

Determinants of Higher Education Choice among Secondary- Level Students in Nepal¹

Deb Bahadur Chhetri, Hiralal Regmi, & Biplav Sharma

Abstract

The subject studied at the secondary level stands as a foundation for program and subject selection in higher education. Factors influencing students' career choices and educational decision-making are important but are less prioritised in the Nepalese education context. This paper analyses the factors influencing students' career choices and higher-education decision-making after grades 11 and 12. The study used a mixed-methods research design. Seven hundred eighty-eight students from Baglung, Parbat, and Myagdi districts were surveyed, while 14 students participated in a qualitative inquiry. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyse survey data, while thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. The findings revealed that employment possibilities and career advancement motivate nearly half of students (45.3%) intended to pursue opportunities abroad. Nearly one-fourth (25.8%) reported following family advice, and the remaining participants reported plans to develop their careers in Nepal, either through higher education or entrepreneurship. Almost half of the respondents (44%) chose the management stream for their future studies, followed by education (23.2%), science (14.2%), and humanities and social sciences (4.1%). Nearly one-third (29.2%) of students got opportunities for career counseling in schools. services within their school environments. Future career prospects were identified as the primary influencing factor (60.8%) in career choice and educational selection. Findings suggest

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that school education requires integrating counseling services to enhance students' decision-making capabilities in educational selection. Future research should explore students' conceptions of career-choice decision-making and examine their broader implications for educational access and equity.

Keywords: career choice, higher education, migration, program selection, student aspirations

Introduction

Transitions from secondary level to higher education are critical junctures in students' academic life, and the selection of subjects during Grade 11 and 12 often has long-lasting consequences. These choices shape not only immediate academic opportunities but also the alignment among students' interests, university programs, and labour market demands (Maringe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017). However, subjects chosen in the senior grades of secondary school align with subject choices for a university career, and students switch to another discipline (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019; Kao et al., 2023). These arguments imply that subject choices in grades 11 and 12 play a key role in shaping students' confidence, skills, and mindset for their academic journey and career paths.

Prior research findings (Rothwell et al., 2016; Boulila & Ouhajji, 2023) suggest that personal interests and the perceived possibility of employment help students prepare their mindset for further study. Family advice, availability of institutional guidance, and resources drive students' decisions regarding subject selection (Maringe, 2006). Students increasingly base their subject choices on pragmatic considerations such as future employability and economic stability rather than solely on intrinsic interest. Parental guidance has been identified as one of the most significant determinants, with family members and teachers strongly shaping students' choices in Nigeria (James, Prayer, & Saleh, 2024). Mid-teenage students in the United Kingdom consider the subject utility as an indicator for selecting higher education (British Academy, 2024). This trend reflects the growing emphasis on labour market outcomes in educational decision-making.

Research findings across the South Asian context highlight multiple factors influencing students' academic choices. Parental education, family expectations, and socioeconomic status strongly influence students' academic choices in South Asia (Asif et al., 2018). Thus, students' higher education is influenced by their sociological and family economic constraints, which shape their career decisions.

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Peer influence and individual traits have a substantial effect on the selection of academic career paths. Besides the peer influence, other socio-cultural factors influence career decisions about education. A study conducted in Cambodia shows that lower-income individuals choose social science over other sciences. Their choice is influenced by parental advice and perceived affordability (Hun, 2024). Students from lower-income families have fewer opportunities for career counseling and guidance due to their financial limitations (Gautam, 2024). Consequently, these factors influence career choice (Timilsina, 2023). Thus, the socio-economic status influences children's educational choices. Similarly, a study in Korea concluded that gender, parental education, subject interest, and school size influence students' college major choices (Kim & Park, 2013). Thus, socio-economic status, culture, and family factors influence students' higher-education career choices.

Studies conducted in developed educational contexts identify personal interest, self-concept, and institutional guidance as determinant factors of educational choices (Maringe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017; Rothwell et al., 2016). Regarding the factors influencing students' decision-making about their future education, prior research has yielded inconsistent results. The disparity is observed, whether students' decisions are primarily influenced by personal interests or external socio-economic pressures.

Despite the importance of higher education, formal and authentic career counseling services are not available at the school level in Nepal. As a result, students have limited access to formal counseling and information about educational opportunities after Grade 12. In this scenario, students follow their seniors' educational pathways and make educational decisions based on migration aspirations, employment opportunities, and career security. Previous research has focused on career choice and educational decision-making. During the literature review, it was found that prior studies are descriptive and rely on small qualitative samples. These limitations provide limited generalizable insights.

