



# Why confidence leads to swifter tertiary education choices: A qualitative study of the international tertiary education industry of Australia

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Confidence  
International education  
Education decision-making  
International students

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates international students' confidence as a base for imminent tertiary education decisions. International students are a highly sought-after commodity, particularly during and after a global pandemic when the income streams of tertiary education providers are limited. In-depth interviews were conducted with students who sought guidance towards an international study experience to explore the guiding research questions, (1) how does confidence impact tertiary education decisions of international students and (2) what is the relationship between confidence and time to make a tertiary education decision? Set within the context of the international tertiary education industry of Australia, the original contribution stems from identifying that guidance towards an international study experience is affected by confidence in; guidance counselors, the brand name of the university, and the tertiary education decision itself. The identified confidence characteristics in this study have an inverse relationship with the length of time taken for the students' decision-making process. This leads to swifter finalizations of tertiary education decisions by students increasing returns on education providers' admission activities.

## 1. Introduction

In high uncertainty environments, such as the (post)-COVID-19 world, service mega-disruptions have led to unexpected disruptions of entire service eco-systems [1]. Education service providers are facing immense financial pressures due to lockdowns, rapidly changing delivery modes, and a significant drop in international students [2]. Within the international education industry COVID-19 was the biggest crisis to have ever hit and has caused the most significant disruption to international student flows in history [3] including student recruitment [4], content delivery methods [5,6], and student retention [7]. Given the recent removal of international border restrictions around the world, there is a heightened sense of urgency now to regain a lot of the international tertiary student market lost through the COVID-19 pandemic [8]. This is due not only because of the boost to tertiary education providers and their bottom line, but also because of the flow on effect of international students for tourism, job creation, skilled migration, and general economic benefits [9].

Under externally threatening situations, such as anxiety about disease (e.g., COVID-19), individuals are known to increase variety seeking behaviors [10], therefore, it is likely that this extends to the international tertiary education industry as well, with students likely to exhibit an increased desire for variety seeking. Consequently, they would search for additional information on potential

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e17484>

Received 30 October 2022; Received in revised form 14 June 2023; Accepted 20 June 2023

Available online 21 June 2023

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international study experiences and education service providers, prior to making decisions. This variety seeking inclination results in increased exposure to different choices and time lags, adding further challenges to an already competitive and disrupted marketplace [11,12]. Within this context, this research examines international students who seek guidance on international study experiences for tertiary education. Specifically, it explores the role of confidence in international students' tertiary education decisions and its temporal relationship to decision-making time.

Confidence has been widely researched [13] and so have individuals' decision-making processes [14]. Specifically, confidence contributes to success, commitment, and goal achievement with regards to career development and is widely studied [15–17]. The global COVID-19 pandemic is still having unprecedented impact on governments, businesses, institutions of learning, and the general population alike. It caught everyone in the tertiary education industry, management, academics, and students unaware [18]. In such uncertain times when rules and regulations change frequently and individuals perceive the world to be in constant flux, a high level of confidence can contribute to a reduction of perceived risk [19]. Confidence is the expectation to not get disappointed [13] and provides certainty for future actions [20]. This is important, since individuals' decisions and behaviors are influenced by the levels of risk they perceive [19].

Within the tertiary education sector, the role of confidence has been studied by considering various stakeholders such as health professionals [21], students [22,23], and teachers [24]. These studies focus on future positive outcomes at an individual level. Within this space, organizational benefits to education service providers remain scant. Further, current research does not present a temporal assessment of confidence and decision-making time which may enhance organizational benefits. Considering these gaps, this paper conceptualizes the impact of confidence and its relationship with time by contextualizing it to students entering the tertiary education system. This specific context allows for a direct decision outcome (i.e., tertiary education decision) that can be determined by investigating the temporal implications of the decision. Therefore, by drawing on concepts such as the purchase decision-making process, time, and confidence this study explores the research questions, (1) how does confidence impact tertiary education decisions of international students and (2) what is the relationship between confidence and time to make a tertiary education decision?

Underpinned by the Theory of Planned Behavior [25], theoretically, this paper proposes a relationship between confidence and decision-making time, putting into perspective the role confidence plays in a wider institutional context. Specifically, it proposes that the time taken to make a tertiary education decision is shortened if confidence persists during the process. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposes that the likelihood of an individual acting on a behavior, in this instance enrolling at a particular university, is influenced by their attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms and perception of behavioral control, via their behavioral intentions [25]. The likelihood of action is stronger when their attitude is more favorable, in other words they have more confidence in their decision [26]. Therefore, this study is looking at how a decision can be strengthened through confidence in that decision, which is the strength of the attitude toward the behavior. Practically, this paper makes a case for confidence to be considered a facilitator of international students' tertiary education decision. As a further contribution, this current research will show that providing guidance in the form of interactions with education and guidance counsellors at international tertiary education shows encourages confidence in students across three identified internal and external factors. Guidance provided at these education shows includes information about career outcomes after graduation, what to expect when undertaking the course of study, opportunities that arise during the course including internships, placements and other work integrated learning opportunities, expectations regarding salary and employability, and other such information as required by the student.

