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What shapes cadets' decisions? Factors influencing the choice of the Faculty of Medicine of the Military Medical Academy

Šta oblikuje odluke kadeta? Faktori koji utiču na izbor Medicinskog fakulteta Vojnomedicinske akademije

Aleksandar Petrović*, Milica Kostić-Stanković†, Marina Ignjatović†

***Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, Public Relations Department, Belgrade, Serbia; †University of Belgrade, Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia**

Abstract

Background/Aim. To create an effective promotional strategy for the Medical Faculty of the Military Medical Academy (MF MMA), it is essential to understand why young people decide to enroll in this military higher education institution (MHEI). The aim of this study was to identify the key factors and examine their influence on cadets' decisions to enroll in MF MMA. **Methods.** A cross-sectional study was conducted during the second semester of the 2023/2024 academic year with 121 participants (cadets and candidates for enrollment at the MF MMA). A qualitative phase, aimed at defining the research instrument, was implemented using the focus group method. Data collection was performed using an online questionnaire. Analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression. **Results.** The factors that have the greatest influence on cadets' decisions to enroll in the MF MMA are: "cultural capital" ($\beta = 0.260$; $p < 0.01$), "physical culture" ($\beta = 0.210$; $p < 0.05$), "quality of military medical education" ($\beta = 0.191$; $p < 0.05$), "career" ($\beta = 0.176$; $p < 0.05$), and "status" ($\beta = 0.171$; $p < 0.05$). **Conclusion.** The results indicate that cadets' decision to choose MF MMA is influenced by the combination of personal and institutional factors of a predominantly social nature. Candidates applying for enrollment at the MF MMA have strong personal affinities towards the profession of an army officer/military doctor, highly value the culture of the military organization, appreciate the educational offer of the MHEI, and recognize opportunities for professional and career development. These findings may contribute to defining the promotional strategy of MF MMA and ensure that the institution maintains a stable influx of high-quality and motivated candidates for education.

Key words:
education, medical; military medicine; serbia; surveys and questionnaires.

Apstrakt

Uvod/Cilj. Da bi se kreirala efektivna promotivna strategija Medicinskog fakulteta Vojnomedicinske akademije (MF VMA), neophodno je razumeti razloge zbog kojih se mladi opredeljuju da upišu ovu vojnu visokoškolsku ustanovu (VVŠU). Cilj rada bio je da se utvrde ključni faktori i ispita njihov uticaj na odluku kadeta da upišu MF VMA. **Metode.** Sprovedena je studija preseka tokom drugog semestra školske 2023/2024. godine sa 121 ispitanikom (kadeti i kandidati za upis na MF VMA). Kvalitativna faza sa ciljem definisanja istraživačkog instrumenta realizovana je metodom fokus grupe. Prikupljanje podataka realizovano je putem *online* upitnika. Analiza je vršena primenom višestruke linearne regresije. **Rezultati.** Najveći uticaj na odluku kadeta da upišu MF VMA imaju faktori: „kulturni kapital" ($\beta = 0{,}260$; $p < 0{,}01$), „fizička kultura" ($\beta = 0{,}210$; $p < 0{,}05$), „kvalitet vojnog medicinskog obrazovanja" ($\beta = 0{,}191$; $p < 0{,}05$), „karijera" ($\beta = 0{,}176$; $p < 0{,}05$) i „status" ($\beta = 0{,}171$; $p < 0{,}05$). **Zaključak.** Rezultati ukazuju da na izbor MF VMA od strane kadeta utiče kombinacija ličnih i institucionalnih faktora pretežno socijalne prirode. Kandidati koji konkurišu za upis na MF VMA imaju naglašene lične afinitete prema profesiji oficira/vojnog lekara, visoko vrednuju kulturu vojne organizacije, cene obrazovnu ponudu VVŠU, i prepoznaju prilike za stručni i karijerni razvoj. Ova saznanja mogu doprineti definisanju promotivne strategije MF VMA i obezbediti da ta institucija ima stabilan priliv kvalitetnih i motivisanih kandidata za školovanje.

Ključne reči:
edukacija, medicinska; medicina, vojna; srbija; ankete i upitnici.

