

## Factors Shaping MBA Students' Enrollment in Foreign-Affiliated Colleges



Sunetra Pradhanang<sup>1\*</sup>, Suresh Panthi<sup>2</sup>, Avinash Shrestha<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Himalayan Whitehouse College, Putalisadak, Kathmandu, Nepal, Email: sunetra2001@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6485-6279>

<sup>2</sup>Uniglobe College, Baneshwor, Kathmandu, Nepal, Email: panthisuresh@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5268-2806>

<sup>3</sup>Kantipur Valley College, Kumariapati, Lalitpur, Nepal, Email: avim.shrestha@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4898-3252>

\*Corresponding Author

### Abstract

Based on participants' accounts, the growing demand for internationally recognized business qualifications in Nepal has led to a rapid expansion of internationally affiliated MBA institutions in Kathmandu; however, there is limited evidence on the factors influencing participants' choices of these institutions in the local context. The present study aims to explore the determinants shaping MBA participants' selection of internationally affiliated institutions in Kathmandu. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 20 MBA participants enrolled in internationally affiliated institutions. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions on motivations, information sources, perceived quality, social influence, financial considerations, and challenges was used. Data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, including coding, categorization, and theme development. The findings show that participants primarily choose internationally affiliated MBA programs for the perceived international recognition of degrees, locally accessible global education, practical, modern curricula, and expectations of improved career prospects. Family support, peer recommendations, and affordability compared to studying abroad were also notable contextual influences in the Nepalese setting. This research implies that institutions should strengthen transparency regarding degree recognition, emphasize employability outcomes, and align curricula with industry needs. At the same time, policymakers should enhance regulation and quality assurance of foreign affiliations. By situating institution-choice theory in Nepal, this study highlights context-specific drivers of demand for transnational higher education in developing-country settings.

**Keywords:** institution choice, internationally affiliated universities, MBA students, Kathmandu, college choice, thematic analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Overall, education plays a vital role not only in shaping individual life opportunities but also in advancing national development. At the individual level, academic qualifications are closely linked to career prospects and socioeconomic mobility, as employers often evaluate candidates drawing on academic performance, institutional reputation, and program quality. In Nepal, many participants aspire to obtain internationally recognized qualifications to enhance their competitiveness in the global labor market. However, the high financial cost of overseas education and frequent visa constraints limit access to foreign universities. In this context, internationally affiliated institutions operating within Nepal have emerged as an accessible alternative, enabling participants to obtain international degrees locally (Phyak, 2024).

According to participants' accounts, Nepal's higher education sector has expanded considerably in recent years. By 2023, the country had 13 central universities, 4 provincial universities, and 5 medical academies, encompassing 1,455 campuses, 162 constituent, 539 community, and 754 private institutions (Subedi, 2025). Alongside this expansion, demand for international academic programs has increased, reflecting participants' aspirations for globally relevant education and improved employability (Budhathoki, 2013). Consequently, internationally affiliated university institutions offering Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs have grown rapidly in Kathmandu.

Notably, despite this growth, limited empirical research has examined the considerations influencing participants' choice of internationally affiliated MBA institutions in Nepal. Existing studies on higher education choice have largely focused on general university selection or international student mobility, with insufficient attention to participants who pursue foreign degrees within their home country. As a result, there is a lack of context-specific understanding of the motivations, perceptions, and choice-making considerations of participants enrolled in internationally affiliated MBA programs in Kathmandu. This knowledge gap constrains higher education institutions and policymakers in designing strategies and policies aligned with participants' expectations and the evolving transnational education landscape.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What factors influence students' choice of foreign-affiliated MBA colleges in Kathmandu?
2. How do these factors shape students' decision-making processes when selecting such institutions?