Research questions

The present study analyses students' awareness of higher education and career counseling services, explores their preferred career choices and higher education and examines the factors influencing higher education choice among secondary-level students in Nepal. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What level of awareness do secondary-level students have regarding higher educational programs and career counseling services?
2. What are the preferred higher education and career choices at the secondary level in Nepal?
3. What factors influence students' higher education choice and career decision-making?

Theories of career choice in tertiary education

Regarding career choice and the selection of educational and academic programs, the Life-Space Theory, Social Learning Theory, Circumscription and Compromise Theory, and Career Choice Theory are notable frameworks that offer significant insights into how individuals make educational and occupational decisions.

Super's Life-Space, Life-span Theory views career development as a lifelong process including the stages: growth (birth to mid-teens), exploration (mid-teens to early twenties), establishment (mid-twenties to mid-forties), maintenance (mid-forties to mid-sixties), and decline (late sixties onward) (Super, 1990). The university's starting phase corresponds to the exploration phase. During this stage, individuals develop, specify, and implement their career preferences, influenced by their perceptions of themselves academically, socially, and professionally. These concepts, in turn, influence their educational choice decisions (Super, 1990). Hence, the perception of their surroundings is a determining factor in the choice of educational and academic programs. Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory proposes that students' learning experiences and their social, cultural, and environmental factors, such as family expectations, peer influence, and cultural norms, play a critical role in shaping their career choices and academic or educational program preferences (Krumboltz, 1979). Additionally, Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise explains how individuals progressively narrow down their career options by eliminating those they perceive as socially inappropriate or unattainable based on gender, class, or perceived ability, and later compromise these preferences due to practical constraints (Gottfredson, 1981). When the students' work and educational environments align with their personality traits, these environments lead to satisfaction and stability (Holland, 1997). The personality traits, including realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional, provide individuals with different capabilities. Thus, a working environment that matches personal traits enhances satisfaction.

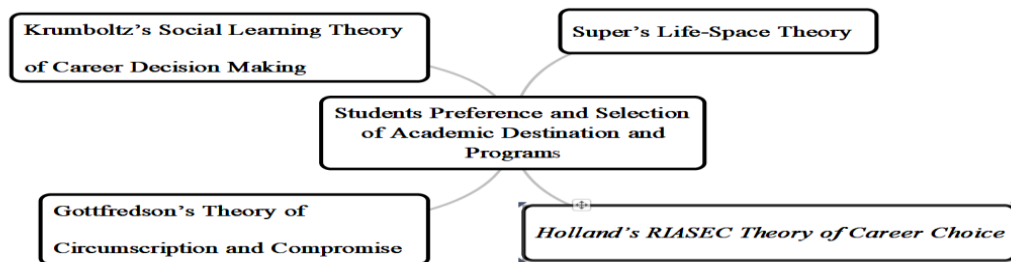
In the Nepali context, these theories converge to show how students' self-image and goals are shaped by family values, economic hardship, and social norms related to migration. Super's exploration stage, for example, is often constrained by structural barriers rather than self-directed experimentation. Likewise, Krumboltz's (1979) idea of happenstance learning is evident in unexpected encounters with educational options, highlighting the lack of school counseling systems.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical lens, which describes students' intentions or preferences for higher study, the following theoretical framework has been developed. This framework underpins the study's analytical approach, connecting personal aspirations, socio-cultural influences, and environmental constraints to explain students' educational decision-making.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the study's structure; the instrumentation is



designed to examine students' academic preferences in the context of Nepal. The framework provides a lens for analysing the interplay among personal aspirations, socio-cultural influences, and available educational opportunities, thereby guiding data analysis.

Regarding this study, some key terms were used. Higher education choice refers to *students' preferences*, indicating their choice of future academic programs and career pathways after secondary-level education. *Career counseling* refers to formal guidance and informational support related to educational and career planning. *Migration aspiration* refers to students' intention to pursue higher education or employment opportunities abroad. These concepts are interconnected with socio-economic conditions, family influence, and perceived career security in shaping students' educational decision-making.