In the proceeding sections, first, the relevant literature will be discussed with particular focus on the concept of confidence and time. This is followed by the project's methodology, findings, and the discussion with implications and future research opportunities.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Confidence

Confidence is well established within decision-making processes [27] with the majority of research focusing on the relationship between subjective confidence and an objective outcome measure i.e., purchase decision [28]. Despite this, literature is yet to agree on a definition for the construct of confidence [29]. Whilst Blomqvist [30] defines confidence as a "state of mind" where one expects an outcome to occur with certainty, confidence is also considered as the belief that "everything is under control" and hence as the expectation that one does not get disappointed [19]. Since this research links confidence with future tertiary education decisions, it follows the definition of confidence as "a future directed call to action with a linked expectation of future actions by third party/ies and one's own future directed abilities" [31] (p. 284) underpinned by the Theory of Planned Behavior [32].

Confidence as a construct therefore refers to the magnitude of one's belief without any stipulation of the source of the belief [33]. The construct of confidence is broad since it can refer to sources internal and/or external to one's own and captures the amassed evidence for a decision [34]. Confidence is likely to vary based on perceived quantity and quality of information collected to make the decision [35]. When uncertainty is reduced, individuals are likely to incur greater confidence in decision-making [36]. Examples from the tertiary education industry demonstrate that confidence with regard to engaging in specific learning experiences such as e-learning [37], clinical training [38–40], and peer teaching [41] impacts student performance. In terms of tertiary education decisions, self-confidence is a contributor for choosing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related study courses [42].

Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, judgments, and expectations are primary factors of confidence, with confidence seen as having three key characteristics; constancy, certainty propensities, and anticipatory reflection [27,43]. Constancy refers to patterns related to an issue or domain specific area where a confidence assessment is ascribed. Certainty propensities express a set of beliefs based on consistency in past patterns supported by degrees of certainty. Anticipatory reflection signifies looking forward in time and conveys the

transferability of patterns into a future time [27]. Therefore, confidence is not independent of an individual's experiences, but is conceptualized as reflective conditioning imbedded in foresight which guides behavior.

It is important to distinguish confidence from self-efficacy, one of the widely researched constructs in educational research and frequently misstated as equivalent to confidence. While these two constructs may be related, they are in fact two distinct constructs [44,45]. Within education settings self-efficacy has been defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" [page 3, 46]. It evidently strengthens academic performance as well [47] and can work as a coping mechanism within learning environments [48]. Hence, self-efficacy only refers to sources of beliefs internal to one's own, whereas confidence incorporates both internal sources and external sources of certainty about future actions [19,20]. Due to this multifaceted nature, confidence is a valuable construct that can aid in predicting and comprehending future behavior [44].

## 2.2. Time and confidence

The concept of time is a fundamental part of the notion of confidence, as confidence reflects the amount of certainty one has about the future [20], which is highly relevant in the increasingly uncertain and unpredictable context of careers [49] and relevant career decisions. All future action is based on the feeling of assuredness or confidence about the decision to be made and therefore provides a temporal framing for the decision. The concept of time is also linked to any decision-making process due to the underlying confidence in making a decision e.g., a tertiary education decision. A decision in itself takes time to make, there is a lead-up time, and a time allocated to the post-decision evaluation. Researchers have investigated the concept of time and how it influences individuals' decisions [50]. For example, time was researched as a scarce resource and how limited time impacts individuals' decision-making [51].

Time is considered both an antecedent and a consequence of a decision [52]. For example, research can investigate whether factors such as complexity impact the amount of time spent on a decision, or whether time spent deciding impacts evaluation of that decision. Relevant research mostly focused either on decisions about time and/or on the decision-making process and thus decision time [50]. Particularly within the tertiary education industry, students are active information seekers [53]. They have a plethora of choices available to them 24/7 [54] and can make instant career development decisions. Therefore, time emerges as a key consideration in the tertiary education decision process.

## 2.3. Service interactions and confidence

One area touted for understanding individuals' needs and identifying required information from these individuals is interactions with staff [55]. These interactions, such as among actors within the tertiary education industry as in this current research, are at the center of any high involvement service. Career advisors and guidance counselors can influence these interactions to promote emotions in the form of confidence resulting in positive service experiences [56]. Positive emotions can include trust in the knowledge provided by the career advisors and guidance counselors, gratitude in the support provided for completing course and scholarship applications and hope regarding what the future entails after completing the course [57]. The decision-making literature focuses on psychological (emotions, beliefs, intentions, etc.) and non-psychological (time, marketing mix, etc.) factors that influence decision-making processes. Yet, literature still lacks knowledge on the impact of confidence on tertiary education decisions.

Research has shown that in the tertiary education industry, prospective students have as few as three alternatives in their evoked set of choices they eventually consider choosing from Ref. [58]. Therefore, this research argues that helping prospective students increase their confidence while making the right tertiary education decisions will enable them to reduce the decision-making time needed and to be more satisfied with their decision for longer. In turn, it will reduce prospective students' exposure and response to stimuli from competing tertiary education providers and increase the likelihood of a decision in favor of the guidance offering tertiary education provider.

