



Who Decides to Study Abroad? Decision-Making Agency Among Nepalese Students: Survey Evidence from Banepa, Nepal

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Abstract: The escalating outflow of Nepalese students seeking higher education abroad represents one of the most consequential demographic shifts in contemporary Nepal, raising fundamental questions about agency, socioeconomic determinants, and the institutional forces that mediate educational migration. This study investigates the central question of who makes the final decision for a Nepalese student to pursue higher education abroad the student or their family members and identifies the socioeconomic and motivational factors that characterise the aspiring population. Adopting a descriptive-analytical research design, primary data were collected from 135 students enrolled at five educational consultancies in Banepa, Kavrepalanchok, Nepal, using a structured self-administered questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics via SPSS. Findings reveal that the majority of respondents (57.04%) identified themselves as the primary decision-maker, challenging the assumption of family-dominant decision processes common in collectivist societies. Educational motives (39.3%) and economic motives (24.4%) were the dominant drivers of abroad aspiration. Japan emerged as the most preferred destination (31.1%), followed by Australia (20%). Most respondents came from private secondary schools (61.5%), belonged to the Brahmin ethnic group (31.1%), held management faculty backgrounds (56.3%), and depended primarily on parental funding (74.8%). These findings partially validate push-pull theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour by demonstrating that individual-level agency, economic rationalisation, and social referencing jointly shape the decision to migrate for education. The study provides actionable evidence for policymakers, educational institutions, and the consultancy sector seeking to understand and respond to Nepal's growing student exodus.

Keywords: *student migration, decision-making agency, Nepal, abroad education, push-pull theory, higher education*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Contextual Setting

International student mobility has grown into one of the defining features of twenty-first-century higher education, reshaping institutional landscapes across both sending and receiving nations. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the number of internationally mobile students rose from approximately 2 million in 2000 to over 6 million by 2019, a trajectory that has continued despite pandemic-era disruptions (UNESCO, 2022). For South Asian economies many of which are characterised by rapidly expanding youth populations, constrained domestic labour markets, and growing aspirational middle classes this global trend assumes particular urgency. Nepal stands among the most acutely affected nations in the region.

Nepal's student emigration has accelerated dramatically in recent years, driven by intersecting dissatisfactions with domestic education quality, limited graduate employment prospects, political instability, and a powerful social aspiration for foreign-earned

credentials. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in Kathmandu issued more than 100,000 No Objection Certificates (NOCs) for students travelling to Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States between January and September 2022 alone a figure exceeding four times the approximately 25,000 NOCs issued across the entirety of 2021 (Nepali Times, 2022). This exponential surge is not a transient fluctuation; the decision to study abroad has become increasingly normative among Nepalese post-secondary students, particularly those who have recently completed their +2 (Higher Secondary Certificate) or equivalent qualifications.

The implications extend well beyond individual career trajectories. Sustained youth emigration deepens Nepal's brain drain, erodes domestic human capital, and imposes severe financial sacrifice on families whose median annual income lies between NPR 150,000 and 200,000. The long-term settlement of graduates abroad evidenced by 20,486 Nepalese obtaining permanent residence in Australia between 2018 and 2022 alone (Department of

Home Affairs, Australia, 2022) raises fundamental questions about Nepal's future social and economic fabric.

Despite the policy urgency of this phenomenon, empirical research has focused predominantly on the structural, economic, and motivational correlates of student emigration, leaving a conspicuous gap regarding the locus of decision-making authority within Nepalese households. In a society structured around collectivist family norms, hierarchical intergenerational relations, and strong parental expectations about children's educational and occupational trajectories (Evason, 2017), the question of whether students themselves initiate and resolve the decision to go abroad or whether that decision is substantially driven by family members carries both theoretical and practical weight. It is theoretically significant because it tests the applicability of individually oriented frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) against collectivist social dynamics. Practically, it determines which actor student or family is the primary target of policy intervention, institutional communication, and market engagement.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

A growing body of scholarship has examined why Nepalese students migrate for education, yet the question of who makes that decision and under what socioeconomic conditions has not been subjected to systematic empirical scrutiny. Existing studies such as Acharya (2012), Shrestha (2021), and Tamang and Shrestha (2021) illuminate the structural drivers and psychological motivations behind student migration without directly interrogating the decision-making hierarchy within households. This gap is not merely a technical omission; it reflects an unexamined assumption that either the student or the family is the dominant decision agent an assumption that has never been empirically grounded in the Nepalese context.