Correspondence to: Aleksandar Petrović, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, Public Relations Department, Birčaninova 5, 11 000 Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: aleksandar.petrovic@mod.gov.rs

Introduction

The marketing orientation of higher education institutions (HEIs) over the past few decades has become a key determinant of their institutional development in the context of increasing competition among universities and faculties [1, 2]. This trend has led to the fact that, despite their specific mission and role in the system of defence and the significant restrictions in the aspect of adopting marketing models of development, military HEIs (MHEIs) in the Republic of Serbia have to compete with their civilian counterparts for future students at the single market of higher education [3]. The Medical Faculty (MF) of the Military Medical Academy (MMA) – MF MMA educates future officers/military doctors, for the needs of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) through integrated academic medical studies and has an interest in ensuring a sufficient number of high-quality and motivated candidates for enrollment year by year.

Without understanding the factors and models that explain what influences potential candidates to enroll in a HEI, universities cannot predict the right manner to increase their efficiency in attracting new students, or they can overestimate the impact of what is done in that field [4]. Therefore, one of the key assumptions for creating an efficient promotional strategy for MHEIs in the Republic of Serbia – The University of Defense (UoD), the Military Academy (MA), and MF MMA – is to research the sets of influential factors which are crucial in cadets' decision to apply for them.

Although the influencing factors and models of HEI selection have been intensively studied since the mid-1970s, only one recent study can be found in major academic repositories that specifically addresses the factors influencing the selection of MHEIs, specifically the choice of MA in Turkey [5]. In contrast, research on the factors that influence the selection of medical faculty has not been published so far. The only study related to the selection factors of civilian HEIs in Serbia was published in 2020 [6]. This gap in the scientific literature indicates the need for a deeper understanding of the motivation and expectations of future students in the military educational context.

However, in most research, it is possible to establish certain regularities regarding the groups of key factors that determine the selection of a HEI. Firstly, researchers often suggest factors that directly relate to the student or candidate, as well as their immediate environment – the family. This group of influential factors can include: a) socioeconomic status, which includes income and ownership of movable and immovable property, parental professions and education, as well as educational aspirations and expectations that families and individuals have regarding education [7–9]; b) success in previous education [10]; c) career preferences [5, 11]; d) personal and family values [5, 12, 13]; e) the influence of close people – parents, relatives, and friends [5, 14, 15]; f) gender [16–18]. The second major group of influential factors, encompassing the institutional prerogatives of HEIs, is particularly significant from a marketing perspective, as these factors can be leveraged to influence the desired outcome of the selection process [19]. It often includes the following: a) institutional (academic) reputation [6, 20]; b) employment opportunities after the studies [6, 20]; c) career prospects [21]; d) expected salary (after graduation) [6, 22]; e) the quality of professors [11, 23]; f) infrastructure (facilities for accommodation, classes, sports, and extracurricular activities) [11, 20, 23]; g) complexity (difficulty) of enrollment [6]. The third group includes those factors that simultaneously relate to (future) students and the HEI and are referred to in the literature as interactional [7]: a) tuition costs [6, 24]; b) financial support (scholarships) [9]; c) location – geographical distance [6, 9, 25]; d) information and sources of information about the HEI [7, 21, 26].

Considerations and interpretations of the factors influencing higher education choices are primarily conceptualized within two model groups: economic models of human capital investment and economic models of status acquisition [27]. Economic or econometric models of HEI choice represent a theoretical framework that provides insight into how prospective students decide which HEI to attend based on economic parameters. Social models emphasize the importance of social connections, family environment, peer influence, and cultural norms in shaping educational aspirations and the choice of tertiary education institutions.

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka [7] state that, despite their efforts, researchers have not yet succeeded in compiling a single list of factors that influence all potential students or in providing a definitive explanation for why students choose a particular university. Research findings in this field vary depending on the time period during which the study was conducted, the country or region, and the broader social, economic, political, and cultural context, as well as the characteristics of the population or sample and the applied methodology.

The aim of this study was to identify and analyze the key factors influencing the choice of MF MMA by relying on a review of existing literature and the results of research conducted with cadets of this MHEI.

Methods

A total of 121 respondents participated in the survey, out of which 112 were cadets from the first to the fourth year of study at MF MMA, Belgrade, Serbia (28 were in the first year, 24 in the second, 31 in the third, and 29 in the the fourth year of studies), which is more than two-thirds of the total number of cadets. There were also nine candidates for enrollment in MF MMA. Regarding gender, 31 respondents (25.6%) were male and 90 (74.4%) female. The gender structure of the sample corresponds to the gender structure of all cadets in the MF MMA. Considering the above facts, it may be concluded that the sample was adequate.