## 3. Methodology

The objectives of this research were to identify how confidence impacts international students' perception of their tertiary education decisions, the choice process, as well as its impact on the student recruitment processes of tertiary education providers. This research project extends the literature by evaluating the impact of confidence as a future directed emotion with a direct impact on tertiary education decisions creating temporal and financial benefits for education service providers.

### 3.1. Research design

Since confidence and its impact on tertiary education decisions are underrepresented in the literature with little attention to students entering or moving within the tertiary education system, an exploratory approach to the research design was justified. As the research focused on participants' experiences and their rich and detailed descriptions of these, semi-structured in-depth interviews were considered the most appropriate [59]. Interview questions were designed to solicit information from the participants about the decision-making process they underwent when deciding on an international study experience, in particular what elements were most influential in the process.

### 3.2. Sample

The data was obtained from students who had previously visited international tertiary education shows where multiple education providers from around the world interacted with prospective students. These international tertiary education shows formed part of their tertiary education choice process for an international study experience at a university in Australia. Fourteen interviews were conducted over a seven-month timeframe in 2018 once the students had made their choice and had arrived in Australia to take up their study. This breadth of time helped manage any potential selection bias by ensuring a variety of participants. However, through reflexivity it is acknowledged that there will always be a level of bias in such qualitative work despite the experience of the interviewers [60].

The Australian international tertiary education industry was chosen since Australia together with other Anglophone countries have the longest-lasting and well-established international student markets [61]. Since all participants interviewed were enrolled at a university in Australia and accessible on campus, purposive sampling was utilized using convenience data collection [62]. This style of homogenous, purposive sample is typically adopted in qualitative research to maximize the insights gained from the sample of interest [63]. The sample is selected to highlight the conditions under which the phenomena of interest operate, not the generalizability of the findings to other settings [64]. Whilst purposive sampling was favored over population-based probability sampling due to cost reasons this may have exposed the research project to increased selection bias and/or sampling error but given that the goal of the research was to investigate the phenomenon of interest in detail, these potential limitations were deemed not to be substantial [64].

### 3.3. Participant recruitment

Teaching staff across several undergraduate and postgraduate degrees promoted the research project before the start of their lectures. The students were advised that the researchers were looking for students who participated in a tertiary education show before committing to enrol in the degree they were currently studying. Amongst others, the students were further informed of the purpose of the study, that ethics approval was obtained, sample questions, approximate time involvement, and that they would receive a AU\$20 shopping voucher for their time. Interested students were then directed to email the research team to be considered.

This resulted in a sample population comprising 14 interviewees. Eight participants self-identified as female and six as male. They were all between the ages of 22 and 38 years of age. The interviewees’ countries of origin span across four continents (i.e., Egypt, France, Germany, Singapore, Vietnam, China, Indonesia, India, and USA). The interviewees were enrolled in undergraduate (eight) and postgraduate (six) degrees. One interviewee identified as studying in a research degree (PhD) and the remaining 13 interviewees were studying in coursework degrees (Bachelor and Master).

### 3.4. Data collection

After two initial pilot interviews, followed by minor adjustments to the standardized interview guide, 12 additional interviews were conducted independently by two researchers. These interviews lasted between 30 and 40 min. In total 14 audiotaped face-to-face interviews took place. Thematic saturation [65] was used as an indicator for when to conclude the interviewing process. These interviews were subsequently professionally transcribed. With a homogeneous sample and good quality data, 12 interviews are normally sufficient to reach data saturation [66]. Exploratory studies in social sciences are best completed with small samples, allowing for improved validity of the in-depth and detailed analysis within the social setting [67].

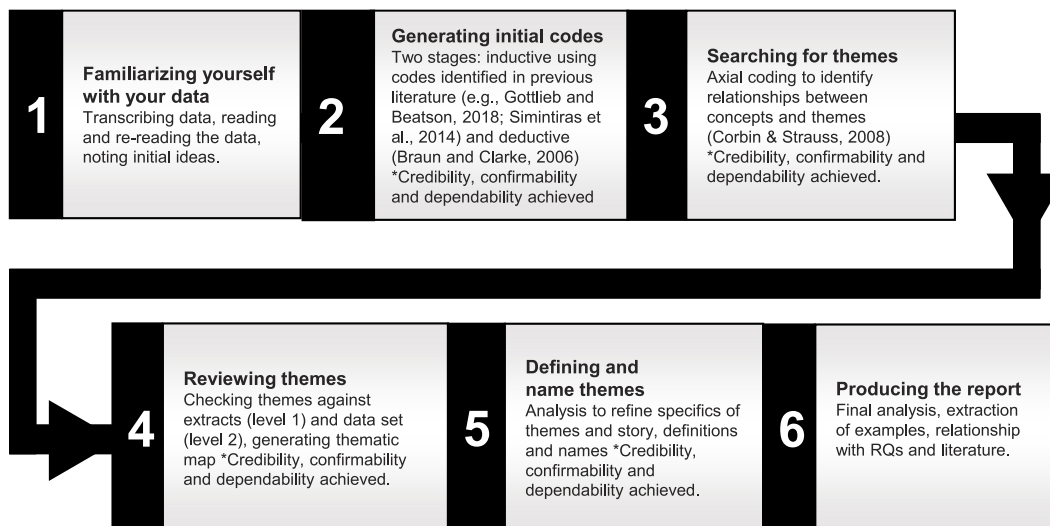


Fig. 1. Phases of thematic analysis in psychology based on Braun and Clarke (2006).