This study fills that gap by asking directly: in the context of contemporary Nepalese student migration for higher education, who makes the ultimate decision the student or their family and what demographic, socioeconomic, and motivational variables characterise the population making that decision?

1.3 Research Objectives

The study is guided by five objectives:

- (1) to identify the primary decision-maker student versus family in the context of Nepalese students pursuing higher education abroad
- (2) to describe the demographic and socioeconomic profile of students aspiring to study abroad
- (3) to identify the motivational factors driving the decision
- (4) to determine preferred study destinations and funding sources among the study population

(5) to contextualise findings within established theoretical frameworks of student migration and educational decision-making.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on student migration and educational decision-making in Nepal and the South Asian context in three ways. First, it generates the first empirical baseline on decision-making agency at the household level a dimension entirely absent from prior Nepal-focused research. Second, by mapping the socioeconomic profile of aspirant students against decision-making patterns, it reveals the structural conditions under which student versus family authority emerges. Third, it tests push-pull theory, social network theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour in a South Asian collectivist context rarely engaged by mainstream migration scholarship, while supplying actionable evidence for policymakers, the consultancy sector, and destination-country institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Trends in International Student Mobility

International student mobility is embedded within the broader processes of academic globalisation, in which knowledge, credentials, and human capital circulate across national borders in response to differential quality signals and economic incentives. The global market for international higher education has expanded substantially, driven by the commodification of degrees, the proliferation of English-medium instruction programmes, and the strategic immigration pathways that many receiving nations offer to graduate students. Researchers have consistently identified a cluster of destination countries the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, and Japan as the dominant hosts of internationally mobile students, owing to the reputational prestige of their universities, post-study work rights, and pathways to permanent residency (OECD, 2022).

From the sending-country perspective, the academic literature identifies a convergent set of motivations: the superior quality of foreign institutions, enhanced career prospects, higher lifetime earnings, and social status gains associated with foreign credentials (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Economic theory frames this as human capital investment behaviour, in which students and families weigh the direct and opportunity costs of foreign study against the anticipated income premium and labour market advantages of internationally recognised qualifications (Becker, 1964, as applied in Acharya, 2012). Sociological perspectives emphasise social referencing, peer and family network effects, and transnational community ties as equally powerful drivers particularly in collectivist Asian societies where educational decisions are rarely made in isolation from family expectations and community norms, with parental influence operating through five documented channels: financial provision, information

sharing, expectation-setting, social persuasion, and competitive peer pressure (Pimpa, 2005).

2.2 Student Migration from Nepal: National Context

Nepal occupies a distinctive position in the global student mobility landscape. As a low-income country with a young demographic structure, a rapidly expanding secondary school completion rate, and a domestic higher education sector struggling to meet both quantitative and qualitative demand, Nepal generates strong structural pressure toward educational emigration. The domestic system governed under Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, Pokhara University, and several affiliated colleges has been criticised for its limited academic programmes, examination-centred pedagogy, inadequate research infrastructure, and weak industry linkages, all of which diminish the perceived value of Nepal-based degrees (Bhattarai, 2021).

Acharya (2012), in the seminal Nepalese study on student migration, concluded that Nepalese students migrate abroad primarily to maximise the return on their educational investment both through consumption benefits (the intrinsic value of attending prestigious institutions) and investment benefits (improved employment prospects and higher earning potential). Acharya's work positions Nepal's student migration within the human capital tradition and finds support for both push-pull and social network theories. Notably, the study found that family income level did not singularly determine migration decisions, suggesting that aspiration functions as an independent driver across income strata.

Shrestha (2021) examined student perceptions of abroad study using a descriptive research design combining purposive and random sampling. The primary motivation was to convert human capital into financial capital through degrees that open pathways to employment in destination countries. Crucially, 60% of participants had family members abroad and 60.5% of households had a migration history, underscoring the potency of social network effects. Students with close relatives overseas were both more inclined to emigrate and more likely to be successful in doing so consistent with the social network theory of migration (Massey et al., 1993).

