 18,000 SMS invitations were sent for each of the two survey versions. In the first wave, 129 students responded to the scenario-based version (a response rate of 0.7%), and 188 students completed the qualitative version (a response rate of 1.03%). The full text of both questionnaires is provided in Appendix A. In the second wave, the link was re-sent with an additional word "Reminder:" at the beginning of the invitation SMS text to individuals who had not responded in the first wave. In total, approximately 5,850 links were distributed for the qualitative (expectations) survey and 32,175 links for the hypothetical scenario version. During the second round, 68 respondents completed the expectations version, and 233 respondents completed the hypothetical scenario version.

[2] According to the official minimum wage in Iran for the year 1404 HS (2025), the daily minimum wage was 346,000 tomans (approximately USD 3.5).

[3] Respondents from the first wave who completed the survey in less than five minutes were excluded from the analytical sample. In the second wave, respondents who spent less than five minutes and failed the attention check were also removed. These exclusions help ensure that the final dataset reflects attentive and engaged participants. We realized that the language used in the attention check in the first wave (which asked respondents to "think about their favorite colors" but instructed them to select two specific assigned colors) was not suitable for Iranian students. A large share of respondents who chose a different color nonetheless provided consistent and credible answers across the survey, similar to students with comparable demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Summary Statistics by Survey

	Survey		
	All	Hypothetical Scenario	Qualitative
Observations	541	304	237
Gender			
Male	224	123	101
Female	306	172	134
Residence (Urban/Rural)			
Urban	484	274	210
Rural	54	28	26
Exam field			
Experimental Sciences	166	80	86
Humanities	223	132	91
Mathematics & Physics	140	85	55

3.2 Summary Statistics

Table 2 reports summary statistics by gender, combining respondents from both survey versions—the stated-preference (scenario-based) and the qualitative questionnaire. The sample is comparable with the population of university entrants across gender, with 56% female and 42% male participants. Students are drawn from a variety of exam and high school fields, with representation from all major academic tracks.

Household income distribution and parental education levels indicate substantial socioeconomic diversity, while the majority of students come from urban areas. Parents' average schooling is around 12–13 years, mean monthly household income is roughly 30 million tomans, and the average high school GPA is approximately 17. Overall, the combined sample exhibits a balanced and heterogeneous composition across gender, academic field, and socioeconomic background.

Table 2: Summary Statistics by Gender

	By Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
Sample size (N)	312 (54.3%)	229 (39.8%)	575
Exam Field			
Experimental Sciences	100 (33.0%)	66 (28.9%)	170 (31.4%)
Humanities	154 (50.8%)	73 (32.0%)	231 (42.6%)
Mathematics & Physics	49 (16.2%)	89 (39.0%)	141 (26.0%)
All	303 (100.0%)	228 (100.0%)	531 (100.0%)
High School Field			
Experimental Sciences	102 (32.7%)	65 (28.4%)	171 (31.0%)
Islamic Sciences	6 (1.9%)	9 (3.9%)	15 (2.7%)
Literature & Humanities	153 (49.0%)	65 (28.4%)	222 (40.2%)
Mathematics & Physics	51 (16.3%)	89 (38.9%)	143 (25.9%)
Technical & Vocational	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.2%)
All	312 (100.0%)	229 (100.0%)	541 (100.0%)
High School Type			
Exemplary Public School	72 (23.2%)	68 (29.8%)	143 (26.1%)
Private School	60 (19.4%)	49 (21.5%)	112 (20.4%)
Public School	152 (49.0%)	83 (36.4%)	237 (43.2%)
SAMPAD (Elite School)	26 (8.4%)	28 (12.3%)	56 (10.2%)
All	310 (100.0%)	228 (100.0%)	538 (100.0%)
Household Income			
15–30M Tomans	96 (30.9%)	83 (36.4%)	183 (33.3%)
30–50M Tomans	57 (18.3%)	47 (20.6%)	106 (19.3%)
<15M Tomans	62 (19.9%)	31 (13.6%)	94 (17.1%)
>50M Tomans	30 (9.6%)	24 (10.5%)	54 (9.8%)
Prefer not to say	66 (21.2%)	43 (18.9%)	112 (20.4%)
All	311 (100.0%)	228 (100.0%)	539 (100.0%)
Urban or Rural			
Rural	32 (10.3%)	22 (9.6%)	55 (10.0%)
Urban	280 (89.7%)	207 (90.4%)	497 (90.0%)
All	312 (100.0%)	229 (100.0%)	541 (100.0%)
Region (Mantaghe)			
1	106 (37.2%)	71 (33.3%)	179 (35.2%)
2	95 (33.3%)	83 (39.0%)	183 (36.0%)
3	84 (29.5%)	59 (27.7%)	146 (28.7%)
All	285 (100.0%)	213 (100.0%)	498 (100.0%)
Mean and median (continuous variables)			
Father's Education (years)	12.01 (12.00)	13.55 (16.00)	12.67 (12.00)
Mother's Education (years)	11.66 (12.00)	12.96 (12.00)	12.21 (12.00)
Household Income (million Toman)	29.27 (22.50)	30.55 (22.50)	29.77 (22.50)
High School GPA	17.01 (17.50)	17.02 (17.49)	17.00 (17.50)
Exam National Rank	37812.92 (14000.00)	154960.02 (10105.00)	87174.05 (12973.00)
Household Size	4.01 (4.00)	4.19 (4.00)	4.10 (4.00)

For categorical rows, percentages are column percentages (within each gender). Continuous rows report mean (median).

Table 3 summarizes descriptive statistics on students' mobility status, willingness to relocate, parental support, and housing preferences by gender.

Extending the approach of Florida (2009) into educational migration by taking into the possible conflict between children and parents preferences, respondents were asked to classify themselves according to their willingness and ability to relocate. This question aims to capture spatial mobility preferences and constraints, distinguishing between individuals who are *"mobile"*, *"stuck"*, and *"rooted"*.

> *"If you had the opportunity to study for a bachelor's degree at a university located in a city other than where your family resides, which of the following best describes your willingness and ability to do so?"*

1. *I am willing and able to study in another city, and I will do so if the opportunity arises.*
2. *I am willing to study in another city, but I am unable to do so because my parents oppose it.*
3. *I am willing to study in another city, but I am unable to do so for other reasons (e.g., financial or personal constraints).*
4. *I am willing to study in another city, but both parental opposition and other factors prevent me from doing so.*
5. *I am not willing to study in another city and prefer to study where I currently live.*

Based on the responses to this question, students were categorized into three main mobility types (1) Mobile: those who are both willing and able to study in another city (Option 1); (2) Stuck: those who are willing but unable to relocate due to either parental opposition or other constraints (Options 2-4); (3) Rooted: those who are unwilling to study outside their hometown (Option 5). This classification captures both *preference* and *constraint*-driven dimensions of mobility, allowing for a nuanced analysis of how openness or restriction to geographic relocation influences university choice behavior.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics: Mobility, Willingness, and Housing Preferences by Gender