Both interviewers are highly experienced in designing and conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviewers were academic staff from a Business School in a major Australian university. In line with Corbin and Strauss [68], the interview guide evolved throughout the data collection process to ensure it captured any new concepts that emerged. Sample questions included, “what elements were most influential to your decision-making process”, “tell me about your experience when making a decision” and “what were the outcomes of your decision-making experience”. At this stage the participants were also probed for the length of time it took them to make the decision. The appendix outlines the interview guide.

### 3.5. Data analysis

The data analysis was “conducted in a precise, consistent and exhaustive manner” [69]. The research process of thematic analysis followed Lincoln and Guba [70] utilizing the six phases of Braun and Clarke [71] and their 15-point checklist, including the organization and description of the data. See Fig. 1 for these six phases. Categories and themes were identified through rigorous analysis conducted by both researchers. The data was first sorted and coded using NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software program from QSR International and a codebook developed by the researchers. This thematic content analysis resulted in the identification of emerging categories, themes, and findings. Thematic analysis is a widely used analytic method in qualitative research that enables a thorough explanation of the data by classifying, analyzing, and recording of patterns [71]. An additional count of the themes was conducted following Miles and Huberman [72] to provide further information.

Rigor was established through dependability, credibility, and confirmability as outlined below [70].

- **Dependability:** an audit trail was established outlining the decisions made, such as the justification for the sample as well as the method used, including the questions in the interview guide [73]. Furthermore, consultation between the researchers occurred regularly throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Although the researchers conducted the analysis individually, they compared their findings and any discrepancies to validate findings and to minimize potential bias [74].
- **Credibility:** to ensure credibility through the analysis phase, ideas were garnered through literature searches and discussions with other researchers, stretching the authors’ ideas such as the identification of theoretical frameworks and concepts (see phases 2–5 in Fig. 1). Regular peer debriefings about the outcomes were also a part of the process [73].
- **Confirmability:** was achieved by utilizing a reflexive approach, where all decisions undertaken were recorded in such a manner enabling confirmation from others (outlined in phases 2–5 in Fig. 1).

Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers’ home university (University Human Research Ethics Committee), and the research was conducted in line with standard ethical guidelines and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

## 4. Findings

This research project explored actual tertiary education decisions with 14 participants who had embarked on an international study experience. To analyze the influence of confidence on tertiary education decisions, prospective students who attended international tertiary education shows in search of guidance were interviewed. Through data analysis, three components of confidence were identified as having an impact on the tertiary education decisions of prospective students. Thematic content analysis revealed that confidence was mentioned across all participants 48 times. Further scrutiny of the identified mentionings of confidence, revealed three separate components of confidence; “confidence in the decision to be made”, “confidence in the education provider’s brand”, and

**Table 1**  
Number of mentionings in interviews conducted.

Interview#	Newly identified emotion construct - Confidence			
	Confidence main construct	Confidence Sub constructs		
		Confidence in the tertiary education decision	Education provider’s brand	Guidance counselors
1	10	6	3	1
2	7	3	2	2
3	6	3	2	1
4	5	1	1	3
5	4	2	2	0
6	3	1	0	2
7	3	1	0	2
8	3	0	1	2
9	2	1	1	0
10	2	0	2	0
11	1	1	0	0
12	1	0	0	1
13	1	0	1	0
14	0	0	0	0
Σ	48	19	15	14

“confidence in the education provider’s guidance counselors”. These three components will be discussed in turn. Each of these components of confidence were independent of each other with no discussion of them interlinking. The component with the highest mentionings was “confidence in the decision to be made”. See [Table 1](#) for a breakdown of numbers for a participant level.

These three components map to the three characteristics related to patterns and propensities identified by Simintiras et al. [27]; constancy, certainty propensities and anticipatory reflection. These components represented both controllable aspects of confidence (external factors to the participant) and non-controllable aspects of confidence (internal factors to the participant). As such, the current work consolidates past findings and extends this work by identifying the findings within the tertiary education decision process and exploring the relationship between the components of confidence, time to a decision and resulting benefits for the education service provider.

#### 4.1. Confidence – clarification on the decision to be made

The most frequent confidence component to be discussed in the interviews was the notion of being confident in the tertiary education decision participants were making. The participants suggested they came to the education shows to seek final guidance around their decision and to reduce the options or to confirm an underlying prior idea, reflecting the search for constancy in patterns [27] evidenced through prior research by the participants. Choice is important; however, choice overload may result in lower confidence in the eventual decision made [75]. Although they might not come with a final evoked set [58] to choose from, they have identified criteria to evaluate the tertiary education options available to them. Given that perceived quality of education emerged as an increasing consideration by students [76], directed efforts such as education shows can be used to disseminate such information strengthening students’ decision-making confidence.

Confidence in the tertiary education decision to be made was mentioned the most with 19 out of 48 total mentionings. Hence, the data suggests that prospective students within international tertiary education choose to attend international tertiary education shows towards the end of their choice process when the initial information search stage has already been concluded and a narrowing down of options towards an evoked set is in the process.