This research was conducted with the consent of the Rector of UoD and the Commander of MA during the second semester of the 2023/2024 school year.

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase of qualitative research was conducted to develop a questionnaire for the subsequent quantitative empirical

research. To obtain a representative sample, 12 cadets from the first to the fourth year of studies at MF MMA (four males and eight females, equally distributed by year of study) participated in the qualitative research conducted using the focus group method [28]. The selection process considered gender parity and equal distribution across study years. During the session, cadets were encouraged to articulate their key reasons and motivations for enrolling in the MF MMA. In the first round, each participant shared one or two main reasons, followed by a moderated discussion to deepen insights and stimulate interaction. The discussion was guided using open-ended prompts focused on motivational and decision-making factors related to choosing a military medical education. The researcher diligently recorded the answers and attitudes expressed during the focus group. Content analysis was conducted by grouping statements based on frequency and similarity, which formed the basis for constructing the questionnaire items. This process ensured that the constructs reflected authentic cadet experiences and aligned with themes emerging from the qualitative data.

After processing and analyzing the data acquired using the focus group, based on the quality and frequency of given responses, a structured questionnaire was developed with a total of 39 questions (Appendix) – statements related to the reasons and motives for enrolling in MF MMA (34 statements) and the satisfaction with the decision to enroll (5 statements). The latter represents the outcome of the future model. All of the statements mentioned above were rated on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire also included questions regarding demographic data and information on socioeconomic status.

Based on a review of the scientific literature and the similarity of the responses given in the qualitative phase of the research, the constructs – factors concerning the decision to enroll in MF MMA were tested. The following constructs were formulated: "reputation", "benefits", "cultural capital", "career", "personal development", "quality of military medical education", "status", "physical culture", "influence of close people", and "self-perception". The "decision" scale, as the outcome in the future model, was formulated alongside these factors, measuring cadets' willingness and determination to enroll in MF MMA. The comprehensibility of the questionnaire was checked, and minor corrections to the wording of the statements were made with a group of cadets chosen by the commanders of the Cadet Brigade (the unit that includes all cadets of the MA and the MF MMA from the first to the fourth year of studies) using a random sample method. The number of subitems in each subconstruct is given in Table 1, while the details regarding the subitems are available upon request.

The second phase of the research was conducted using an online questionnaire (Google Forms). The survey was voluntary and completely anonymous. The questionnaire was distributed to all cadets from the first to the fourth year of studies by the management of the MF MMA. The respondents were informed that the purpose of the survey was scientific research and that the confidentiality of the data was guaranteed.

Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis in this study was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were applied to examine the factors influencing cadets' decisions to enroll in the MF MMA. Descriptive statistics included measures of central tendency and dispersion, with mean and standard deviation used to summarize continuous variables, while minimum and maximum values were reported to indicate the range of responses. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. To assess the interrelationships between key constructs, Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied. The interpretation of correlation strength followed Cohen's guidelines (1988), with significance levels set at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive power of selected constructs, including "cultural capital", "physical culture", "quality of military medical education", "career", and "status" on cadets' enrollment decisions. The assessment of the regression model included the evaluation of standardized regression coefficients to determine the relative influence of predictors, the coefficient of determination (r^2) to quantify the explained

Table 1

Cronbach's alpha value for scales

Scales	n	Cronbach's alpha	Reliability assessment
Factor 1: Reputation	3	0.738	acceptable
Factor 2: Benefits	3	0.720	acceptable
Factor 3: Cultural capital	4	0.745	acceptable
Factor 4: Career	3	0.716	acceptable
Factor 5: Personal development	3	0.725	acceptable
Factor 6: Quality of military medical education	4	0.748	acceptable
Factor 7: Status	3	0.786	acceptable
Factor 8: Physical culture	3	0.762	acceptable
Factor 9: Influence of close people	5	0.756	acceptable
Factor 10: Self-perception	3	0.712	acceptable
Construct scale	34	0.870	good
Decision scale	5	0.765	acceptable
Full scale	39	0.929	excellent

n – number of questions.

variance, and the analysis of variance (ANOVA) test (F-statistic) to verify the overall significance of the model. Statistical significance for individual predictors was determined using a threshold of $p < 0.05$. The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values above 0.70 deemed acceptable, above 0.80 considered good, and above 0.90 regarded as excellent. The assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were examined to ensure the validity of statistical inferences. The applied methodology provided a robust framework for analyzing the factors influencing cadets' enrollment decisions, ensuring the reliability of the study findings.