In many cases, the present study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the limited literature on institution choice in Nepal by focusing specifically on participants enrolled in internationally affiliated MBA programs in Kathmandu. Second, the findings will provide evidence-based insights for higher education leaders and policymakers to develop student-oriented recruitment and program strategies that reflect learners' needs and preferences. Third, the study offers practical implications for strengthening the quality and relevance of higher education in Nepal within an increasingly globalized academic environment.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 College Choice as a Multidimensional Process

Across interviews, college choice is widely recognized as a complex, multifaceted decision shaped by academic, economic, social, psychological, and institutional factors. Rather than being influenced by a single determinant, participants typically evaluate a combination of factors when selecting higher education institutions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). College choice research, therefore, emphasizes the importance of examining diverse influences to capture the full scope of participants' decision-making processes.

It was evident that early work conceptualized institution choice as a staged process involving predisposition, search, and selection phases, each affected by different types of influences (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Later studies further demonstrated that participants' institutional choices emerge

from interactions between personal aspirations, family expectations, institutional characteristics, and broader socio-economic contexts (Perna, 2006). These perspectives support an exploratory approach that considers multiple potential influences rather than restricting analysis to a predetermined framework.

## 2.2 Academic and Institutional Factors

Overall, a substantial body of research identifies institutional attributes as central to college selection. Academic reputation, program availability, teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and accreditation status are consistently reported as major determinants (Briggs, 2006; Maringe, 2006). Students often associate reputable institutions with stronger career prospects and higher educational standards.

Notably, for postgraduate business education, program specialization and industry relevance are particularly influential. MBA applicants frequently evaluate curriculum structure, faculty expertise, and practical learning opportunities such as internships or industry projects (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997). The perceived global recognition of qualifications is also notable, especially in internationally affiliated programs (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013).

## 2.3 Career and Employability Considerations

It was evident that employment prospects and career advancement opportunities are among the most influential motivations in higher education choices (James et al., 1999). Students tend to prefer institutions that demonstrate strong graduate employability outcomes, industry linkages, and professional networking opportunities (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

It was evident that for MBA participants in particular, expected salary growth, managerial career progression, and international mobility significantly shape institutional choice (Pimpa, 2005). Foreign-affiliated universities may therefore be attractive because they are perceived as enhancing global career competitiveness.

## 2.4 Financial Factors

In many cases, cost considerations remain a central influence across contexts. Tuition fees, availability of scholarships, payment flexibility, and perceived return on investment all affect participants' choices (Vrontis et al., 2007). Students often evaluate educational choices in terms of cost–benefit trade-offs, comparing financial expenditure with anticipated career benefits (Chapman, 1981).

From participants' accounts, affordability relative to studying abroad is particularly notable in developing-country contexts. Foreign-affiliated institutions may offer international degrees at lower costs than overseas study, thereby widening access to global education (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013).

## 2.5 Social and Interpersonal Influences

Notably, family expectations, parental guidance, and peer recommendations are consistently identified as strong influences in university choice (Pimpa, 2005; Maringe, 2006). In collectivist societies, educational choices often involve family consultation and shared choice-making (Hofstede, 2011).

According to participants' accounts, parents may influence the type of institution, location, and field of study, drawing on perceived prestige, safety, or career outcomes. Peer experiences and alums feedback also shape perceptions of institutional quality and desirability (Briggs, 2006).

## 2.6 Personal and Psychological Factors

Notably, students' aspirations, interests, self-identity, and perceived fit with institutional culture also contribute to the choice of institution (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Individual motivations, such as a desire for international exposure, personal development, or status attainment, can guide institutional preferences (Bourdieu, 1986).

Overall, for postgraduate participants, prior educational experiences and professional goals strongly influence program selection (James et al., 1999). MBA candidates often seek institutions aligned with leadership ambitions and entrepreneurial goals.

## 2.7 Location and Accessibility

Overall, geographical proximity, urban environment, campus facilities, and living conditions are additional practical considerations in institutional selection (Briggs, 2006). Students may prefer institutions located in major cities due to access to employment opportunities, professional networks, and lifestyle amenities (Maringe, 2006).

It was evident that in Kathmandu, the concentration of internationally affiliated institutions may increase accessibility and visibility, thereby shaping student choices.