Everything was clear to me, so I decided. Actually, I didn’t have time to browsing all the booths on that day because I got what I want within the timeframe, so I think I told my husband, I say, “Okay, we know everything, so I think we don’t have much time, we should go home, prepare application and everything,” so we didn’t browse much, just got what we want and go home. (Interview 2)

... because I knew that I wanted to go deeper into this career and to do that I had to bridge my various knowledge gaps and that was through further studies, so I knew that I wanted to go there. So the trade show helped me to better understand the expectations and living standards in Australia, and yeah it really compelled my decision ultimately. (Interview 9)

I felt more assured that I had really shortlisted a few universities rather than - because I came in with more in mind, with more choices in mind, but I left with a shortlist of one, so that reduced my choice. (Interview 1)

#### 4.2. Confidence – education provider’s brand recognition

The second most frequently identified component of confidence was the feeling of confidence the participants had in the brand of the university. University brand image is a key consideration of students across cultures [76]. Aligning with this, the participants put confidence in well-known brand names suggesting alignment with certainty propensities and pattern recurrence [27].

Students visiting international tertiary education shows appear to be also somewhat influenced by their peers. These influences span across areas of what they feel about the recognizable brand names, and which university they put confidence into delivering the course they are interested in. Interestingly, word of mouth appears to be more useful than other marketing efforts in a tertiary education context [77]. The transcripts reveal that potential international students trust their peers as part of their in-group and that they are inclined to put confidence in their peer’s decisions [78].

I went to this [university], that’s one. Because from my seniors I heard that – about [university] and all that they conduct these things, they will apply for visas or they’ll help you in each and every stage, so that’s why I went to that place because ... they will be conducting the [language] examination, it means they are good authorities (Interview 13)

I think I would not be that interested in a university that I never heard before. ... I found the name that I’m interested in before I attended, yeah, because there are lists of the universities that will attend the show. Even when I ask my friends about it, they say is a large amount of universities is coming through. How many of them? So each one make up the whole first impression of whether people want to go or are not going. (Interview 6)

#### 4.3. Confidence – guidance counselors

The final component of confidence which emerged through the interviews was the importance placed on the interactions they had with the education provider’s guidance counselors rather than through interactions with other entities such as educational agents or through university websites. The participants referred to the confidence gained in their decision based on the style of interactivity [79]

they had with the counselors.

Students perceive an information overload when trying to identify and choose the right education provider to pursue their career goal. The participants indicated that third parties, such as educational agents, are only broadly supportive regarding the tertiary education choice process. They frequently lack knowledge and skills when it comes to guidance and career development options. Students initially try to compensate for the lack of rich information with individual information searches online. In doing so the exhibiting education providers' websites are used, as well as electronic word of mouth seeking behavior via social media [80].

The findings indicate that interactions with guidance counselors at international tertiary education shows play a part in establishing the students' confidence and perception of the degree/course they are searching information for and therefore, initiate the relationship building even before students sign up with a particular tertiary education provider. This early relationship building captures the anticipatory reflection evident in the characteristics of confidence [27].

I think it's a matter of the person in charge. I'm still thinking if that staff wasn't the person I talked to during the trade show, I may not even choose [name of university] because he was really convincing. And in all the trade shows, I met him. So I came to meet him three times. So he knows all the information he has told me and now what's built up from there. (Interview 4)

I think, it was the boost, you can say, that I got the confidence that yes I can get the scholarship. The confidence from that that yes I can get the scholarship, they saw my profile and everything so they said that, you will definitely get a scholarship. (Interview 12)

... you can actually go talk to a person who's representing the university, which was quite good. And I also wanted to know my chances, because like what if I'm not accepted, so like, "This is my score, so where do I stand?" (Interview 6)

Actually, I want to talk directly to the institutions' representatives. I want them directly address my concerns. Because I kept emailing back and forwards with some of the staff ... and I didn't get really good answer from those staff, I know they need authority from their manager, or something like that, so I come directly, on that day I really want a good answer so I can make application straight away. (Interview 1)

Actually, the staff really knowledgeable. When I switch from education to social work, he can tell me straight away, he open the booklet and he show me the requirements of social work degree, English requirements, application due date for international student. He make it really clear about all the requirements, so it's really good for me. (Interview 1)

#### 4.4. Temporal relationship between exposure to guidance, confidence, and tertiary education decision

Due to decision processes that regularly vary in length and complexity, the performance of international trade show participation has been questioned previously [81]. To address this previous questioning, the current research investigated the time it took the interviewed students from the exposure of the guidance provided at an international tertiary education show to the finalization of their tertiary education choice process and signing up to an international study experience.