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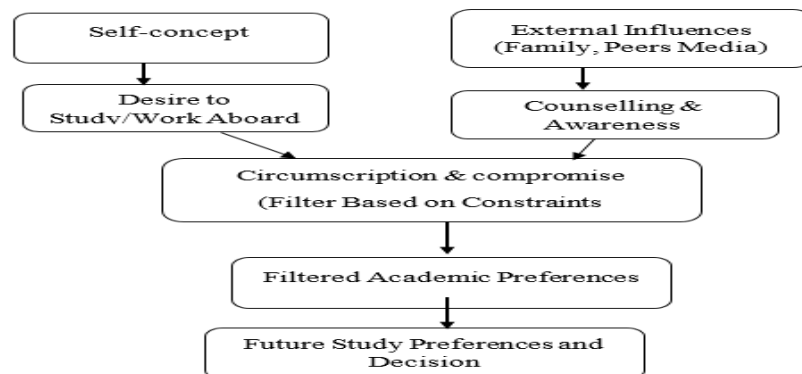
Conceptual framework

Formal counseling services for students beginning higher education are widely available in European and American countries (Eurydice, 2025; Martirosyan et al., 2019); however, such services are largely unavailable in rural areas of South Asian countries, including Nepal (Acharya, 2016). The foundation of senior school education significantly influences students' career paths and options for higher education (Maringe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017). Personal interests, perceived employability, family expectations, peer influence, and the availability of institutional guidance are influencing factors in the decision-making process for university education selection (Maringe, 2006; Timilsina, 2023). Additionally, socioeconomic status, school environment, and gender influence preferences, with financial and informational constraints limiting access to technical, vocational, and less conventional programs and serving as decision-making factors in higher-education choice (Gautam, 2024; Kim & Park, 2013).

In this context, students' higher education choices emerge from the interaction among self-concept, external influences, the desire to study or work abroad, counseling and awareness, and circumscription and compromise, resulting in filtered academic preferences that reflect both aspirations and contextual constraints. Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework guiding this study.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the Study



As shown in Figure 2, self-concept represents students' confidence and perceived abilities, while external influences include family, peers, teachers, and social norms. The trends in students' choices of study and work abroad imply an intention to migrate to well-developed countries. Thus, the desire for board choice and settlement in developed

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countries influences the selection of programs for academic careers. The multiple paths create decision-making stress. The counselling and awareness of educational opportunities reduce decision-making stress. Factors related to the family and the country's situation create circumscription and compromise in decision-making. This situation limited students' educational aspirations. These barriers limit the opportunities and result in filtered academic preferences that combine personal aspirations with contextual realities.

Methods

The research process was guided by a pragmatic philosophical paradigm. The mixed-method research design was employed. This method enables a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by integrating statistical trends with in-depth individual perspectives within their socio-cultural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fetters & Freshwater, 2021; Saldana, 2021; Tracy, 2023). Therefore, a mixed method was used.

This sequential mixed-methods design was selected to align quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of both statistical patterns and individual narratives (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2020). The quantitative phase provided descriptive trends, while the qualitative phase offered contextual insights into students' perceptions and aspirations. The mixed-methods research design allows for an in-depth understanding of issues concerning individual experiences and collective voices (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2020; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2019). Previously, surveys and open-ended questionnaires were used sequentially to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions and plans for higher education. Multi-stage sampling was employed to conduct the study. This method is applicable when a complete list of the population is not available, and a more manageable unit needs to be selected (McCombes, 2023). The total population of 10,337, including grades 11 and 12, across the three selected districts (Centre for Education and Human Resource Development, 2024). This population represented a diverse cross-section of public and private institutions, allowing for a balanced understanding of the academic and socio-economic variations among secondary students in Western Nepal. The minimum sample size of 371 was determined using an online sample size calculator called Raosft. Dhawalagiri Multiple Campus in Baglung is a government-funded higher education institution serving as the main academic centre for students from three nearby districts within its designated geographical catchment

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area. Since the study concerns higher education, Dhawalagiri Multiple Campus was selected as the basis for sampling from a large population. From a preliminary investigation, 56 feeder schools associated with the campus were identified. To ensure representation from all areas, 19 schools were selected using random sampling. After contacting the selected schools, the number of students to be included in data collection was determined using stratified random sampling based on the total number of students. Finally, twice that number of students were included in the data collection. This sampling approach adhered to ethical and statistical guidelines to ensure representativeness. Among the distributed and collected questionnaires, 788 responses were valid. In qualitative inquiry, 14 students participated. The socio-demographic information and factors influencing career choice decisions were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale in the survey questionnaire. The open-ended questions explored students' awareness, aspiration, and perceived barriers to higher education. The questionnaire was validated through expert review by three faculty members of Tribhuvan University.

Data were collected between January and March 2025. All the participants were briefed about the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. The survey was conducted by distributing hard-copy questionnaires to students in selected schools and classes, randomly based on seating arrangements. Following the preliminary analysis of survey data, the five open-ended questions were distributed to 20 randomly selected students from Baglung Municipality. Finally, the number of valid survey participants was 788, and 14 responses were received to the open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Creswell and Poth's (2023) five-step process. Triangulation of both data types enabled a comprehensive understanding of educational and career decision-making patterns. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS version 27.