Results

The reliability of the scales was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was acceptable for the construct scales (α ranging from 0.712 to 0.786) and the "decision" scale ($\alpha = 0.765$), good for the construct scale ($\alpha = 0.870$), and excellent for the entire measurement scale ($\alpha = 0.929$), which confirms the required level of reliability and internal consistency of the scales (Table 1). Descriptive statistics of the constructs and decisions are presented in Table 2. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis, presented in Table 3, showed a moderate to strong correlation (r ranging from 0.347 to 0.677) and a highly significant correlation between the construct "decision" and all other constructs ($p < 0.01$). The inter-construct correlations are moderate and also highly significant in most cases.

The results of the multiple regression analysis (Table 4) indicate that the regression model is significant, as evidenced by a significant F-statistic in the ANOVA test ($p < 0.001$). The predictor set of constructs explains 63.4% of the variability of the dependent variable ($r^2 = 0.634$). The standardized regression coefficients β show that the strongest influence on the decision is exerted by the constructs: "cultural capital" ($\beta = 0.260$; $p < 0.01$), "physical culture" ($\beta = 0.210$; $p < 0.05$), "quality of military medical education" ($\beta = 0.191$; $p < 0.05$), "career" ($\beta = 0.176$; $p < 0.05$), and "status" ($\beta = 0.171$; $p < 0.05$). Other constructs with weak positive or negative influence on the "decision" variable do not have a statistically significant impact.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of constructs/factors and decisions

Variable	Mean ± SD	Min–Max
Factor 1: Reputation	4.36 ± 0.67	2.33–5.00
Factor 2: Benefits	4.19 ± 0.60	2.33–5.00
Factor 3: Cultural capital	4.08 ± 0.81	1.00–5.00
Factor 4: Career	3.93 ± 0.81	1.67–5.00
Factor 5: Personal development	4.32 ± 0.66	2.00–5.00
Factor 6: Quality of military medical education	4.42 ± 0.62	2.25–5.00
Factor 7: Status	4.28 ± 0.79	1.00–5.00
Factor 8. Physical culture	4.20 ± 0.78	1.67–5.00
Factor 9: Influence of close people	3.64 ± 0.86	1.60–5.00
Factor 10: Self-perception	4.36 ± 0.64	2.33–5.00
Decision	4.23 ± 0.79	1.60–5.00

SD – standard deviation; min – minimum; max – maximum.

Table 3

Correlation matrix between the construct "decision" and all other constructs

Construct	Decision	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Factor 1: Reputation	0.490**									
Factor 2: Benefits	0.363**	0.324**								
Factor 3: Cultural capital	0.677**	0.496**	0.217*							
Factor 4: Career	0.508**	0.246**	0.271**	0.500**						
Factor 5: Personal development	0.470**	0.394**	0.343**	0.433**	0.398**					
Factor 6: Quality of military medical education	0.627**	0.624**	0.376**	0.547**	0.315**	0.476**				
Factor 7: Status	0.584**	0.439**	0.290**	0.578**	0.311**	0.458**	0.505**			
Factor 8: Physical culture	0.647**	0.553**	0.380**	0.581**	0.379**	0.559**	0.671**	0.476**		
Factor 9: Influence of close people	0.347**	0.274**	0.217*	0.363**	0.271**	0.180*	0.439**	0.293**	0.394**	
Factor 10: Self-perception	0.550**	0.401**	0.133	0.580**	0.392**	0.341**	0.550**	0.633**	0.497**	0.225*

Pearson correlation analysis (r) was used.