	By Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
Mobility Type			
mobile	130 (42.5%)	131 (58.5%)	264 (49.1%)
rooted	105 (34.3%)	59 (26.3%)	169 (31.4%)
stuck (other reasons: financial/personal)	40 (13.1%)	18 (8.0%)	58 (10.8%)
stuck (parents' opposition + other barriers)	11 (3.6%)	6 (2.7%)	17 (3.2%)
stuck (parents' opposition)	20 (6.5%)	10 (4.5%)	30 (5.6%)
All	306 (100.0%)	224 (100.0%)	530 (100.0%)
Willingness to Relocate			
Completely willing	105 (34.7%)	80 (36.0%)	187 (35.1%)
Willing	37 (12.2%)	35 (15.8%)	73 (13.7%)
Moderately willing	61 (20.1%)	48 (21.6%)	110 (20.6%)
Slightly willing	56 (18.5%)	30 (13.5%)	88 (16.5%)
Not at all willing	44 (14.5%)	29 (13.1%)	75 (14.1%)
All	303 (100.0%)	222 (100.0%)	525 (100.0%)
Parental Support for Relocation			
Completely supportive	66 (21.7%)	55 (24.7%)	123 (23.0%)
Supportive	51 (16.8%)	38 (17.0%)	92 (17.2%)
Neutral	59 (19.4%)	52 (23.3%)	111 (20.7%)
Somewhat opposed	71 (23.4%)	44 (19.7%)	116 (21.7%)
Completely opposed	57 (18.8%)	34 (15.2%)	93 (17.4%)
All	304 (100.0%)	223 (100.0%)	527 (100.0%)
Housing Preference in Other City			
Any dorm (university or non-university)	35 (11.5%)	33 (14.9%)	68 (12.7%)
No dorm; I will rent a house	19 (6.2%)	21 (9.5%)	42 (7.9%)
No preference	24 (7.9%)	37 (16.7%)	62 (11.6%)
University dorm only	227 (74.4%)	131 (59.0%)	363 (67.9%)
All	305 (100.0%)	222 (100.0%)	527 (100.0%)

For categorical rows, percentages in Female/Male/Total are column percentages within each block (they sum to 100% down each column). The 'All' row is 100%.

Table 3 summarizes patterns of mobility, willingness to relocate, parental support, and housing preferences by gender. Nearly half of all respondents (49 percent) are classified as mobile, though a clear gender gap emerges: 59 percent of male students report being mobile compared with only 43 percent of females. Female students are more likely to describe themselves as rooted (34 percent versus 26 percent among males) or "stuck" due to financial or parental barriers. About 11 percent of all respondents cite financial or personal reasons for being unable to move, and an additional 9 percent attribute their immobility at least partly to parental opposition. Consistent with these patterns, willingness to relocate follows a broadly similar distribution across genders, but female students are more concentrated in the lower end of the willingness scale, reporting higher rates of being either "slightly willing" or "not at all willing." Parental opposition is

somewhat stronger for girls, whereas boys encounter slightly more neutral or supportive parental attitudes. Housing preferences reinforce these gendered patterns: overall, two-thirds of students (68 percent) prefer university dormitories, but the preference is markedly higher among female students (74 percent) than males (59 percent). Male students, by contrast, show greater openness to renting private housing, using non-university dorms, or having no fixed preference.

4 Qualitative Questions

The survey included questions on the perceived importance of urban amenities, commuting conditions between the student's residence and potential university cities, and dormitory characteristics; factors that might influence parents' approval of studying in another city; factors that could encourage or discourage students from relocating for higher education; students' field-of-study preferences; willingness to move for university; preferred housing arrangements if studying away from home; decisions under hypothetical lottery scenarios; personality traits (Big Five); gender attitudes; expected labor market outcomes after graduation; and the nature of students' relationships with their parents. These qualitative questions provided additional contextual information to complement the experimental data and support the analysis of students' university choice behavior.

4.1 Motivating and Discouraging Factors

As part of the qualitative version of the survey, respondents were asked to rank the importance of several factors related to studying in another city. Three questions were designed for this purpose. In the first question, students ranked the *discouraging factors* that might prevent them from studying in another city. In the second question, they ranked the *motivating factors* that could encourage them to pursue higher education elsewhere. The third question focused on *parents' reasons for opposing* their child's study in another city.

The results in Table 4 show that economic and logistical barriers dominate students' discouraging factors when considering studying in another city. The two most important obstacles are high travel costs to visit family and lack of affordable housing or dormitories, both ranking significantly higher than social or cultural concerns. Parental opposition also features among the top three discouraging factors, without any significant gender differences. In contrast, concerns related to cultural adaptation, crime rates, or marriage opportunities receive much lower importance. Overall, these results indicate that financial and accommodation-related constraints outweigh social or psychological barriers in limiting students' educational mobility, with broadly

similar patterns for male and female students[4].

Turning to motivating factors, students place the greatest importance on university or program quality and the opportunity to study their preferred major, followed by better job opportunities after graduation. The desire to gain independence from family ranks next. A notable gender difference emerges for the experience of living in a new city and culture, which is significantly more valued by male students. Other motivating factors, such as safer urban environments, parental encouragement, or better marriage prospects, rank lower and do not differ significantly by gender. These findings emphasize that educational and career motivations outweigh lifestyle or family-related incentives, with the exception that male students exhibit a stronger curiosity for new environments.

Finally, parents' opposition reasons are primarily economic and emotional in nature. "High living costs in another city" is rated as the most important concern, with a significant gender difference—parents of female students cite this reason more frequently. Emotional attachment and concerns about homesickness follow closely, suggesting that family ties play a major role in limiting students' relocation decisions. Other factors, such as "the desire to monitor social life", "doubts about living independently", or "the need for help with household tasks", are of lower importance but still reflect parental concerns over control and family dependence.

The results highlight that parents' economic concerns and emotional attachments jointly constrain students' geographic mobility. An important observation is that girls report receiving less parental support for relocation and are more likely to be restricted for parental reasons (as shown in Table 3). As evidenced in Table 4, the rationale for this lower parental support does not primarily stem from stricter social control over girls, but rather from financial considerations. The perception that parents' opposition is driven by economic costs is consistent with families having weaker incentives to invest in the human capital of daughters.

[4]Note that a similar gendered pattern exist in the distribution of types among "stuck" students

Table 4: Mean rank of factors influencing students' willingness to study in another city, categorized by parents' opposition reasons, motivating factors, and discouraging factors (lower values indicate higher importance).

Item	Overall	Female	Male	p-value (F ≠ M)
Discouraging Factors to Study in Another City				
High travel costs to visit family	2.83	2.88	2.74	0.513
Lack of affordable housing or dorms	2.97	2.86	3.12	0.235
Parental opposition to studying elsewhere	3.22	3.25	3.20	0.804
Fear of adapting to a new culture	3.58	3.57	3.59	0.909
Concern about higher crime rates	3.69	3.63	3.74	0.587
Concern about fewer marriage opportunities	4.71	4.81	4.60	0.321
Motivating Factors to Study in Another City				
Higher university or program quality	3.20	3.01	3.40	0.157
Opportunity to study preferred major	3.40	3.30	3.53	0.408
Better job opportunities after graduation	4.06	3.98	4.17	0.489
Gain more independence from family	4.16	4.08	4.26	0.536
Experience living in a new city and culture	4.37	4.69	3.92	0.004***
Safer or more desirable urban environment	5.01	4.96	5.11	0.577
Encouragement from family to study elsewhere	5.70	5.73	5.68	0.870
Better marriage prospects	6.10	6.26	5.93	0.262
Parents' Opposition Reasons				
High living costs in another city	3.08	2.83	3.42	0.009***
Emotional attachment of parents	3.16	3.08	3.25	0.431
Concern that I may feel homesick	3.28	3.35	3.20	0.506
Desire to monitor my social life	3.31	3.41	3.15	0.220
Doubt about my ability to live independently	3.77	3.83	3.66	0.448
Need me to help with household tasks	4.41	4.50	4.33	0.422

Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$ **** $p < 0.001$

4.2 City and University Amenities

In addition to the factors discussed above, we ask respondents to evaluate specific features related to commuting conditions, dormitory characteristics, and urban amenities, reported in Table 5. Three separate questions captured these dimensions. The first asked students to rank the importance of various aspects of commuting between their home and potential university cities. The second focused on dormitory-related attributes that would matter most if studying away from home. The third question covered urban amenities in the city of study. As in the previous questions, lower numerical values indicate higher importance.