The research data shows students displayed a significant spread of the temporal relationships between receiving guidance and the time the tertiary education choice process was finalized. Time and related pressures have been previously identified as decision stressors that impact decision quality [82]. Findings reveal that confidence built through international trade shows contributes to reducing decision-making time influencing students' decision quality through the improvement of the decision-making process. Since all participants were active students at an Australian university, the focus of this research was how swiftly they made their actual finalized tertiary education decisions as an outcome of the guidance provided to them, therefore actual behavior around this decision was considered. The temporal range included finalization of the decision through an on-the-spot commitment during the international tertiary education show, to a decision that took place five years after participation as seen in Table 2. Almost 80% (11) of participants indicated that they had committed to an international study experience within a month of receiving guidance, with almost half of these

**Table 2**  
Impact of confidence on the temporal link between career guidance received & career development decision.

Interview #	Confidence TOTAL	Time between career guidance received and finalization of career development decision
1	10	At the TE show
2	7	1 day
3	6	1 week
4	5	1 week
5	4	1 month
6	3	1 week
7	3	1 month
8	3	1 month
9	2	1 month
10	2	1 month
11	1	1 month
12	1	2 months
13	1	4 months
14	0	5 years

participants (five) having made their decision within a week of receiving guidance at the international tertiary education show.

#### 4.5. Impact of “confidence” on students’ tertiary education decisions

One of the aims of this research was to investigate the role confidence played as a base for international students’ tertiary education decision outcomes. This was accomplished by comparing the participants’ references to the various components of confidence experienced during their visit to an international tertiary education show and their exposure to relevant guidance, with the time it took the participants to finalize their tertiary education choice process. The findings show a relationship between the confidence gained from the international tertiary education show, and the duration of the final tertiary education decision. [Table 2](#) depicts confidence as a proposed base for guidance outcomes. Accordingly, the more mentionings the participants made regarding confidence, the faster they finalized their tertiary education choice process. The highest number of confidence mentionings resulted in an on-the-spot decision for one participant. The participant who did not express any form of confidence when recalling the guidance s/he received took five years to reach a tertiary education decision based on the guidance received at the international tertiary education show.

Between the previously mentioned two extreme cases, all remaining participants mentioned various amounts of confidence, whereby, the lower the amount of confidence exhibited the longer the time between receiving guidance and the finalization of the tertiary education choice process. The only exception is Participant 6 who, with a lower number of mentionings of confidence depicted a faster decision than Participant 5 who ranked higher in confidence yet took longer to finalize her/his decision. Thus, the amount of confidence appears to suggest a temporal connection between receiving guidance, the confidence gained through that process and the final decision.

The following sections delineate the discussion and implications as to the role of confidence on the tertiary education choice process. The revelation that the temporal relationship between guidance and a tertiary education decision is influenced by the amount of confidence perceived by students is novel and emerges as a significant contribution of this paper.

## 5. Discussion

This research answers the questions, (1) how does confidence impact tertiary education decisions of international students and (2) what is the relationship between confidence and time to make a tertiary education decision? Previous research has shown that confidence influences individuals’ decision-making behavior [31]. This research builds on the literature identifying confidence as strengthening the tertiary education decision process whereby the greater the amount of confidence experienced the shorter the tertiary education decision timeframe. This is supported by TPB, demonstrating that when students have a stronger positive attitude toward their decision, they are more likely to act on the decision, hence shortening the time to making the education decision-making process.

In response to question 1, how does confidence impact tertiary education decisions of international students, the results revealed that although international students have access to a lot of information about different universities and study options, it appears that participants rely a great deal on guidance counselling obtained at international tertiary education shows to build confidence in their final decision. This research identified three specific confidence factors; confidence about the tertiary education decision to be made, confidence in the interactions with the university’s guidance counselors, and confidence in the university’s brand recognition, as influencing the confidence that persists through to the decision-making point. These three components reflect the three theoretical characteristics of confidence previously identified by Simintiras et al. [27]. The challenge for tertiary education providers is that only two of these elements (i.e., guidance counselors and brand) are to some degree within their control. The other factor, confidence in the tertiary education decision to be made, is a subjective perception of one’s future actions and is internal to the student. However, as the two factors of guidance counselors and brand name inevitably influence students’ final decision, tertiary education providers may use the resulting halo effect to their advantage.

### 5.1. Confidence in the tertiary education decision

Confidence appears to be a key contributor in students’ choice of tertiary education and their prospective career [42]. Still, research on how confidence influences their decision process remains limited. To this end, through its findings this research suggests that confidence aids international students’ tertiary education decision process by providing affirmations to their previous research and perceptions. Evidently, this confidence is influenced by organizational level factors that include guidance counselors and the institution’s brand recognition encountered at international tertiary education shows.

### 5.2. Confidence in guidance counselors

Guidance counselors emerged as contributing to strengthening international students’ confidence in a context of tertiary education decision-making. The interactions at international tertiary education shows between students and guidance counselors from exhibiting education providers generated responses such as trust [31] and gratitude [83] which were linked to the feeling of confidence the participants displayed. This supports research in the education sector that links interactions of students and staff with a reduction in anxiety and an increase in confidence [84] and previous research highlighting the importance of interactions with employees in establishing positive responses towards an organization [55]. This same finding emerged in the current research, with participants indicating that confidence in the information provided by guidance counselors resulted in a favorable disposition toward their tertiary



education decision. Within tertiary education, a lack of specific degree and course knowledge is compensated for by the education providers' facilitation of engaging guidance counselors. Research has shown that students have a perceived need for positive relationships with staff of tertiary education providers such as guidance counselors [85,86]. This element suggests that education providers should ensure appropriate training of staff representing them at international tertiary education shows, as it is knowledge acquired through these interactions that translates to confidence in the student's final decision. This study confirms students' expectation of guidance counselors to provide them with accurate and immediate information about courses, progression, and further opportunities like scholarships. It appears also that the manner that this information is delivered is also important, not just the information itself. This includes the convincing style and tone of speech used at tertiary education shows just as it is required in other frontline informational exchanges [87]. This assured style of service delivery is echoed in other service research and is linked with the degree of training and appropriate recruitment of staff [see for example, 88].