Permission for data collection was obtained from the respective schools before conducting the survey. Participants were informed about the objective of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. No individual identifiers were collected, and responses were used only for academic and research purposes. Peer debriefing, audit trails, and member checking were used for trustworthiness. Grammarly was used to improve the language clarity.

This study was limited to secondary-level students in grades 11 and 12 from selected schools in the Baglung, Parbat, and Myagdi districts of Nepal. The study focused on students' higher education choices, career aspirations, access to counseling, and the socio-economic factors influencing them. The finding is based on self-reported responses collected through a cross-sectional survey and qualitative inquiry. Therefore, the result may not represent all secondary-level students in Nepal

Result and Discussion

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Socio-demographic information for participants in both the quantitative and qualitative phases is presented in Table 1. The participants' ages ranged from 15 to 23; however, more than 90% of students were in the 16-19 age group in both phases. The female participation was higher than that of males. The majority of participants from Baglung district, followed by Myagdi, were predominantly Brahmin/Chhetri, with Janajati the next-largest group. Similarly, the majority of participants are from public schools.

Table 1

Socio-demographic Status of Respondents

Participants in Quantitative Phase (n=788)				Participants in Qualitative Phase (n=14)			
Category	n	%	Pseudo name	Gender	Stream	School Type	
Gender			A	Female	Science	Private	
Male	337	42.8	B	Male	Science	Private	
Female	451	57.2	C	Female	Science	Private	
Ethnicity			D	Female	Science	Private	
Brahmin/Chhetri	345	43.8	E	Male	Science	Private	
Janajati	298	37.8	F	Male	Science	Public	
Dalit	135	17.1	G	Female	Science	Public	
Madhesi	2	0.3	H	Male	Science	Public	
Not mentioned	8	1	I	Female	Science	Public	
District			J	Female	Science	Public	
Baglung	563	71.4	K	Male	Edu	Public	
Parbat	39	4.9	L	Female	Edu	Public	
Myagdi	186	23.6	M	Male	Mgt	Public	
School Type			N	Female	Mgt	Public	
Public	566	71.8					
Private	222	28.2					

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Stream			
Management	327	41.5	
Science	165	20.9	
Education	247	31.3	
Humanities	28	3.6	
Technical	21	2.7	

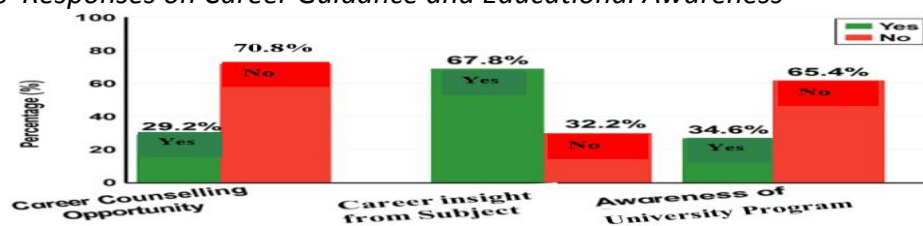
Additionally, the majority of participants were from the management stream, followed by the education and science streams. However, in the qualitative phase, respondents in the science stream were higher than in the other streams.

Awareness of higher education and career counseling services

Regarding students' career counseling opportunities and awareness of higher educational programs the result was as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

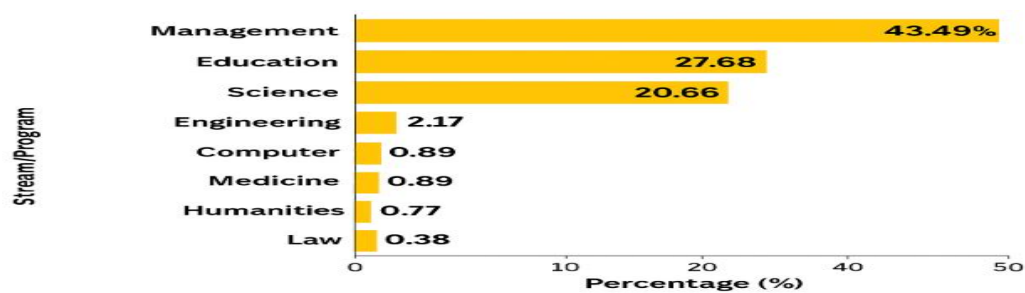
Students' Responses on Career Guidance and Educational Awareness



Only 29.2% of respondents reported receiving any career counselling, and just 34.6% were aware of university programs related to their interests. A significant majority (70.8%) had no access to guidance services, although 67.8% acknowledged that some school subjects indirectly provided career insights. The students demonstrated awareness of the subject, as evidenced by their responses shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Student's Knowledge about Available Programs