Tamang and Shrestha (2021) adopted a narrative inquiry approach, interviewing three participants through in-depth conversations to explore the motivational texture of student emigration. Their findings illuminate the lived dimensions of the push-pull dynamic: students articulate the decision to go abroad as a response to Nepal's perceived educational and economic inadequacy as much as an attraction to foreign opportunity. Political instability, limited career mobility, and the social prestige of foreign credentials emerged as deeply embedded in students' self-narratives, confirming that migration is not merely an

economic calculation but a socially constituted aspiration shaped by family narratives, community norms, and perceived structural constraints.

Bhattarai (2021), using 20 years of econometric data, found that Nepal's integration into global economic flows through remittances and foreign direct investment has generated an educational migration cycle in which student departure ultimately feeds back into the economy through remittances making abroad education economically rational not only for the individual student but, paradoxically, for Nepal's national economy.

2.3 Decision-Making Frameworks in Educational Contexts

The academic literature on higher education decision-making offers several models that specify the sequence of cognitive, social, and structural factors through which students arrive at enrolment choices. The Chapman (1981) model identifies institutional characteristics and external influences family, peers, and financial considerations as primary determinants of college choice. The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model extends this into a three-stage process: predisposition (formation of intent), search (information gathering), and choice (final decision). A systematic review of international student mobility research confirms that economic and social factors are the most consistently documented determinants across all three stages, with financial risk-bearing emerging as especially pronounced for students from lower-income households who must calculate the full cost of study against anticipated returns before committing to migration (Gutema et al., 2024).

Jabeen and Rafiuddin (2015) proposed a decision-making model specifically calibrated for higher education in the UAE, grounding it in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This model identified five primary factors shaping enrolment decisions: socioeconomic considerations, reference group influences (peers and parents), personal academic attributes, environmental factors, and facilities-related concerns. Parental expectations and peer competition emerged as among the most influential determinants a finding particularly resonant in the South Asian context, where family honour, community standing, and intergenerational expectations structure the decision-making environment.

Applying these frameworks to Nepal requires sensitivity to the country's distinctive sociostructural features. Decision-making in Nepalese households is shaped by deeply ingrained hierarchical norms in which younger family members particularly unmarried children are expected to defer to parental authority on matters of consequence, including education and marriage (Evason, 2017). Against this backdrop, the finding that a majority of Nepalese students in this study identified themselves as the primary decision-maker represents a noteworthy departure from normative expectations that warrants careful theoretical interpretation.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in three complementary frameworks whose combined application offers a multi-dimensional explanatory lens for Nepalese student migration and decision-making.

2.4.1 Push-Pull Theory

Lee's (1966) push-pull theory the foundational framework in migration studies conceptualises population movement as the product of forces that repel individuals from the origin context (push factors) and attract them toward the destination (pull factors). In the context of student migration from Nepal, push factors include dissatisfaction with domestic higher education quality, limited post-graduation employment prospects, low graduate wages, political instability, and the absence of specialised programmes (Acharya, 2012; Tamang & Shrestha, 2021). Pull factors encompass the reputational prestige and instructional quality of foreign universities, post-study work rights and pathways to permanent residency, higher salary expectations, and the social prestige associated with foreign credentials.

The theory maps directly onto this study's findings: educational and economic motives among respondents correspond to both push and pull dimensions. However, push-pull theory's original formulation cannot explain intra-household authority dynamics it describes the forces acting on a potential migrant but not how the decision-making process is distributed between student and family. This limitation necessitates supplementation with theories that address the social and relational dimensions of decision-making.

2.4.2 Social Network Theory

Social network theory, as applied to migration (Massey et al., 1993; Boyd, 1989), posits that migration decisions are not made by atomistic individuals in isolation but are embedded in networks of social relationships family, community, and ethnic ties that reduce the costs and risks of migration by providing information, resources, and social support. Each successful migration event within a network lowers the perceived risk for subsequent network members, generating a cumulative and self-reinforcing migration

dynamic. In the Nepalese context, the high proportion of students with family or community members already living abroad (Shrestha, 2021) provides strong empirical support for this mechanism.