## 2.8 Information Sources and Marketing Influences

Notably, access to information significantly affects institutional selection. Students rely on multiple sources, including institutional websites, rankings, promotional materials, alumni testimonials, education fairs, and social media (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

In many cases, marketing communication and brand image also influence perceptions of institutional quality and attractiveness (Ivy, 2001). Positive institutional branding can therefore strengthen student preference even before direct experience with the institution.

## 2.9 Perceived International Value of Foreign-Affiliated Institutions

It was evident that foreign-affiliated universities are often perceived as providing internationally recognized qualifications, modern curricula, and global academic standards (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). Students may associate such institutions with better career mobility and opportunities for further study abroad.

According to participants' accounts, research on transnational education indicates that they frequently choose international branch or affiliated campuses to obtain foreign degrees without leaving their home countries (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). This perception is especially relevant for postgraduate business education, where global recognition and professional credibility are highly valued.

## 2.10 Implications for an Exploratory Approach

Based on participants' accounts, the literature demonstrates that university choice is influenced by a wide array of interacting factors rather than by a single predetermined set of variables. Academic, financial, social, psychological, and contextual elements all contribute to choice-making, and their relative importance varies across contexts and student groups.

Across interviews, given this multidimensional nature, an exploratory qualitative approach is appropriate for identifying context-specific influences on MBA participants' choice of internationally affiliated institutions in Kathmandu. Such an approach allows themes to emerge from participants' experiences rather than restricting analysis to predefined variables, thereby addressing the objectives of the present study.

# 3. Research Methodology

## 3.1 Research Design

Overall, the present study employed a qualitative research design to investigate how participants decide to enroll in internationally affiliated MBA institutions in Kathmandu. An exploratory qualitative approach is appropriate when prior research is limited, and the aim is to understand participants' perspectives, meanings, and experiences in depth rather than to test predetermined variables.

It was evident that college choices are complex and context-dependent, shaped by multiple academic, social, economic, and personal influences. Therefore, a qualitative design enables the researcher to capture nuanced decision-making processes and context-specific considerations that structured quantitative instruments may not capture.

Across interviews, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow participants to describe their experiences and reasoning in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues relevant to the study objectives.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants were enrolled in internationally affiliated MBA programs in institutions located in Kathmandu, Nepal. Students were drawn from several institutions across the city to capture diverse perspectives and experiences.

Notably, participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to recruit individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criterion required participants to be currently studying in an internationally affiliated MBA institution in Kathmandu. The continued until data saturation was reached, that is, when additional interviews no longer produced new insights or themes relevant to the research questions.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to obtain detailed accounts of participants' choice-making experiences. Interviews were conducted in Nepali, the participants' primary language, to facilitate comfort and authentic expression. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

It was evident that each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted by the researcher, who is fluent in both Nepali and English. Conducting interviews in the local language helped ensure clarity of meaning and minimized linguistic barriers.

Across interviews, an interview guide was developed to explore considerations influencing participants' choice of internationally affiliated MBA institutions. Topics included academic considerations, career expectations, financial issues, family and peer influence, media exposure, institutional reputation, and societal perceptions. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their motivations, experiences, and reasoning processes in detail.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Overall, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within textual data. The analysis followed the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarization** : Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in Nepali and subsequently translated into English. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the data.
2. **Initial Coding** : Meaningful segments of text related to institution choice considerations were labeled with descriptive codes.
3. **Searching for Themes** : Related codes were grouped to form preliminary themes representing recurring influences on participants' choices.
4. **Reviewing Themes** : Themes were compared across interviews and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes** : Final themes and subthemes were clearly defined to capture the essence of participants' experiences.
6. **Reporting** : The finalized thematic structure was incorporated into the results section and illustrated with participant quotations.

Notably, to enhance analytical rigor, coding choices and theme development were discussed among the research team until consensus was reached. This collaborative process improved consistency and interpretive validity.

### 3.5 Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Interviews were conducted in participants' native language to preserve meaning. Verbatim transcription and careful translation helped maintain data accuracy. Repeated reading and systematic coding enhanced analytical reliability. In addition, collaborative review of themes among researchers reduced individual bias and strengthened the credibility of interpretations.