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The majority of students reported familiarity with management programs (43.49%), followed by education (27.68%) and Science (20.66%). Smaller proportions of students were aware of programs in engineering (2.17%), Computer (0.89%), medicine (0.77%), humanities (0.89%), and law (0.38%). A very small portion of students (3.08%) did not report their stream of study. This result indicates that the majority of the students were familiar with the management program, followed by education, and then science. However, students' awareness of other higher education programs is comparatively low. This finding indicates limited exposure to diverse academic and professional fields at the secondary level. This highlights that broader career guidance and exposure to diverse fields of study are essential for students at the school level. Limited awareness of diverse educational opportunities may restrict students' ability to make informed, interest-based career decisions.

Qualitative inquiry findings support the facts identified by the survey results. Student B said, "Our school never organised a session on what to study next." Student H further explained that "We hear about universities from social media, not from teachers." These student experiences highlight an information vacuum at the institutional level regarding higher education institutions and schools. Educational institutions are leaving students to rely on peer and family networks for central decisions. Moreover, students reported knowledge of various subjects and a willingness to pursue them. Therefore, students tend to continue in familiar subject areas rather than exploring educational pathways aligned with future career opportunities and personal interests. Besides this, two students report not being concerned about the program results of seeking a job in a foreign country. Hence, qualitative inquiry justifies the results from the quantitative study.

This finding aligns with the theoretical claim of the System Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2014). This theory claims that career development needs a plan and context-based support, but experience is not sufficient.

This theory emphasises that career development requires structured and context-sensitive interventions rather than unplanned experiences. Similarly, the findings indicate that students' career decisions are affected by multiple factors. The finding highlighted that students described making choices influenced by peers, family expectations, or societal prestige rather than through informed counseling. This suggests that educational decision-making among secondary-level students is shaped more by external social

influences than by systematic career exploration. It aligns with the claim that, without proper guidance, students' educational choices are influenced by others rather than by their own desires and capabilities (Krumboltz, 1979). mentioned by Krumboltz's social Learning Theory. Thus, students are removed from their realities and decision-making contexts when they lack opportunities for counseling.

More than 90% students were aged between 16 and 19, adolescents. The preferences of multiple factors are in a critical context. This finding aligns with Ginzberg's (1951) career development theory. This theory identifies adolescence as a critical period for career exploration and decision-making. The lack of structured counseling during this stage may therefore hamper the formation of realistic and satisfying career goals. A majority of students (67.8%) believed that specific school subjects offered partial exposure to career concepts. Nearly one-third (32.2%) of students reported that their subjects made no meaningful contribution to career awareness. Therefore, the available educational opportunities are insufficient to guide the career path. The main causes of this situation may be due to the detachment of theory from practical life skills. Thus, applied or vocational subjects incidentally foster awareness. But theoretical subjects remain detached from real-world career contexts, and the social environment creates career confusion for the students rather than clearly guiding their career path. Thus, in the absence of career counseling, students' decisions are formed through incidental learning rather than systematic exploration. Furthermore, Previous studies indicate that secondary schools often provide limited career support services (Arfasa & Weldmeskel, 2020). Thus, minimal career support, creating dependency on informal sources required to establish for secondary level students in Nepal. Thus, theoretical explanations and just bookish, paper-and-pencil practices cannot guide a career without integrated skill practice.

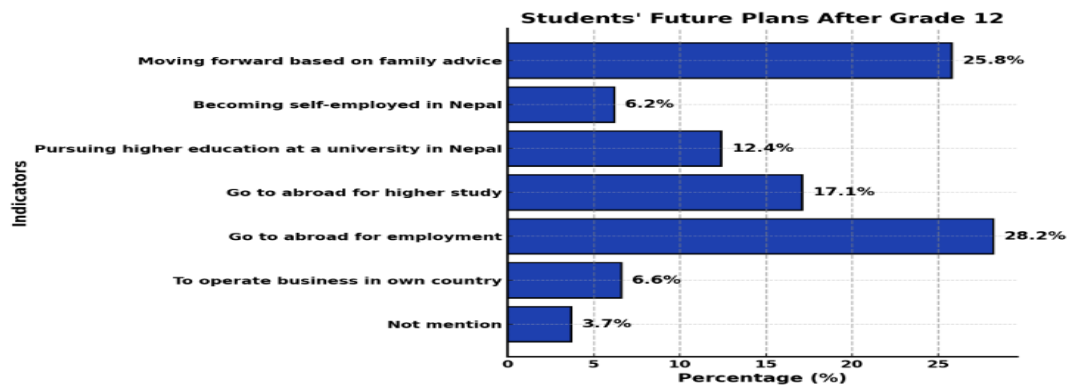
The integration of these quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the absence of formal career counseling in schools influences the ability to make correct decisions. These absences limit students' awareness of careers and opportunities. It also creates an environment of inequities in access to information and decision-making support. Students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds may be more affected by this lack of institutional support. Strengthening formal career guidance at the upper secondary level is an urgent necessity to ensure students make informed, reflective, and contextually grounded career choices.