Students place the highest importance on "intercity travel cost" and "travel safety" for commuting conditions, indicating that mobility decisions are closely tied to affordability and perceived security. The least important conditions are "mode of transport" or "road quality". Gender differences are notable: female students rank "travel safety" much higher in importance than males, while male students value "travel time" more. No gender differences appear in other conditions. These results reflect while communicating can be costly for both genders, what female and male consider the most important costs of commuting vary.

Among dormitory conditions, "proximity to campus" is the top priority for both genders, followed by practical aspects such as "everyday amenities" and "room density". Gender differences are small overall, except for "recreational facilities", which men rate as more important. "Dorm rules" such as curfews (which in Iran is much more restricted for female-only dorms than male-only dorms) do not significantly differ by gender, suggesting that institutional constraints are similarly accepted across groups.

In choosing which city to study, students prioritize "urban safety" and "public or welfare amenities" over lifestyle factors such as "cultural and recreational amenities" or "green spaces". Female students attach significantly greater importance to "urban safety", while men rate "cultural and recreational amenities" slightly higher. These contrasts suggest that women's location preferences are shaped primarily by safety considerations, which may in turn limit their educational opportunities in urban areas perceived as unsafe.

Table 5: Mean rank of factors related to urban amenities, commuting conditions, and dormitory features (lower values indicate higher importance).

Item	Overall	Female	Male	p-value (F≠M)
Commute features				
Intercity travel cost	2.67	2.70	2.64	0.718
Travel safety (theft/harassment risk)	2.70	2.38	3.10	0.000****
Travel time	2.92	3.10	2.71	0.036**
Mode of transport (plane/train/bus)	3.27	3.35	3.18	0.334
Road quality and accident risk	3.43	3.47	3.38	0.621
Dorm features				
Proximity to campus	2.36	2.41	2.32	0.589
Everyday amenities (washer/fridge)	2.71	2.67	2.76	0.597
Dorm density (room occupancy)	2.75	2.64	2.87	0.193
Recreational facilities (gym/green area)	3.54	3.70	3.33	0.031**
Dorm rules (curfew/other limits)	3.63	3.57	3.72	0.409
Urban facilities				
Urban safety	2.85	2.61	3.18	0.014**
Public and welfare amenities	3.17	3.32	2.99	0.094*
Urban public transportation	3.21	3.09	3.34	0.255
Climate	3.64	3.64	3.63	0.950
Cultural and recreational amenities	3.86	4.04	3.63	0.072*
Green spaces and environmental quality	4.26	4.30	4.24	0.766

Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$ **** $p < 0.001$

4.3 Household Decision Making Process

To examine the household decision-making structure behind the selection of the study city, we adapted a question from Giustinelli (2016), originally designed to elicit child–parent decision roles in educational track choice. The purpose of this question is to identify whether educational location decisions are typically made jointly within families or dominated by a particular household member.

"How was the decision regarding the selection of the study city made in your family?"

a) From the beginning, all family members shared the same opinion regarding the choice of the study city.

b) A discussion or consultation was held within the family to reach a joint decision.

If only one person made the final decision ***after discussion****, please indicate who it was:*

c) Myself

d) My father

e) My mother

f) Other

If only one person made the final decision ***without any discussion****, please indicate who it was:*

g) Myself

h) My father

i) My mother

j) Other

Table 6 shows that university location decisions are typically made collectively within families rather than by individuals. About 39 percent of both female and male students report an initial full family agreement on where to study, while roughly 30 percent describe the outcome as a joint decision after discussion. Only about 17 percent report that, instead of a joint decision, one person made the final decision after discussion—most often the student themselves rather than a parent. Decisions made without prior discussion are relatively uncommon, accounting for only about 8 percent of all cases. There are no statistically significant gender differences across any category.

Table 6: Decision-making process for selecting the study city by gender

	By Gender			
	Female	Male	Total	p-value (F≠M)
Family consensus				
Initial full family agreement	52 (39.1%)	39 (39.0%)	91 (39.1%)	0.988
Joint decision after discussion	43 (32.3%)	27 (27.0%)	70 (30.0%)	0.380
Final decision (after discussion)				
Self	20 (15.0%)	20 (20.0%)	40 (17.2%)	0.320
Father	4 (3.0%)	5 (5.0%)	9 (3.9%)	0.503
Mother	2 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.9%)	0.508
Others	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.000
Final decision (without discussion)				
Self	6 (4.5%)	8 (8.0%)	14 (6.0%)	0.267
Father	3 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.3%)	0.262
Mother	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.0%)	1 (0.4%)	0.429
Others	3 (2.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.3%)	0.262

Female/Male/Total show column percentages using grand totals of the whole table. The p-values come from two-sided tests of equality of proportions (F vs M) using grand column totals as denominators.
Significance levels: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01, **** p < 0.001.

4.4 Parental Relationship and personality

Table 7: Pearson correlations (r) between predictors and two targets (parents support relocation and students' willing to relocate degree). Values are r with significance stars.

	Parental support for relocation			Willingness to relocate		
Predictor	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female
Future expectations						
Expectation: full-time job at age 30	0.169***	0.052	0.215**	0.125*	-0.040	0.203**
Expectation: married at age 30	0.021	0.077	-0.031	-0.080	-0.120	-0.072
Expectation: living abroad at age 30	0.102	0.038	0.123	0.093	0.118	0.045
Expectation: living in another city in Iran at 30	0.251****	0.210**	0.242***	0.311****	0.226**	0.349****
Gender-role attitudes						
Parents' gender-role attitudes	-0.092	-0.132	0.056	-0.047	0.026	-0.043
Own attitude toward women working after marriage	0.117	0.011	0.157	0.052	0.127	0.045
Perceived social attitude toward women working after marriage	0.042	-0.164	0.198	0.074	0.411**	-0.172
Parental factors						
Parents allow social choices	0.081	0.113	0.090	-0.079	0.010	-0.127
Parental support for autonomy	0.008	-0.148	0.150*	0.097	-0.032	0.195**
Closeness to parents	0.038	0.004	0.076	-0.126*	-0.022	-0.203**
Parents respond via dialogue	0.041	0.022	0.094	-0.064	-0.030	-0.065
Parents respect appearance choices	0.072	0.081	0.066	-0.089	-0.005	-0.172**
Personality / Decision						
BFI: Agreeableness	0.020	-0.032	0.013	0.034	0.033	0.010
BFI: Conscientiousness	0.144**	0.069	0.196**	0.061	-0.055	0.141
BFI: Extraversion	0.054	0.128	0.010	-0.031	0.002	-0.053
BFI: Neuroticism	-0.099	-0.082	-0.072	-0.052	0.071	-0.114
BFI: Openness	-0.053	0.022	-0.084	0.039	0.141	-0.013
Risk preference	0.031	0.037	0.024	-0.085	-0.149	-0.039

Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients (r). Significance stars: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01, **** p < 0.001.