## 4. Results

Across interviews, 20 MBA participants enrolled in an internationally affiliated university in Kathmandu were interviewed. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, moving from familiarization and coding to theme construction and refinement. Themes are presented below.

### 4.1 Access to Information and Guidance (most prevalent)

Across interviews, students frequently described how they learned about programs through prior institutional ties, social media, alum networks, consultancies/agents, and institutional outreach. These channels shaped early perceptions, shortlisting, and eventual selection.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- "...social media... these days, social media is packed with ads and testimonials..."
- "Having completed my undergraduate studies at Pulse College (*college name changed*), I was already familiar... and alumni discounts made it practical..."

### 4.2 International Exposure and Recognition

Overall, the promise of an internationally recognized credential, credit mobility/pathways, and global classroom perspectives strongly motivated choices. Students emphasized the value of a foreign affiliation and the option of eventual study/placement abroad.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- "I initially planned to go abroad, but realized I could still get international recognition without leaving Nepal."
- "A foreign affiliation does not automatically mean quality, so I checked the awarding university and curriculum first."

### 4.3 Perceived Academic Quality and Curriculum

Notably, learners valued an up-to-date syllabus, project- and assignment-based assessment, contemporary teaching methods, and industry-aligned coursework. Several contrasted "modern" curricula with "outdated" alternatives. *Illustrative excerpts:*

- "Assignment-based curriculum is favorable to traditional examinations."
- Overall, "I would rather pay more for the latest tools and updated curriculum than for outdated ones."

### 4.4 Challenges and Barriers

Overall, participants reported few procedural hurdles in admissions; however, perceived challenges included sorting reliable information from marketing, weighing social expectations, and ensuring degree credibility/recognition.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- "The admission process was exceptionally simple and straightforward."
- "I made sure recognition and awarding university credentials were legit before deciding."

### 4.5 Employability and Career Outcomes

Notably, anticipated career mobility, placements, industry exposure, and networks factored heavily. Students linked international curricula and assessment styles to practical skills and employability.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- “Foreign-affiliated programs emphasize practical knowledge and industry connections.”
- “I wanted global perspectives that translate to better career opportunities.”

#### **4.6 Social & Cultural Influences**

Overall, parents, close friends, and alums often validated the choices; encouragement outweighed pressure. Peer examples and family trust in foreign affiliations were common.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- “My parents encouraged me a lot.”
- “... close friends were supportive.”

#### **4.7 Financial Considerations**

Overall, cost mattered, but many framed it in value-for-money terms (modern curriculum, recognition, and outcomes). Scholarships and alumni discounts influenced some choices; others prioritized quality over price differentials.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- “Financial considerations played a role.”
- “... the total cost was far less than going abroad.”

#### **4.8 Accessibility, Location & Process**

In many cases, students appreciated local access to international programs, clear eligibility criteria, and streamlined admissions processes, reducing the need to relocate or navigate visa requirements.

*Illustrative excerpts:*

- “The process was clear and professionally managed.”
- “We instantly got registration from the university...”
- “The college is centrally located, and amenities are futuristic...”

### **5. Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors influencing participants' choice of internationally affiliated MBA institutions in Kathmandu. Through thematic analysis of interview data, several key themes emerged: access to information and guidance; international exposure and recognition; perceived academic quality; employability and career outcomes; social and cultural influences; financial considerations; and accessibility/admission processes. These findings resonate with and, in some cases, extend existing literature on higher education choice.

#### **5.1 Information Sources and Decision-Making**

It was evident that a dominant theme was participants' reliance on social media, alums, and prior institutional ties when making choices. This aligns with Perna (2006), who emphasizes the role of information channels in shaping institutional choice, particularly in contexts where participants lack prior exposure to international options. Similar to findings by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), who highlight the salience of institutional communication, participants demonstrated how digital platforms and alums endorsements can shape perceptions and influence final choices. Unlike in some Western contexts, where guidance counselors play a critical role (Chapman, 1981), peer networks appeared more influential here.