Exploration of career pathways

The students' preferred post-secondary career choice is shown in Figure 5. The result shows that the maximum number of students intended to go abroad for either employment or higher education. Among the respondent students, 28.2% intended to go abroad for employment and 17.1% for higher education. This implies that a major career concern is connected with job opportunities.

Figure 5

Student's Preferred Post-Secondary Career Pathways



This result indicates that nearly half of the students seek their future outside Nepal. This finding reflects the growing influence of migration culture and perceived economic insecurity among secondary-level students in Nepal. The students focused on opportunities that ensure career security. Qualitative study findings support this pattern. Regarding this case, student F viewed, "Everyone in my community goes abroad; staying here means no progress." This implies that nearly half of the students perceive limited opportunities for personal and professional growth within Nepal. The students' career choice to study abroad, either to study or for a job, aligns with Lee's (1966) push-pull theory. This theory explains migration as the outcome of interactions between local push factors. The findings indicate that limited employment opportunities and perceived educational insecurity function as major push factors among students. The respondents present a case for employment linked to push factors as described by Lee (1966). Similarly, limited educational quality and future career aspirations among the students align with the push factors. Student K reported that "Brother of my friend is now in Australia and he has sufficient income." This saying indicates the pull factors as mentioned by Lee (1966). These factors include perceived opportunities for better

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income, global exposure, and social status. The convergence of quantitative data and qualitative voices illustrates how migration has evolved into a cultural norm, shaping young people's sense of achievement and belonging. This trend suggests that educational success is increasingly associated with global mobility and foreign employment opportunities among Nepali youth. The overall pattern of career choices is also guided by social thought and its inspiration.

The family influence emerged as another significant determinant in students' career planning. The survey result shows that one-fourth of the respondents (25.8%) reported that their future decisions were guided by family advice. Student G reported that "Only our desire is not important, our family advice is important for our education." Similarly, student K explained, "Our family and their suggestion is important and a role model for our career rather than our self-decision". Thus, qualitative insights echoed this influence, with several students describing parents as the ultimate decision-makers regarding studies and career paths. This one-fourth of students' responses indicates that family advice and guidance affect a limited number of students. This result indicates that family advice and guidance continue to influence students' educational and career decisions. This finding is supported by the Social Cognitive Career Theory proposed by Lent et al. (1994), which suggests that young people's career decisions are shaped by their families' expectations and the social environments in which they grow up. In the context of Nepal's collectivist culture, where family and community relationships hold profound importance, this pattern shows how individual ambitions are closely linked with collective values and family guidance (Arfasa & Weldmeskel, 2020; Bista, 2020).

Besides choosing abroad career, a small number of students (6.6%) plan to start a business, and 6.2% of students reported being self-employed in Nepal. The finding shows that only a small number of students are motivated by entrepreneurial aspirations. The majority of students do not consider domestic business and entrepreneurial activities as attractive career options. Thus, the majority of the students intended to choose a higher income. This finding aligns with the theoretical claim that students perceived a higher return on education and skills when invested abroad (Becker, 1964), as posited by Human Capital Theory. In the questionnaire, Student K reported that, "Entrepreneurial activities in Nepal do not guarantee a future career, and there is no guarantee, which is substantiated by concerns." This response highlights systemic barriers in Nepal for business and entrepreneurial activities. Limited market opportunities and perceived

economic insecurity may discourage students from pursuing entrepreneurship within Nepal. Similarly, student C reported that "In Nepal no security and support for business and small market." As students highlighted limited markets and underdeveloped private sectors, they expressed uncertainty regarding business sustainability and employment opportunities. As they highlighted poor markets, the underdeveloped private sectors give them an uneasy feeling about the business and job market. Despite the dominant inspiration from abroad, a small portion of people feel that a career is possible in Nepal.