Table 7 reports correlation coefficients between a set of parental and personality-related predictors and two outcome variables: parents' support for their child's relocation and students' own willingness to relocate for higher education. To measure individual risk preferences, the survey included a standardized experimental task based on the method developed by Eckel and Grossman (2002), commonly known as the *(EG) Game*. In this task, each respondent was presented with six hypothetical lotteries (games) that differ in their degree of risk and potential payoff. Each game offers a 50% chance of winning either a higher or a lower monetary reward, with the spread between the two outcomes increasing monotonically across the six options. Respondents were asked to choose one game they would be willing to play, and this choice was used to infer their degree of risk aversion. Lower-numbered choices correspond to higher levels of risk aversion, while higher-numbered choices indicate greater risk tolerance.

Table 7 shows that, overall, parental relationship variables exhibit no significant correlations with either students' willingness to relocate or their parents' support for relocation. However, among female students, several meaningful associations emerge. Parents' support for relocation is positively correlated with "parental support for autonomy", indicating that when parents respect their daughters' independence, they are more likely to endorse studying in another city. In contrast, "closeness to parents" and "parents' respect for appearance choices" are both negatively associated with female students' willingness to relocate, suggesting that stronger emotional attachment or less parental monitoring is linked to lower mobility intentions. Turning to personality characteristics, most correlations are small and statistically insignificant. The only significant relationship appears for "conscientiousness", which is positively associated with parental support for relocation among female students. No other Big Five traits or risk preference measures show meaningful correlations with either parents' support or students' willingness to relocate.

5 Hypothetical Scenarios Questions

The experiment was designed using seven attributes: (i) total monthly living cost for a student in the city, (ii) availability and quality of dormitory, (iii) travel time from the university to parents' home, (iv) availability of the respondent's preferred field of study, (v) urban amenities (recreational facilities, public transport, crime rates, etc.), (vi) expected income at age 30 after graduation, and (vii) probability of marrying someone from the top two income deciles by age 30.

In the first wave, each respondent was presented with 12 scenarios, each consisting of three alternatives. In every scenario, three attributes varied across alternatives, while all other attributes were held constant. Respondents were asked to rank the alternatives according to their preferences. The attribute "total monthly

living cost" was included in all scenarios, while the two remaining attributes were selected from the other six. The inclusion of the cost attribute in every scenario was necessary to enable the calculation of willingness to pay (WTP).

For example, one scenario could include monthly living cost, expected income at age 30, and dormitory quality, with their levels differing across alternatives. Each such combination was repeated in four scenarios with different attribute levels.

5.0.1 General considerations in designing choice experiments

Attribute selection was the first step in designing the scenarios. Since no prior stated preference experiments had been conducted in Iran, it was not possible to directly rely on previous studies. Therefore, the process of selecting attributes was based on expert consultation and a qualitative pilot survey. In the initial pilot, hypothetical scenarios incorporating seven potential attributes—identified through discussions with academic experts and specialists, and tailored to the Iranian context, structure, and culture—were tested. In addition, the qualitative pilot survey asked respondents to list the factors that could encourage them to study in another city, the factors that might discourage them, and the aspects they believed were most important for parents when opposing their children's study in another city.

The levels of the attributes were chosen to reflect realistic and tangible values for the target population, thereby making the scenarios more credible and relatable for respondents. In addition, the attribute total monthly living cost was included in all scenarios as a common attribute, enabling the calculation of willingness to pay (WTP). In designing the scenario matrix and combining the attribute levels, several steps were followed. In the first step, the attributes other than total living cost were randomly paired in different versions, ensuring that each attribute appeared in four scenarios per version. Next, the levels of the attributes were randomly combined. At this stage, duplicate or dominant alternatives were eliminated in order to avoid creating overly obvious or repetitive choices. Several logical considerations were also applied. First, the attribute levels—particularly for expected income—were specified in such a way that they remained locally comparable, allowing respondents to make meaningful trade-offs, similar to (Wiswall and Zafar, 2018).

Second, the frequency of each level was balanced across the 48 scenarios as much as possible. In addition, alternatives that combined two top levels simultaneously were excluded, since in such cases it would not be clear whether the choice was driven by one attribute or the other. Finally, different matrix structures were applied to enhance variation. For example, in some designs, the same level of a given attribute was intentionally repeated in two alternatives, making that attribute irrelevant for the decision between those two and forcing respondents to focus on the trade-off between the remaining attributes. For example, Figure

2 shows one of the hypothetical scenarios presented to the students.

Alternative	Travel time to parents' house	Total monthly cost of living in that city	Dorm
A	About 3 hours	About 10 million Tomans	Available - Excellent
B	More than 6 hours	About 3 million Tomans	Available – Standard
C	About 1.5 hours	About 10 million Tomans	Not available

Figure 2: Example of a hypothetical choice scenario presented to students. Monetary amounts are shown in tomans (1 USD 100,000 tomans).

5.1 Model

To estimate the preferences of students over university choice alternatives, we employ a Ranked-Order Logit (ROL) model. Suppose each student i faces a set of alternatives $j \in J_i$, and ranks them from most to least preferred. The utility that student i derives from alternative j is specified as:

$$U_{ij} = X'_{ij}\beta + \epsilon_{ij}, \tag{1}$$

where X_{ij} is a vector of observed attributes for alternative j as perceived by student i, β is a vector of parameters to be estimated, and ϵ_{ij} is an i.i.d. extreme value type I error term.

Given that student i provides a complete ranking of the alternatives, the probability of observing a particular ranking $r_i = (j_1 \succ j_2 \succ \cdots \succ j_{|J_i|})$ is given by the product of conditional logit probabilities:

$$P(r_i \mid \beta) = \prod_{k=1}^{|J_i|} \frac{\exp(X'_{ij_k}\beta)}{\sum_{l=k}^{|J_i|} \exp(X'_{ij_l}\beta)}. \tag{2}$$

The model parameters β can be consistently estimated by maximizing the log-likelihood function:

$$\mathcal{L}(\beta) = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \log P(r_i \mid \beta). \tag{3}$$

This setup allows us to identify the marginal contribution of each attribute to the utility of an alternative and to compute willingness-to-pay measures when a monetary attribute (e.g., total monthly living cost) is included.

The estimated coefficients β from the ranked-order logit model reflect changes in latent utility rather than directly observable outcomes. Consequently, they are not immediately interpretable in monetary or tangible terms. To provide a more meaningful and comparable metric, we translate these effects into marginal willingness-to-pay (WTP), expressing the impact of non-monetary attributes in terms of a monetary attribute.

When one of the attributes is monetary, such as the total monthly living cost, the marginal WTP for a non-monetary attribute X_m is computed as

$$WTP_k = -\frac{\beta_k}{\beta_{\text{cost}}} \times \frac{S_{\text{cost}}}{S_k}, \tag{4}$$

where β_k denotes the estimated coefficient for attribute k, β_{cost} is the coefficient on the cost attribute, and S_k and S_{cost} are the scaling factors used to adjust the units of each variable (e.g., one hour, one million Toman, or a ten–percentage-point change). This measure reflects the amount of money a student is willing to forego to obtain a one-unit increase in a non-monetary attribute, thereby providing a tangible interpretation of the relative importance of each attribute in students' decision-making.

We begin by presenting the estimated coefficients from the rank-ordered logit (ROL) model. We then interpret these estimates by deriving the implied willingness-to-pay (WTP) measures, following the relationship introduced in Equation (4). This transformation enables us to express the estimated preferences in monetary terms, allowing for a clearer comparison of the relative importance of each attribute across individuals and scenarios.