***Note*: * Significance at the 0.05 level; **Significance at the 0.01 level.**

Table 4

The connection and influence of constructs/factors on the decision

Predictor variables	Non-standard coefficients	Standard coefficients (β)	*t*	*p*-value
Constant	-0.422	-	-0.907	0.367
Factor 1: Reputation	-0.008	-0.007	-0.091	0.928
Factor 2: Benefits	0.093	0.070	1.052	0.295
Factor 3: Cultural capital	0.254	0.260	2.974	**0.004**
Factor 4: Career	0.172	0.176	2.469	**0.015**
Factor 5: Personal development	-0.027	-0.023	-0.303	0.762
Factor 6: Quality of military medical education	0.242	0.191	2.027	**0.045**
Factor 7: Status	0.171	0.171	2.028	**0.045**
Factor 8: Physical culture	0.212	0.210	2.327	**0.022**
Factor 9: Influence of close people	-0.023	-0.025	-0.375	0.708
Factor 10: Self-perception	0.023	0.019	0.220	0.826

Bold values indicate significance level of $p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$.

***Note*: model statistics ($F = 19.067$; $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.634$, adjusted $r^2 = 0.601$).**

Discussion

"Cultural capital" ($\beta = 0.260$; $p < 0.01$) turned out to be the most important predictor in the cadets' decision to enroll in MF MMA. When commenting on statements related to patriotism, readiness to defend the country, and inclination towards discipline and military culture, the respondents indicated that their personal beliefs, aligned with the values of the military organization, largely influenced their decision to enroll in the MF MMA. This result confirmed the previous research findings showing that the personal preferences and values passed on to the individual by the social environment in which they grow up significantly influence the choice of the prospect HEI, and thus the future profession [5, 12, 13, 27].

The second most influential factor, "physical culture" ($\beta = 0.210$; $p < 0.05$), has not yet been identified in the literature related to the choice of HEIs. However, this factor is specific to the MHEI-related study. It groups the statements reflecting the respondents' perception of the MF MMA as an MHEI where "one can develop the mind and body equally" highlighting personal physical development as a direct benefit of studying there. In addition, respondents evaluated the statement on the attractiveness of MF MMA for future cadets based on the availability of high-quality sports facilities. The mentioned factor can be related to findings from previous literature indicating that HEIs with high-quality infrastructure, including sports facilities, tend to be more appealing to future students [22].

The decision to enroll in MF MMA is significantly positively influenced by the perception of the "quality of military medical education" ($\beta = 0.191$; $p < 0.05$). Within this construct, the respondents evaluated statements regarding whether MF MMA truly educates its students (cadets) for their future profession, whether the curriculum comprises a unity of theory and practice, and whether modern teaching aids and methods are used. Additionally, they acknowledged that MHEIs have an advantage over their civilian counterparts because they provide additional specific skills (e.g., obtaining a driver's license, learning to ski, earning a foreign language certificate) and free educational resources (e.g., textbooks, access to the latest scientific and professional literature). This finding is consistent with previous reports highlighting that the "content of the study program" of HEI selection is particularly important for students who consider the quality and relevance of the curriculum in relation to their academic and professional goals [26]. Some studies indicate that a significant number of young people, when choosing a faculty, prioritize acquiring specific knowledge and skills for their future profession and favor these institutional factors over calculating potential costs and benefits [29]. The strong and very significant correlation between this factor and the factor "physical culture" ($r = 0.671$; $p < 0.01$) supports the conclusion that the study program of the MF MMA, enriched with content not present at other similar civilian faculties, gives an advantage when deciding on enrollment.

The influence of the construct "career" ($\beta = 0.176$; $p < 0.05$) explains respondents' attitude towards opportunities for a predictable career, professional development, education, and vertical advancement within the military organization. This result can be explained by the fact that the MMA, a renowned tertiary healthcare institution, is seen as an institution where young officers (doctors) can successfully specialize in their desired branches of medicine. The results mentioned above are consistent with the findings of a study of the factors influencing the selection of Turkish MA, including professional development and advancement opportunities in the "Career Opportunities" factor [5]. In the literature related to research on the choice of civilian HEIs, the factor of career prospects refers to the possibilities of professional practice during education and the opportunity to develop, advance, and earn well in a particular profession [21, 30]. This construct can be partially interpreted through the prism of the only research conducted in Serbia related to the criteria for selecting a HEI. It emphasizes that the possibility of employment after graduation is the most important factor in choosing a HEI [6], and the Ministry of Defence guarantees secure employment as one of the key benefits to graduates of the MF MMA.