The result shows that 12.4% of students expressed a desire to continue their higher studies in Nepal. This small portion of desire to continue studying in Nepal reflects a decline in trust in the direction provided by university education. Besides the dominant belief, uneasy feelings about business are among the indicators of how work is conducted and engaged in Nepal. The students perceive a gap between job opportunities and education in Nepal. The relevance of domestic higher education programs in ensuring future career prospects is being undermined by market availability. This perception aligns with prior research highlighting the gap between education and the job market (Khadka et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2022). The findings also align with evidence of misalignment between university curricula and labour market demands. The qualitative inquiry supports this finding. Student B said that "In the portion of students' graduation, the market is tiny, no opportunities to achieve quality", suggesting a disconnection between academic content and employability. These patterns of students' desires point toward a broadening brain drain, as aspirations for global mobility overshadow investment in local opportunities. This situation may contribute to long-term challenges for Nepal's national human capital development and skilled workforce retention.

The quantitative result demonstrated the dominant migration trends in other countries for either education or the job market. This shows that job-seeking intention shapes students' study plans rather than their skills and expertise. The qualitative inquiry supports this trend by identifying reasons why students choose to study abroad. The qualitative evidence highlighted that migration aspirations have become embedded in students' career identity. Participants described foreign education as a path to dignity, implying that global exposure symbolises success and self-worth. This perception reflects the growing social prestige associated with foreign education and migration within Nepalese society. The alignment between quantitative results and qualitative findings reveals that Nepali students' career choices are shaped by a complex interplay of

structural limitations, family expectations, and migration culture, reflecting broader transformations in youth identity under globalisation. The findings highlight the urgent need for context-sensitive career counseling and stronger alignment between higher education, employment opportunities, and national development priorities in Nepal.

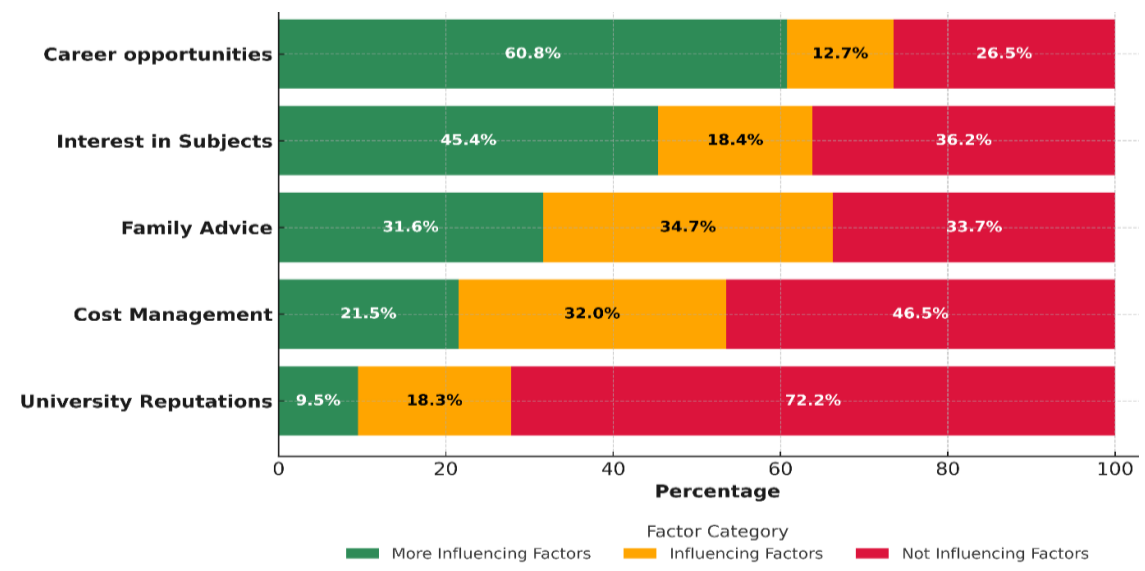
Factors influencing career decision-making

Career opportunities, subject interests, family advice, cost management, and university reputation were identified in the literature review. These factors are considered in this research to identify their level of influence. The student's perception is displayed in Figure 6.

The survey result revealed that career opportunities are a major influencing factor. As students reported in the indicator, 60.8% voted career opportunities as the most influential factor. However, 26.5% believe that career opportunities are not the only factor impacting decision-making. The subject interest is in second position, with 45.4% of the vote as the most influential factor. But 32.2% of students believe it is not an influencing factor in career decision-making. Nearly one-fifth of students believe that subject interest is a medium factor in decision-making.