5.2 Rank-Ordered Logit (ROL) Estimates

Table 8 reports the results from the rank-ordered logit models estimated without and with gender interactions. In both specifications, each coefficient reflects the marginal utility associated with a change in an attribute, conditional on the full ranking of alternatives provided by respondents. The gender-interaction model allows each attribute's effect to vary for male students relative to female students.[5]

Across both models, "Cost of Living" has a negative and highly significant coefficient, indicating that higher living expenses reduce the likelihood that an option is ranked favorably. In contrast, "Expected Future Income", "Dorm Facilities", "Major Match", and "Urban Facilities" consistently show large positive and highly significant effects, confirming that improvements in these attributes raise the perceived desirability of an alternative. "Travel Time" is negative and significant in both models, while "Marriage Probability" remains statistically insignificant.

Introducing gender interactions in column (2) reveals that most attributes have similar effects for male and female respondents. The main exception concerns the "Urban Facilities" attributes. In the choice experiment, respondents were asked to imagine cities offering amenities typical of a provincial capital or one

[5]For ordinal attributes—"Dorm Facilities", "Major Match", and "Urban Facilities"—we estimate separate coefficients for each category relative to a baseline (e.g., no dorm, Top 20, or other cities). Treating these attributes categorically avoids imposing linearity across ordered levels and allows for non-monotonic changes in utility across categories, providing a more flexible representation of preferences.

of Iran's five largest cities. The positive and statistically significant interaction terms indicate that male students place substantially higher value on strong urban amenities compared to female students. Overall, including gender interactions reveals some gender differences without altering the main conclusions: economic and locational attributes remain the dominant drivers of students' university location preferences, with a notable gender gap appearing only in preferences for the amenities of larger, better-serviced cities.

Table 8: Rank-Ordered Logit: Base vs Gender Interaction Model

	(1) No Gender Interaction	(2) With Gender Interaction
Cost		
Cost of Living	-0.076^{***} (0.007)	-0.086^{***} (0.010)
Male × Cost of Living		0.020 (0.014)
Income		
Expected Future Income (Million)	0.064^{***} (0.012)	0.073^{***} (0.017)
Male × Expected Future Income (Million)		−0.019 (0.023)
Marriage		
Marriage Probability (%)	0.148 (0.342)	−0.018 (0.436)
Male × Marriage Probability (%)		0.452 (0.673)
Travel Time		
Travel Time (Hours)	-0.101^{***} (0.020)	-0.111^{***} (0.026)
Male × Travel Time (Hours)		0.020 (0.040)
Dorm Facilities		
Standard (vs None)	0.855^{***} (0.087)	0.973^{***} (0.113)
Premium (vs None)	1.224^{***} (0.102)	1.383^{***} (0.140)
Male × Standard		−0.270 (0.180)
Male × Premium		-0.341^{*} (0.205)
Major Match		
Top 5 (vs Top 20)	0.793^{***} (0.106)	0.815^{***} (0.153)
First Choice (vs Top 20)	0.642^{***} (0.106)	0.564^{***} (0.137)
Male × Top 5		−0.036 (0.207)
Male × First Choice		0.216 (0.219)
Urban Facilities		
Provincial Capital (vs Other Cities)	0.620^{***} (0.081)	0.439^{***} (0.105)
Top 5 Cities (vs Other Cities)	0.601^{***} (0.100)	0.483^{***} (0.132)
Male × Provincial Capital		0.433^{***} (0.164)
Male × Top 5 Cities		0.303 (0.199)
Unique Observations	301	292
Log likelihood	−4700.686	−4618.111

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

5.2.1 Willingness to Pay

Table 9 reports the Willingness to Pay (WTP) values implied by the rank-ordered logit coefficients. Column (1) uses the Baseline Model, while Columns (2) and (3) correspond to male and female respondents in the gender-interaction model. These WTP estimates reflect how much additional living cost students are willing to pay for improvements in the attributes of university and city options.

Students consistently display a strong willingness to pay for better income prospects. An increase of one million Tomans in expected future income—representing the income students anticipate after graduation—yields WTP values of about 0.85 million Tomans for women and 0.81 million for men. This indicates that both genders are willing to accept higher living expenses today in exchange for stronger labor-market opportunities in the future.

In contrast, students require compensation for longer commuting time. Travel Time measures the number of hours needed to travel from a student's home to the university city. The negative WTP values (around –1.3 million Tomans for both genders) show that students dislike long-distance travel and would need to be compensated through lower living costs to accept an extra hour of travel.

Housing conditions exhibit some of the largest WTP values. Access to a standard dormitory is worth about 11 million Tomans to both genders, while access to a high-quality dormitory is valued at approximately 16 million Tomans. These large values underscore the central importance of housing amenities when students compare university locations.

Academic alignment is also highly valued. Students are willing to pay between 8 and 10 million Tomans to relocate to a new city if doing so allows them to study in one of their top five preferred majors, and even more when the move provides access to their single most preferred major. Gender differences are notable: men are willing to pay about 11.8 million Tomans for admission to their First-Choice major, compared to 6.57 million for women, indicating that men place a substantially higher premium on exact academic match.

The largest gender differences arise in preferences for the urban environment. Students are willing to pay substantial amounts to relocate to cities with stronger amenities—either those typical of a provincial capital or those characteristic of Iran's five largest metropolitan areas. While both genders value these improvements, men do so much more strongly. Their willingness to pay for access to a provincial-capital city is about 13.3 million Tomans, compared to 5.1 million for women, and their willingness to pay for cities with top metropolitan level amenities is 11.9 million Tomans, compared to 5.6 million for women. This pronounced gap indicates that city-level amenities are the primary dimension along which male and female location preferences diverge.

Finally, the WTP estimates for marriage-probability improvements are statistically noisy and not mean-

ingful in direction or magnitude, indicating that expectations about marriage prospects do not systematically shape students' willingness to trade off living costs.

Table 9: Willingness-to-Pay Estimates: Baseline vs. Gender-Interaction Model

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All	*Female*	*Male*	*Male − Female*
	b/se	*b/se*	*b/se*	*b/se*
Travel Time (+1 hour)	−1.332***	−1.294***	−1.383***	−0.090
	(0.243)	(0.290)	(0.434)	(0.522)
Expected Future Income (+1 million)	0.839***	0.850***	0.815***	−0.035
	(0.141)	(0.167)	(0.244)	(0.296)
Marriage Probability (+10 p.p.)	19.494	−2.050	66.164	68.214
	(44.415)	(50.857)	(75.426)	(90.970)
Dorm: Standard (vs None)	11.294***	11.338***	10.714***	−0.624
	(1.298)	(1.539)	(2.198)	(2.683)
Dorm: Premium (vs None)	16.156***	16.118***	15.887***	−0.230
	(1.425)	(1.758)	(2.295)	(2.891)
Major: Top 5 (vs Top 20)	10.465***	9.491***	11.865***	2.374
	(1.539)	(1.910)	(2.459)	(3.114)
Major: First Choice (vs Top 20)	8.481***	6.574***	11.882***	5.308*
	(1.291)	(1.526)	(2.269)	(2.735)
Urban: Provincial Capital (vs Other)	8.191***	5.116***	13.290***	8.175***
	(1.240)	(1.324)	(2.512)	(2.840)
Urban: Top 5 Cities (vs Other)	7.941***	5.630***	11.981***	6.351**
	(1.268)	(1.439)	(2.431)	(2.825)
Unique Observations	301	292	292	292

Notes: WTP values are computed as the ratio of the attribute coefficient to the cost-of-living coefficient. The "Male – Female" column reports the difference in WTP (Male minus Female), computed from the gender-interaction model using nlcom. Standard errors and significance levels are derived via the delta method.