### 5.3. Confidence in the education provider's brand recognition

Education provider brand and the confidence attached to it emerged as strengthening tertiary education decisions as well. This finding provides further justification for investments in brand name and university ranking efforts within the tertiary education industry. Rankings have become a powerful influencer within tertiary education [89]. The global push of tertiary education providers to be well presented across a number of international rankings seems to support this development [90]. When an education provider is highly ranked, the likelihood of the education providers' brand to get recognized at education shows is therefore of considerable benefit to the attempts to get students (and their families [91]) to walk onto the booth and to engage with the exhibiting education provider. Universities have focused more recently on rankings and accreditation of their programs to differentiate themselves [92] for student recruitment, attract a higher caliber of staff and as an indicator of quality [93]. This more objective measure of university quality [94] was seen by international students as a way of establishing confidence in their decision. If the brand was recognized and that connection was made during marketing communication and service interactions such as international tertiary education shows, confidence in the tertiary education decision can be enhanced. Education providers need to ensure continued efforts in improving their rankings and accreditation levels while translating these efforts into meaningful information for prospective international students [76]. Rankings and accreditations have a favorable response from potential employers [93] and perhaps through student case studies, career progression stories and the like, guidance counselors can use this information to further confidence in the brand name.

### 5.4. The temporal relationship between guidance, confidence, and time

Addressing research question 2, what is the relationship between confidence and time to make a tertiary education decision, the findings revealed the connection between confidence and the time difference between students receiving guidance at an international tertiary education show and the finalization of their tertiary education decision. Findings show that the higher the confidence level of participants during the international tertiary education show attendance, the shorter the time between that event and the finalization of decisions. Within an education context, research has shown that if education providers help increase their students' confidence levels in their academic performance, then students are more likely to engage with the subject matter [95] and the higher their confidence levels the stronger their decision-making behavior [96]. A similar link is likely for students seeking guidance on their tertiary education choices. When students engage with guidance counselors, they are more likely to be confident in the tertiary education decision they are making. A key component for an organization's competitive advantage is the effective delivery of services [97]. Therefore, this research envisions the confidence construct to provide an alternative method for academic and industry led research into the assessment of guidance outcomes.

### 5.5. Theoretical implications

This research examined international students within tertiary education who sought guidance towards an international study experience. Prospective students attend international tertiary education shows to gain further information about tertiary education decisions. By exploring the role of confidence in this interaction, the inverse relationship between exposure to information and time taken to make a tertiary education decision is highlighted. This finding is supported by TPB in that the stronger the attitude toward a behavior, the more likely the behavior will be enacted [98]. Thus, a possible temporal relationship between guidance, confidence and decision is proposed. This helps further comprehension of international students' decision-making process directing academic attention to confidence within this process. Furthermore, the three components of confidence; guidance counselors, the brand name of the university, and the tertiary education decision itself, reflect the theoretical characteristics of constancy, certainty propensities, and anticipatory reflection proposed by Simintiras et al. [27] indicating parallels between consumer behavior research and education marketing research.

The findings provide a first indication for the elements that academics can use as antecedents when trying to ascertain how to understand the confidence levels perceived by students as part of their tertiary education choice process. Specifically, these implications are of particular significance within high uncertainty environments such as the international tertiary education environment but also during events that may cause general uncertainty such as a global pandemic. Furthermore, the findings have direct relevance to academics working on guidance outcomes for students (i.e., linearity/changes, choice) as well as for career guidance outcomes for tertiary education institutions that focus on student recruitment and measure this success in student admission numbers. The findings further support the development of a generally applicable guidance outcomes scale based on the components of confidence as revealed

in this study.

The theoretical understanding into confidence is enhanced by examining the construct of confidence in a contemporary service setting, such as international tertiary education shows. As confidence reflects belief not only in one's own assuredness, but also that of the organization, it is important to investigate confidence within multiple contexts. This paper contributes to a growing body of literature of confidence research in a variety of service contexts, such as tourism and hospitality, the public service sector, and banking [99–101].

### 5.6. Managerial implications

This research shows that confidence can be used as a base for the likelihood of an imminent tertiary education decision. This is of significance as the career development choice process can be long and complex with many individual events and milestones along its way, as well as a significant number of alternatives to consider [102]. Similarly, within the tertiary education industry as the context of this study, students typically have an evoked set of at least three universities to choose from Ref. [58]. This evoked set, and desire for variety seeking, is also likely to be increased by students due to such perceived threats as COVID-19, posing additional challenges and time delays for education providers trying to attract prospective students. Therefore, the more an education provider can influence the confidence levels of its prospective students, the closer the temporal gap between receiving guidance and making a tertiary education decision. This temporal proximity limits the number of alternatives within a student's evoked set of tertiary education providers to choose from and maintains a higher level of confidence in the decision by reducing the prospective students' exposure and response to stimuli from competing tertiary education providers. From a tertiary education provider's point of view this provides for higher student admission numbers and a better conversion ratio.