Figure 6

Factors Influencing Students' Career Decision-Making



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Regarding the family, nearly one-third of students believe there are more influential factors, another third believe it is a medium-level influence; however, one-third believe it does not affect decision-making regarding career choice. The university's reputation is not perceived as an influencing factor. However, only 18.3% students considered it as an influencing factor. Thus, the finding indicates that students' decision-making is shaped by extrinsic and practical motivations. Thus, this finding suggests that students prioritise employability and economic stability over intrinsic academic interests in their educational planning. This finding is supported by the qualitative inquiry result. Student B said, "I chose a subject that gives me a job fast." This view focuses on employability and financial security. This finding reflects the increasing influence of economic uncertainty on students' educational decisions. Similarly, students' G and K have coincident views. K said, "My parents told me management is practical." This evidence indicates that family expectations and social norms influence career decision-making. Students' educational choices appear increasingly connected with pragmatic survival strategies rather than purely self-directed. Only a few students mentioned intrinsic motivation; for example, Student L said, "I want to be a teacher because I love mathematics." This indicates that personal satisfaction often takes a secondary role to economic and social concerns. Thus, the majority of students' cognition regarding career decisions is shaped by their future and employment.

This finding supports Super's (1990) life-span, life-space theory's claim. This theory claims that the exploration phase of career development is ideally characterised by self-assessment and the pursuit of personal goals. The students set personal employment goals that primarily influence career choice, making it possible to choose a career in other countries. The future life concerns and planning process appear restricted within the Nepali socio-economic setting. Financial pressure, limited career guidance, and unstable job markets are significant factors that hinder students' autonomy in decision-making. These structural limitations may reduce students' ability to make fully independent educational choices based on personal interests and capabilities. Consequently, students' choices reflect adaptive survival strategies rather than free self-exploration. Educational decision-making, therefore, becomes closely associated with economic adaptation and social mobility. This interpretation extends Super's theoretical assumptions by demonstrating how socio-economic limitations can transform vocational exploration into pragmatic adjustment. Immediate employment opportunities emerged as the primary

concern. Intention of immediate employment is driven by social-cultural and economic pressures imposed on students, diverting them from their real choice. Thus, sociocultural and family economic status, as well as their thoughts, influence decision-making.

The findings align with the employability and economic stability override passion and academic curiosity among Nepali youth (Timilsina, 2023). Similarly, the findings align with the findings that parental expectations and job prospects are the strongest predictors of program choice among South Asian students. Additionally, Timilsina (2023) also noted that limited counseling services and intense family pressure lead students toward programs perceived as financially dependable, which supports the findings of this study. Finally, the study's findings confirm that academic decision-making is socially embedded and shaped by both structural constraints and cultural expectations. The findings demonstrate that students' educational decisions are influenced by personal aspirations, broader socio-economic realities, and cultural pressures.

The result can be connected to career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), which describes individuals as active agents who develop their career plans through meaning-making, reflexivity, and adaptive engagement. Students indirectly feel economic and social pressure, in addition to their internal capabilities for self-evaluation and decision-making based on their hobbies and natural interests. The findings suggest that socio-economic conditions significantly constrain students' perceived career possibilities, limiting their envisioned "possible selves" and challenging the idea of fully autonomous career construction, particularly in developing contexts. This finding highlights how structural inequalities may restrict students' freedom to pursue educational pathways aligned with their interests and long-term goals.

The findings emerged from mixed survey results and qualitative inquiry, which highlighted that job security, financial stability, and a bright career are the primary motivators influencing students' selection of academic programs. These findings emphasise the need for universities and policymakers to strengthen career guidance, provide financial literacy programs, and support motivational counseling for their students. Strengthening coordination among schools, universities, and labour market institutions may further support students in making informed, contextually relevant career decisions.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that students' preferences for future study and educational career decisions are shaped by pragmatic and externally imposed factors rather than by intrinsic motivation or self-directed aspirations. The decision was made under cognitive pressure from external factors. The majority of the students intended to go abroad. The desire for better economic opportunities, a brighter career, and the wish to escape the uncertainties and limitations of the local educational and social environment are major factors in decision-making. Students' intentions regarding higher study are often guided more by career considerations than by the subject's importance or cost-effectiveness. The intention behind students' career choices is primarily shaped by prior experiences and the socio-cultural trend of labour migration, driven by the pursuit of economic stability, higher salaries, and better investment environments. However, students often pay little attention to universities' reputations. The absence of effective counseling services and limited entrepreneurial support has fostered a superficial decision-making system. As a result, the widespread social message that studying or working abroad ensures higher income and a secure future continues to influence youth mobility toward foreign countries.

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Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

We declare that this research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

Declaration Statement

The authors confirm that Grammarly Premium was used to enhance the manuscript's clarity and readability.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests with any individual or agency.

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Authors' Contributions

Deb Bahadur Chhetri: Tool development, data collection, data analysis, and report preparation.

Hira Lal Regmi: Data collection, tool standardization, and literature review.

Biplav Sharma: Conceptualization, literature review, data collection, and review of research tools.

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