6 Conclusion

This paper examines why many students prefer to study close to home and how they trade off academic opportunities, costs, and city amenities when choosing the location of their higher education. Using two original surveys of university entrants in Iran—one focused on attitudes, constraints, and family dynamics, and the other on a stated-preference ranking experiment—we show that distance is not merely a geographic variable but reflects a bundle of economic, familial, and environmental considerations. High living and travel costs, limited dormitory availability, and parental opposition emerge as key barriers to studying in another city, with these constraints binding more tightly for female students. Girls are less willing—and often less able—to migrate for education; they receive weaker parental support and attribute parents' reluctance primarily to economic concerns rather than conservative gender attitudes. At the same time, female students

place particularly high weight on safety and housing security.

The rank-ordered logit and WTP analyses show that students are willing to pay substantial amounts to relocate when doing so offers clear academic and urban advantages. Lower living costs, higher expected income, shorter travel time from home, better dormitory quality, access to preferred majors, and stronger urban amenities all increase the attractiveness of a university–city option. Students assign especially high monetary value to premium dormitory quality, top-choice majors, and large metropolitan amenities, with male students displaying a markedly stronger willingness to pay for big-city environments and exact academic match, while female students place greater emphasis on housing conditions.

Overall, the findings indicate that reducing geographic inequality in access to higher education requires addressing financial and infrastructural barriers—such as expanding affordable dormitories, improving transportation, and diversifying university majors in underserved regions—while also recognizing the gender-specific constraints that shape students' willingness and ability to relocate.

References

Vladimír Baláž, Allan M Williams, and Erika Fifeková. Determinants of emigration from slovakia: Evidence from a discrete choice experiment. *Population, Space and Place*, 22(7):1–17, 2016.

Timothy J Bartik et al. Regional labor markets and migration. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity: Microeconomics*, pages 1–91, 1992.

Christian Bayer and Falko Juessen. Internal migration in the united states. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 10(1):137–163, 2012.

Paul Beaudry, David A Green, and Benjamin M Sand. Why is employment growth so low? the role of job loss and moving costs. *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 62:1–13, 2014.

M. Beffy, D. Fougere, and A. Maurel. Choosing the field of studies in postsecondary education: do expected earnings matter? *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 94(2):334–347, 2012.

J. M. Braxton. *How students choose colleges*, pages 57–67. Jossey-Bass, 1990.

D. W. Chapman. A model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 52(5):490–505, 1981.

J. Cullinan, D. Flannery, S. Walsh, et al. Distance effects, social class and the decision to participate in higher education in ireland. *The Economic and Social Review*, 44(1):19–51, 2013.

Catherine C. Eckel and Philip J. Grossman. Sex differences and statistical stereotyping in attitudes toward financial risk. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 23(4):281–295, 2002. ISSN 1090-5138. doi: 10.1016/S1090-5138(02)00097-1.

Richard Florida. *Who's Your City?: How the Creative Economy Is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*. Basic Books, New York, 2009.

M. Frenette. Too far to go on? distance to school and university participation. *Education Economics*, 14 (1):31–58, 2006. doi: 10.1080/09645290500481865.

Pamela Giustinelli. Group decision making with uncertain outcomes: Unpacking child–parent choice of the high school track. *International Economic Review*, 57(2):573–602, 2016. doi: 10.1111/iere.12172. URL https://doi.org/10.1111/iere.12172.

J. Hearn. The relative roles of academic ascribed and socioeconomic characteristics in college destinations. *Sociology of Education*, 57(1):22–30, 1984.

D. E. Heller. Student price response in higher education: An update to leslie and brinkman. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6):624–659, 1997.

D. Hossler, J. Schmit, and N. Vesper. *Going to college: Social, economic and educational factors' influence on decisions students make*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

John Kennan and James R Walker. The effect of expected income on individual migration decisions. *Econometrica*, 79(1):211–251, 2011.

Gizem Koşar, Tyler Ransom, and Wilbert van der Klaauw. Understanding migration aversion using elicited counterfactual choice probabilities. *Journal of Econometrics*, 225(2):323–345, 2021.

David Lagakos, Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak, and Michael E Waugh. Urban migration and structural transformation: Evidence from bangladesh. *American Economic Review*, 108(9):2460–2501, 2018.

M. Long, D. Goldhaber, and N. Huntington-Klein. Do completed college majors respond to changes in wages? *Economics of Education Review*, 49:1–14, 2015.

Hamish Low. Housing, mortgage default, and non-monetary moving costs. *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 37:1–22, 2020.

H. Oosterbeek, W. Groot, and J. Hartog. An empirical analysis of university choice and earnings. *De Economist*, 140(3):293–309, 1992.

M. Paulsen. *College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior*. Eric Clearinghouse on Higher Education and George Washington University, 1990.

C. Spiess and K. Wrohlich. Does distance determine who attends a university in germany? *Economics of Education Review*, 29(3):470–479, 2010. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2009.10.009.

M. Wiswall and B. Zafar. Determinants of college major choice: identification using an information experiment. *Review of Economic Studies*, 82(2):791–824, 2015.

Matthew Wiswall and Basit Zafar. Preference for the workplace, investment in human capital, and gender. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133(1):457–507, 2018. doi: 10.1093/qje/qjx035.

Basit Zafar. College major choice and the gender gap. *Journal of Human Resources*, 48(3), 2013.

A Survey Questions

Welcome Page

- Welcome to the Survey.
- This survey is conducted by a research team from the Tehran Institute for Advanced Studies (a university research center) for research in the field of education.
- Completing it will take approximately 15 minutes. At the end, as a token of appreciation, 100 prizes of one million tomans will be awarded by lottery among respondents who complete the survey carefully and in full.
- Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. This research institute is independent of Gozineh–2, and Gozineh–2 has no role in designing the questionnaire or accessing the data.

How to respond (please read carefully):

- There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your views. Please answer all questions carefully so that the results of the study are reliable and valuable.
- At the end, make sure to click the "Submit" button so that your responses are recorded; otherwise, you will not be eligible for the lottery.
- This questionnaire is intended for high-school students or university applicants. If you are not a student or applicant, please pass the questionnaire to someone who is.
- For any questions or to contact the research team, please email `info@teias.institute`.

A.1 Questions Common to Both Versions

Question 1

Who is completing this questionnaire?

1. Student / University applicant
2. Parent
3. Other

Skip logic: If option 1 (Student / University applicant) is selected, Question 5 will be shown. Otherwise, Question 2 will be shown.

Question 2

This questionnaire is designed to gather the opinions of high-school students or university applicants. We would appreciate it if you could kindly give this questionnaire to the student/applicant to complete. Can you make this questionnaire available to them so that they can respond?

1. The student/applicant is available.
2. The student/applicant is not available.

Skip logic: If option 1 is selected, show the text box 1. Otherwise, go to Question 3.

Text Box 1

Please hand over this questionnaire to the student/applicant so that they can complete it themselves.

Skip logic: After this text, Question 4 will always be shown.

Question 3

Can you make this questionnaire available to them so that they can respond?

1. Yes.
2. No.

option 1 is selected, show Text Box 1. Otherwise, show Text Box 2.

Question 4

Who is currently completing this questionnaire?

1. Student / University applicant
2. The student/applicant was not available (survey could not be conducted).

Skip logic: If option 1 is selected,will be shown. Otherwise the Text box 2.

Text Box 2

Thank you for your cooperation. This questionnaire is intended specifically for students/university applicants. If you are not a student/applicant, you do not need to complete it.

Skip logic: End of survey.