Another strategy that can support closing the temporal link while maintaining confidence in the decision-making process that tertiary education providers with international branch campuses undertook through COVID-19 was offering students to begin a degree at a branch campus, and then transfer at a later stage to the home campus. This is a strategy that can be leveraged more with additional improvements to online learning and support resources and reduce the uncertainty in the decision process and increase confidence levels for prospective students.

The data suggests that the two confidence components that managers can influence (i.e., education provider's brand and guidance counselors) might have the highest likelihood for tertiary education providers to pro-actively influence the confidence perceptions of their current and prospective students. Specifically, guidance counselors and other front-line staff can focus their efforts on their communications strategies to ensure that the tertiary education provider's messages are consistent and in support of a coherent brand reputation whilst also providing adequate guidance to the individual student. Within the context of international tertiary education shows and more generally within the context of the education industry a new focus on the construct of confidence might offer practitioners a new avenue to evaluate the performance of their guidance counselors and other front-line staff.

Additionally, the research shows that the education provider's guidance counselors need to ensure a consistent and prompt service experience. This could be achieved by rigorous and prompt follow-up processes after the initial contact with a student. The participants indicated that the expectation for instant responses and instant answers when communicating with an exhibiting tertiary education provider is a differentiating factor and has direct impact on their tertiary education choice process. As a conclusion, this research presents tertiary education decision, guidance counselors and brand name as strengthening confidence of prospective students who seek guidance through international tertiary education shows. This confidence translates to swifter decision-making within this context as well. Thus, a temporal relationship between guidance, confidence and tertiary education decision is suggested.

### 5.7. Limitations and future research

Although the research presented is comprehensive, some limitations exist in research design given the qualitative nature of the study. The interviews were with students who all chose the same university as their final international study option and the students were being asked to reflect on an earlier decision, which may have resulted in them not as accurately remembering their thought processes of the time. Although every effort was made to avoid selection bias, to use a broad cross-section of participants, and ask them to accurately reflect on their decision, this does not necessarily constitute a representative sample of the education industry globally although this emphasis on the conditions under which the concepts operate, not with generalizability, is a key focus of qualitative insights [64]. Students choosing international study experiences in countries other than Australia could, however, be considered for future research, as well as students whose aim is a domestic study experience. Interviewing students directly at the tradeshow could also limit the impact of memory on decision making.

While this research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the results still highlight important insights into the role of confidence in making tertiary education decisions and how best to enhance this for tertiary students. With the general consensus that Australia will continue its focus on international student recruitment despite increased competition from other countries, insights into optimizing student confidence in their decision-making process is valuable. To extend the generalizability of the study however, future research may like to collect more data post the COVID-19 pandemic. While Australia did not experience the extensive challenges other countries did, it would still be beneficial to extend the findings and potentially make comparisons pre- and post-pandemic. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to investigate how health fears impact students' confidence levels. While Australia has not experienced the numbers of deaths or COVID-19 related cases as other countries have, this may impact aspects of confidence and the time to decide. Data collected now after individuals have come to a level of acceptance of the COVID-19 pandemic would also help extend the findings.

Extending the research to include a quantitative investigation would also provide generalizability beyond the limitations of a qualitative study. It could be of benefit to investigate students who did not acquire any guidance prior to making their study decision to see if the same findings hold. Specifically, an experimental study could investigate both a control group of students who did not receive any guidance, and a group who did receive guidance. The components of confidence could be manipulated with these two groups to see if the results hold. Furthermore, a broader quantitative investigation could also overcome potential bias in the results from the small sample. While the focus of this research was on confidence, other factors beyond confidence might also act as indicators for tertiary education decisions as well as self-beliefs such as self-efficacy and self-esteem. Future research should investigate this and assess alternative indicators. The research into confidence as a construct for a perceived value concept as a base for a tertiary education decision within the tertiary education choice process was exploratory in nature and should be replicated. This research has highlighted several under-researched areas and will hopefully be able to help academics as well as practitioners extend research in this area.

#### **Name of the approving ethics committee**

University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC).

#### **Ethics approval number**

1500000301.

#### **Production notes**

##### *Author contribution statement*

Udo Gottlieb, Amanda Beatson: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

##### *Data availability statement*

Data will be made available on request.

##### *Additional information*

No additional information is available for this paper.

#### **Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### **Appendix. Interview guide**

1. What tertiary education trade show did you attend & when?
2. Why did you attend this particular tertiary education trade show?
  - a. What motivated you to attend?
  - b. What were your objectives for attending the trade show?
  - c. When did you make the decision to attend [university]?
3. Please tell me about your experience when you attended this trade show.
  - a. What did you like about this particular trade show?
  - b. What did you dislike about this particular trade show?
  - c. Tell me about your experience when making a decision.
4. What were the outcomes of your decision-making experience?
  - a. What elements of the trade show were most influential to your experience/decision-making processes?
  - b. What were the outcomes of attending this trade show besides from signing up with [university]?
5. Did you achieve your initial objectives?

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