The perception of the social status of an officer/a military doctor and the belief that this title brings recognition from the immediate environment and prestige in society is expressed in the construct "status" ($\beta = 0.171$; $p < 0.05$). To this should be added the possibility of choosing a specialization for the most successful graduates in the generation. It can be concluded that the choice of this MHEI is considerably motivated by a

positive perception of the specific characteristics of the military organization and the institutional reputation of the MF MMA, the Ministry of Defence, and the SAF as a socially valuable resource. The moderately strong correlation of high significance between the constructs "status" and "cultural capital" ($r = 0.578$; $p < 0.01$) indicates that, in the profession of a military doctor and an officer of the SAF, the respondents recognized a mechanism for rising on the social ladder that is in line with their personal beliefs about the military profession and the defense system as an institution. The factor influencing the choice of the MA in Turkey, referred to as "elitism", complements the identified influential factor of "status" [5].

Even though it was expected that the construct "influence of close people" would have a positive and significant impact on the decision to enroll, in relation to the construct "cultural capital", this is not the case in the given model. This result could be partially explained by the assumption that cultural capital is an intrinsic motivator for choosing the MF MMA, while the influence of close people, however, represents an external force whose impact may vary with the strength and consistency of the messages that close people send. It was also observed that respondents valued statements related to the influence of parents and family significantly more than those of relatives and friends on the decision to enroll. Although numerous studies emphasize the significant and positive influence of parents and the immediate environment, some suggest that this influence is context-dependent and can, in certain circumstances, be negative [14, 15].

The influence of the construct "reputation" on the decision in the given model is extremely low and without statistical significance ($\beta = - 0.007$; $p = 0.928$). The high mean scores for the statements comprising the "reputation" construct (all above 4) indicate that this perception is already well established in the respondents' minds. Most of them expressed a homogeneously positive opinion about the MF MMA as an exceptional educational institution, the professors' quality, and the diploma's "value", which reduces variability and makes this factor less relevant for explaining differences in decision-making. Therefore, it can be assumed that the reputation of the MF MMA is implied and, as such, represents a necessary but insufficient factor influencing the enrollment decision.

The specificity of the results of this research lies in the fact that the construct "benefits" does not have a significant impact ($\beta = 0.070$; $p < 0.295$) on the decision to enroll, which is not in line with the results of the research on the choice of HEIs in Serbia, where economic criteria prevail, and among them, the possibility of employment after graduation is the first in rank. Although the statement "It is important to me that after completing my studies I have secured employment" within the "benefits" construct was rated highly on average, which corresponds to the results in the previously mentioned research [6], it did not show statistical significance concerning the decision to enroll.

Even though the statements that form the constructs "self-perception" and "personal development" were clearly distinguished in the qualitative research, it was shown that in the regression model, they have a weak and statistically insignificant influence on the decision.

The research results presented in this paper are, to some extent, consistent with those of two recent studies on factors influencing the selection of civilian medical faculties in China and Pakistan [31, 32]. Personal interests, family influence, and the social status of the medical profession support the conclusion that factors linked to cultural capital and the social environment in which a prospective student is raised influence the choice of medical faculty. On the other hand, direct material benefits appear to play a more important role in the faculty selection process for future civilian doctors than for their military counterparts. The research results above [31, 32] indicate that, in addition to the already mentioned, personal interest in medicine is a key motivator for choosing a civilian medical faculty. The absence of that factor in the presented model indicates that cadets of the MF MMA view interest in the medical profession as hierarchically superior to other considerations, which influenced their decision to apply for enrollment at the MF MMA [32].

The main limitation of this research lies in the sample composition, as it included only cadets of the MF MMA and candidates who had already expressed their intention to enroll in this HEI. Although the survey was conducted anonymously, full verification of respondents' identities was not possible due to the use of online forms (Google Forms). The presence of cadets at different educational stages in the surveyed group can also be viewed as a limitation. Furthermore, the research is retrospective, which could have led to distorted attitudes, especially among respondents in their later years of study. Due to the relatively small sample size in relation to the number of items in the instrument, exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis was not performed. To ensure adequate statistical power for such an analysis, a minimum of 5 to 10 participants *per* item is generally recommended. Given the total of 39 items in the instrument, a significantly larger sample would be required, which should be addressed in future research.