Question 5

Please specify the high-school track you studied.

1. Mathematics & Physics
2. Experimental Sciences
3. Literature & Humanities
4. Islamic Sciences
5. Technical & Vocational
6. Work & Knowledge (Kar-o-Danesh)

Question 6

Please specify your quota type.

1.

Question 7

Please specify your national rank in the entrance exam.

Open response (numeric)

Question 8

Please enter your final-year high-school GPA.

Open response (numeric).

Question 9

Have you completed your field selection form on the Sanjesh Organization website?

1. Yes
2. No

Skip logic: If ***Yes*** *(Option 1) is selected, show Questions 10–12. Otherwise, skip these three questions.*

Question 10

Please write the name of the university you have been admitted to.

Open response.

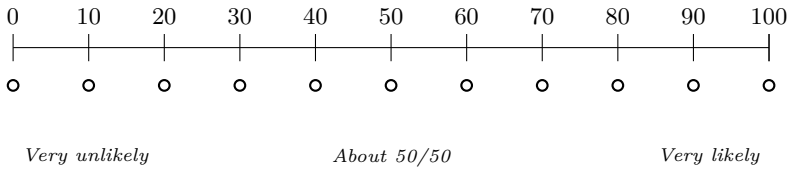
Question 11

Please write the name of the major/field you have been admitted to.

Open response.

Question 12

At the time of filling out your field selection form, how likely did you think it was that you would be admitted to this university and major?



Question 13

Please specify your gender.

1. Male
2. Female

Question 14

Please specify your year of birth.

Open response (dropdown with years).

Question 15

Please specify your household's monthly income (total for the family in 2024–2025). Your information is confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

1. Less than 150,000,000 IRR per month
2. 150,000,000 to 300,000,000 IRR per month
3. 300,000,000 to 500,000,000 IRR per month
4. More than 500,000,000 IRR per month
5. Prefer not to answer

Question 16

Please specify the type of your high school (final year).

1. Public
2. SAMPAD (National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents)
3. Sample Public (Nemuneh Dowlati)
4. Non-profit / Private

Question 17

If you were to choose a color for your room walls, which color would you prefer? ***This is an attention check. Please select Blue and Pink. You can choose at most two options.***

1. Blue
2. Red
3. Cream
4. Pink
5. Pistachio
6. Light gray
7. None

Question 18

Please answer based on your view at the time of completing the field-selection form. If an opportunity arose to study for a bachelor's degree in a city other than your family's place of residence, which of the following best describes your willingness and possibility? ***(Select only one option.)***

1. I am willing and able to study in another city and would go if the opportunity arises.
2. I am willing to study in another city, but my parents oppose it.
3. I am willing to study in another city, but for reasons other than parental opposition (e.g., financial or personal) it is not possible.
4. I am willing to study in another city, but both parental opposition and other factors prevent it.
5. I am not willing to study in another city and prefer to study where I currently live.

Question 19

How many people currently live in your parents' home (including yourself)?

Drop Down Question.

Question 20

Please specify your province of residence.

Drop Down Question.

Question 21

Please specify whether you live in a city or a village.

1. City
2. Village

Skip logic: If ***Village*** *(Option 2) is selected, show Question 23. Otherwise, show Question 22.*

Question 22

Please enter the name of your city of residence.

Open response.

Question 23

Please enter the name of your village of residence.

Open response.

Question 24

Please specify in which entrance exam (Konkur) group you participated. If you participated in two groups, please select the one in which you are most likely to continue your studies.

1. Experimental Sciences
2. Humanities
3. Mathematics and Physics
4. Arts
5. Languages

Skip logic: If ***Experimental Sciences*** *is selected, show Question A. If* ***Humanities*** *is selected, show Question*

*B. If **Mathematics and Physics** is selected, show Question C.*

Question A (shown if Experimental Sciences is selected)

Please answer based on your opinion at the time of filling out the field-selection form. Among the following groups of university majors, which one were you most interested in?

1. Education (Educational Sciences, Teacher Training, Curriculum Studies, etc.)
2. Biological Sciences (Biology, Biochemistry, Genetics, etc.)
3. Physical Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, Earth Sciences, etc.)
4. Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries
5. Veterinary Medicine
6. Health and Welfare (Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, etc.)
7. Business and Management (Business Administration, Human Resource Management, etc.)
8. Law
9. Social Sciences (Political Science, Economics, etc.)

Question B (shown if Humanities is selected)

Please answer based on your opinion at the time of filling out the field-selection form. Among the following groups of university majors, which one were you most interested in?

1. Education (Educational Sciences, Teacher Training, Curriculum Studies, etc.)
2. Humanities (Persian Literature, History, Theology, Foreign Languages, Philosophy, etc.)
3. Social Sciences (Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Economics, etc.)
4. Journalism and Information (Journalism, Librarianship, Information Studies, etc.)
5. Business and Management (Business Administration, Human Resource Management, etc.)
6. Services (Tourism Management, Hotel Management, Tour Guiding, etc.)
7. Law

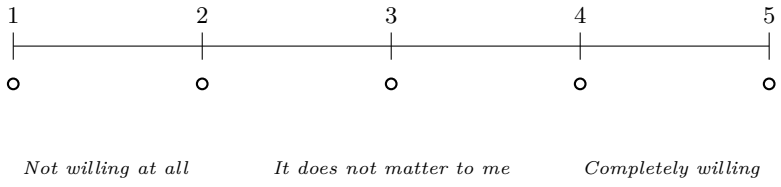
Question C (shown if Mathematics and Physics is selected)

Please answer based on your opinion at the time of filling out the field-selection form. Among the following groups of university majors, which one were you most interested in?

1. Education (Educational Sciences, Teacher Training, Mathematics or Physics Teaching, etc.)
2. Computer and IT (Computer Science, Information Applications, etc.)
3. Mathematics and Statistics
4. Physical Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, etc.)
5. Engineering and Related Professions (Electrical, Mechanical, Industrial, etc.)
6. Production and Processing (Mining, Manufacturing, Food Industries, etc.)
7. Architecture and Construction (Architecture, Urban Design, Civil Engineering, etc.)
8. Business and Management (Business Administration, Human Resource Management, etc.)
9. Law
10. Social Sciences (Political Science, Economics, etc.)

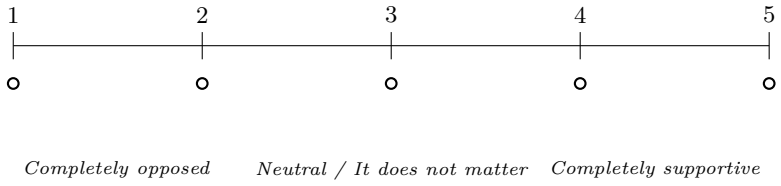
Question 25

Please answer based on your view at the time of completing the field-selection form. How willing are you to move to a city other than your current place of residence to continue your studies?



Question 26

To what extent do your parents agree with your studying in a city other than your current place of residence?



Question 27

In the table below, there are six hypothetical chance games. The outcome of each game is determined by a fair coin toss (Heads/Tails, each 50%). Which game would you choose to play?

Example

In Game 6, if the coin shows *Heads* you receive 200,000 tomans; otherwise (if *Tails*) you receive 7,000,000 tomans.

Choice	Heads	Tails
1	2.8 million tomans	2.8 million tomans
2	2.4 million tomans	3.2 million tomans
3	2.0 million tomans	3.6 million tomans
4	1.6 million tomans	4.0 million tomans
5	1.0 million tomans	6.0 million tomans
6	0.2 million tomans	7.0 million tomans

Question 28

Please answer based on your view at the time of completing the field-selection form. If you study in another city, what would be your first preference for accommodation there?