#### **5.2 International Recognition and Academic Quality**

The pursuit of internationally recognized degrees was another strong motivator. This corroborates earlier research by Maringe and Gibbs (2009), which found that global recognition and quality assurance are decisive in participants' preference for international programs. For participants, the appeal was not only global recognition but also the ability to access it locally without the financial and logistical burdens of studying abroad. The emphasis on curriculum modernity and assignment-based learning reinforces

Perna's (2006) argument that participants seek institutions that align with contemporary and practical approaches to learning. Unlike in studies where participants primarily focused on institutional reputation (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009), these participants were equally attentive to curriculum design and pedagogy.

### **5.3 Employability and Career Prospects**

Consistent with prior studies of Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), employability outcomes were central in shaping student choices. Respondents highlighted that international affiliations provided greater industry exposure, practical skills, and professional networks. This reflects a global trend where higher education is increasingly evaluated in terms of its return on investment. However, the context shows that employability is framed not just in terms of local job opportunities but also in relation to international career mobility, a nuance less pronounced in Western-focused literature.

### **5.4 Social and Cultural Influences**

Across interviews, the role of parents, peers, and alums was evident in legitimizing participants' choices, though the influence was more supportive than coercive. This mirrors Chapman's (1981) model, which identifies family and peer groups as primary reference points in institution choice. In Nepal's collectivist cultural context, such supportive validation may be particularly notable in confirming choices, even when participants themselves are the primary choice-makers.

### **5.5 Financial Considerations and Accessibility**

Across interviews, although cost was acknowledged, it was often interpreted through a value-for-money lens, similar to findings by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), who note that participants weigh tuition against perceived educational returns. What distinguishes this research is that studying locally in an internationally affiliated institution was often seen as a cost-effective alternative to international mobility, especially when scholarships or alumni discounts were available. Accessibility through straightforward admissions processes and convenient local locations further reduced barriers, echoing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) argument that procedural simplicity is a key enabler of choice.

### **5.6 Contribution to Literature**

Overall, the present study both confirms and extends existing frameworks of higher education choice. While the broad considerations (information, recognition, quality, employability, social influence, and cost) are consistent with prior studies (Perna, 2006; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009), the research highlights unique dynamics:

- The centrality of social media and alums networks as choice-shaping tools.
- The dual role of recognition, both as an assurance of quality and as a substitute for overseas study.
- A stronger orientation toward curriculum content and pedagogy, compared to reputation alone.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study explored the considerations influencing MBA participants' choices of internationally affiliated universities in Kathmandu using a qualitative thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the choice-making process is multifaceted, shaped by a combination of academic, social, financial, and informational influences.

The most dominant theme was access to information, demonstrating that participants rely heavily on social media, alums, prior institutional links, and consultancies. Alongside this, international exposure and recognition emerged as a central motivator, with participants placing significant value on globally recognized qualifications and the prospect of international pathways. Closely tied to this was the importance of perceived academic quality, where modern curricula, assignment-based assessment, and practical industry alignment were viewed as decisive advantages over traditional alternatives.

From participants' accounts, while employability and career outcomes provided a strong rationale for investing in these programs, social and cultural influences, especially parental encouragement and peer validation, helped

legitimize and reinforce participants' choices. Financial considerations did play a role, but were often framed in terms of value for money compared to studying abroad, rather than absolute affordability. Finally, participants consistently emphasized the ease of access and admission processes, while noting that the few challenges they encountered primarily concerned verifying the credibility and recognition of foreign affiliations.

These findings underscore that choosing an internationally affiliated MBA program in Kathmandu is not a single-factor choice, but rather the outcome of interconnected influences. Students are balancing aspirations for international exposure, quality education, and employability with practical realities of cost, location, and recognition.

The study suggests that success in attracting learners lies in transparent communication of recognition and quality, active use of digital and alumni networks for outreach, continuous curriculum innovation, and strengthening career support services. For policymakers, the findings highlight the need for clear standards of recognition, supportive policies for quality assurance, and mechanisms to ensure credibility of foreign partnerships.

In conclusion, the study contributes to understanding institution choice in the Nepalese context, offering insights that can help institutions align strategies with participants' expectations and support the broader development of higher education in Nepal.

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