Besides the contribution to the expansion of scientific knowledge related to the selection of MHEIs, the results of this research are practically applicable in creating promotional strategies for the MF MMA aimed at attracting an adequate number of motivated candidates for enrollment.

Future research should be directed towards understanding the differences in the factors that influence the choice of MF MMA and civilian medical faculties, as well as the influence of the sources of information that students (cadets) use when deciding to enroll in a particular HEI. Future studies should also include high school students in order to examine the factors influencing the choice of a HEI by those who have not yet made a final decision about their choice of enrollment.

Conclusion

The results of the research presented in this paper indicate that cadets' decisions to enroll at the MF MMA are shaped by a combination of personal and institutional factors,

predominantly of a social nature. In addition to their desire to practice medicine and become doctors, young men and women who choose the MF MMA are also socially predisposed to military service, primarily due to personal values, family influence, or cultural capital. They perceive the profession of an officer/military doctor as a potential for gaining social status, professional growth, career development, and advancement within the service. The specificities of military education, its focus on acquiring practical knowledge relevant to the future profession, and additional content make the MF MMA attractive for future cadets. As a particular advantage of military education, cadets see its focus on developing physical abilities, which is a factor that has not been identified in scientific literature so far.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by selecting only one response *per* item.
Note: Responses are given using a five-point Likert scale:
a) Strongly disagree
b) Mostly disagree
c) Neutral/Not sure
d) Mostly agree
e) Strongly agree

FACTOR 1: REPUTATION

1. The school I enrolled in (or am applying for) is an exceptional educational institution.
2. A diploma from the Medical Faculty of the Military Medical Academy (MF MMA) is more valuable than one from a civilian university.
3. Top-tier professors teach at the MF MMA.

FACTOR 2: BENEFITS

4. It is important to me to have secured employment after graduation.
5. As an officer/military doctor of the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF), I will have a good salary.
6. The fact that cadets receive monthly pay in addition to free education is a major advantage over civilian faculty.

FACTOR 3: CULTURAL CAPITAL

7. I consider myself a patriot.
8. Every person should be ready to defend their country with arms in case of war.
9. I like order and discipline.
10. I have always enjoyed military-themed movies.

FACTOR 4: CAREER

11. I enrolled in a military school because I knew I could advance and attain a high rank.
12. Predictability in career progression is important when choosing a profession.
13. I would like to acquire high-level professional qualifications and competencies throughout my career.

FACTOR 5: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

14. Graduates of the MF MMA are more mature and better prepared for life than their civilian peers.
15. Military schools help individuals develop skills and abilities to better cope with both professional and personal challenges.
16. I enrolled in a military school because I wanted to become independent.

FACTOR 6: QUALITY OF MILITARY MEDICAL EDUCATION

17. The MF MMA truly prepares students for their future profession.
18. Military schools have an advantage over civilian ones due to specific skills acquired – driving license, foreign language certification, skiing, etc.
19. One of my reasons for choosing a military school was the integration of theory and practice.
20. I believe that modern teaching tools and methods are used at the Military Academy/MF MMA.

FACTOR 7: STATUS

21. I feel empowered in uniform.
22. I believe that officers deserve a high social status.
23. As an officer of the SAF, I would be respected by those around me.

FACTOR 8: PHYSICAL CULTURE

24. At a military school, you develop both mind and body equally.
25. Higher education institutions with good sports facilities are more attractive to future students.
26. I knew that after completing military school, I would be in excellent physical shape.

FACTOR 9: INFLUENCE OF CLOSE PEOPLE

27. The military has always been highly respected in my family.
28. My parents supported my decision to enroll in the Military Academy/MF MMA.
29. Since childhood, I have heard stories about the military from my parents and close relatives.
30. My friends had a positive view of the military, which influenced my decision.
31. People around me have a high opinion of the military.

FACTOR 10: SELF-PERCEPTION

32. I believe I am capable of meeting the challenges of studying at the MF MMA.
33. I was born to be an officer/military doctor.
34. I am talented in leadership and command.

ENROLLMENT DECISION

35. The MF MMA was my first choice for higher education.
36. When the time came to apply, I had no doubts about enrolling at the MF MMA.
37. I would recommend a close friend or family member to enroll in a military school.
38. I have no regrets about enrolling at the MF MMA.
39. I am proud that I will one day become an officer/military doctor in the SAF.