1. Only university dormitory
2. Any type of dormitory (university or non-university)
3. I do not want a dormitory; I prefer to rent a house
4. It does not matter to me

Question 29

(Optional) If you wish, please describe any considerations or concerns you or your family may have about studying in another city.

Open-ended response area.

A.2 Questions Exclusive to the Qualitative City-Selection Version

Question 1

Which urban amenities in the city where you study are most important to you? Please rank them from most important to least important (Row 1 = most important).

1. Cultural and recreational facilities (cinemas, shopping centers, cafés, etc.)
2. Urban transportation (metro, bus, etc.)
3. Climate
4. Urban safety (crime rate, social security)
5. Green space and environmental quality
6. Public and welfare facilities (hospitals, clinics, etc.)

Question 2

Which features of commuting between your place of residence and the city where you study are most important to you (if you study in another city)? Please rank them from most important to least important (Row 1 = most important).

1. Travel time
2. Cost of commuting between the two cities
3. Type of transportation (airplane, train, bus)
4. Travel safety (risk of theft or harassment)
5. Road quality and accident risk

Question 3

Which features of your university dormitory are most important to you (if you study in another city)? Please rank them from most important to least important (Row 1 = most important).

1. Dormitory density (number of people per room)
2. Daily living facilities (washing machine, refrigerator, etc.)
3. Recreational facilities (gym, green space)
4. Dormitory regulations (entry/exit hours and other restrictions)
5. Proximity to the university

Question 4

The following list includes reasons why some parents might oppose their child's studying in another city. Please indicate how important each of these reasons is for your parents (Row 1 = most important).

1. Their need for my help with household tasks
2. Their emotional attachment to me
3. High living expenses in another city
4. Their desire to have more supervision over my social life
5. Their lack of confidence in my ability to live independently
6. Their concern that I might feel homesick

Question 5

The following list includes factors that may encourage some students to continue their education in another city. Please rank the options according to their importance to you (Row 1 = most important).

1. Gaining more independence from family
2. Better job opportunities after graduation
3. Higher quality university or academic program
4. Experiencing life in a new city and different culture
5. Better opportunities for marriage
6. Encouragement from parents or relatives to study in another city
7. Safer or more desirable urban environment
8. Opportunity to study in a preferred field

Question 6

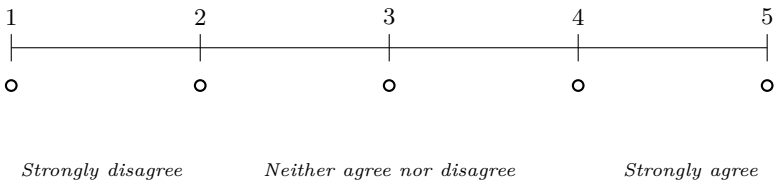
The following list includes reasons that may discourage some students from pursuing university studies in another city. Please rank the options according to their importance to you (Row 1 = most important).

1. Parents' opposition to me moving to another city
2. High cost of traveling home to visit family
3. Lack of dormitories or affordable housing in the destination city
4. Concern about higher crime rates in other cities
5. Fear of adapting to a new culture
6. Concern about fewer marriage opportunities in another city

Question 7

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

1. I see myself as someone who is reserved and quiet.
2. I see myself as someone who generally trusts others.
3. I see myself as someone who tends to be lazy.
4. I see myself as someone who is calm and handles stress well.
5. I see myself as someone who has few artistic interests.
6. I see myself as someone who is outgoing and sociable.
7. I see myself as someone who tends to find fault with others.
8. I see myself as someone who does tasks thoroughly and carefully.
9. I see myself as someone who gets nervous or anxious easily.
10. I see myself as someone who has an active imagination.



Question 8

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: A woman should be able to work outside the home even after marriage and having children.

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly agree

Question 9

If there were no restrictions on studying in another city, would you choose a different university major?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I currently have no such restrictions

Skip logic: If option 1 (Yes) is selected, show next Question. Otherwise, skip the next question.

Question 10

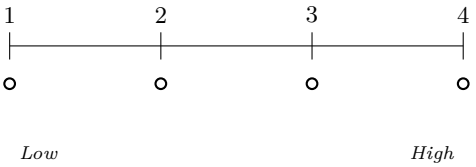
In that case, please write the name of the university major you would have chosen.

Open-ended response area.

Question 11

Please answer each of the following questions based on a 1–4 scale. ***(1 = Low, 4 = High)***

1. How much do your parents respect your personal choices regarding clothing and appearance?
2. How much freedom do your parents give you to decide whom you spend time with?
3. When your parents have requests that go against your wishes, how much do you try to express your views and convince them through discussion?
4. How close do you feel to your parents?
5. To what extent do you think your parents would agree with your studying in another city?
6. When your parents have requests that go against your wishes, how often do you act according to your own will?



Question 12

In your opinion, do your parents agree or disagree with the following statement: "A woman should be able to work outside the home even after marriage and having children."

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly agree

Question 13

Consider two individuals from a medium-sized city in Iran who both go to study at universities in one of the five largest cities of Iran and are otherwise comparable in all respects. Suppose Person A, after graduation, starts working in that same (large) city, while Person B returns to their home city and starts working there. By age 30, how different do you think Person A's monthly income would be compared to Person B's?

1. More than 50% higher
2. About 25% higher
3. Approximately the same
4. About 25% lower
5. More than 50% lower

Question 14

On average, how different do you think monthly rent for housing in the five largest cities of Iran is compared with other cities in the country?

1. More than 50% higher
2. About 25% higher
3. Approximately the same
4. About 25% lower
5. More than 50% lower

A.3 Questions Exclusive to the Hypothetical Scenario Version

Each respondent was presented with 12 hypothetical scenarios. There were four different 12-scenario versions, which differed in the specific combination of levels used and in which two non–cost-of-living attributes were paired together within each scenario.

Below, four sample scenarios from Version 1 are shown. For each of the examples below, three additional

scenarios with the same attribute combinations—but with different levels—were also presented to participants.

Question 1

Scenario 1: Please rank each row in the table from best to worst according to your preference. (*Rank 1 = best; Rank 3 = worst*)

Consider the three alternatives below. All features are identical except for the following:

- Travel time from the university to parents' home
- Total monthly cost of living for a student in that city
- Dormitory availability and quality:
  - Available – Excellent (2 students per room; private study desk and refrigerator)
  - Available – Standard (6 students per room; shared facilities)

Alternative	Travel time to parents' house	Total monthly cost of living in that city	Dorm
A	About 3 hours	About 10 million Tomans	Available - Excellent
B	More than 6 hours	About 3 million Tomans	Available – Standard
C	About 1.5 hours	About 10 million Tomans	Not available

Question 2

Scenario 2: Please rank each row in the table from best to worst according to your preference. (*Rank 1 = best; Rank 3 = worst*)

Consider the three alternatives below. All features are identical except for the following:

- Preferred major (field of study you are interested in)
- Total monthly cost of living for a student in that city
- City amenities (recreation, transportation, safety, etc.)

Alternative	Preferred major	Total monthly cost of living in that city	City amenities
A	Most preferred field of study	About 10 million Tomans	At the level of other cities (excluding provincial capitals and the five largest cities)
B	Among top 5 preferred fields	About 3 million Tomans	At the level of other cities (excluding provincial capitals and the five largest cities)
C	Among top 20 preferred fields	About 10 million Tomans	At the level of the five largest cities