Social network theory also applies to the role of educational consultancies in this study's context. Consultancies function as institutional nodes within the migration network, aggregating information about destination universities, visa requirements, language test preparation, and cost structures, thereby substantially reducing the transaction costs of the migration decision. The study's own consultancy-based sampling frame underscores the institutional embeddedness of the decision-making process within a commercial migration infrastructure that has developed expressly to service Nepal's student emigration market.

2.4.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) explains individual behaviour as the product of three antecedents: attitude toward the behaviour (the individual's positive or negative evaluation), subjective norms (perceived social pressure from significant others), and perceived behavioural control (the individual's perceived capacity to perform the behaviour). Applied to the study abroad decision, TPB suggests that a student's intention to migrate is shaped by their personal attitude toward foreign education, the expectations and encouragements of family members and peers, and their perception of financial feasibility.

The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 represents the interplay of these three theories. The student's decision to study abroad is conceptualised as the outcome of push-pull forces operating at the structural level, social network influences operating at the relational level, and attitudinal and normative factors operating at the individual level. The central empirical question of this study whether the student or the family is the ultimate decision-maker can be read as an empirical test of the relative dominance of the individual (TPB attitude and perceived behavioural control) versus the social (TPB subjective norms and social network theory) in the Nepalese migration context.

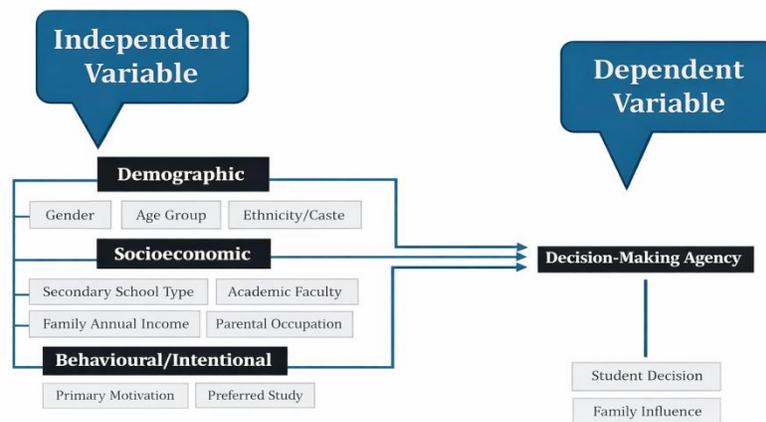


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for student study-abroad decision-making in Nepal

2.5 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the substantial body of literature reviewed above, one gap persists with striking consistency: no study has directly and empirically investigated the locus of decision-making authority student versus family within Nepalese households in the context of abroad study. Existing studies treat the household as a unitary decision-making agent or implicitly assume the dominance of parental authority, consistent with Nepal's collectivist cultural norms. This assumption has never been subjected to systematic empirical challenge. This study addresses that gap by eliciting, from a sample of consultancy-enrolled students, a categorical response about decision-making authority and cross-referencing it against a rich profile of demographic, socioeconomic, motivational, and behavioural variables. In doing so, it generates the first Nepal-specific empirical baseline on student decision-making agency in the context of abroad education a foundational dataset upon which future inferential studies can build.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design, appropriate when the primary purpose is to systematically describe the characteristics of a defined population and identify relationships among variables without experimental manipulation (Creswell, 2014). Given the exploratory nature of the research question concerning decision-making authority in a population about which no prior empirical baseline exists a descriptive approach is both methodologically justified and theoretically appropriate.

The study employs a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data at a single point in time from a defined sample to produce a comprehensive snapshot of the aspirant student population at consultancies during the

data collection period. Both quantitative and qualitative questionnaire dimensions are utilised: quantitative items generate frequency distributions and percentage profiles, while categorically coded items provide contextual richness regarding motivations and destination preferences.

3.2 Study Setting and Target Population

Data collection was conducted across five educational consultancies in Banepa, the administrative centre of Kavrepalanchok District, approximately 30 kilometres east of Kathmandu in Nepal's Bagmati Province. Banepa was selected because it represents a secondary urban centre with a dense concentration of consultancies serving students from both the immediate district and surrounding hill communities yielding a demographically diverse sample not limited to the capital's elite student population. The target population comprises Nepalese students actively seeking higher education abroad and enrolled at educational consultancies for visa processing, language test preparation (IELTS, PTE, JLPT, TOPIK), or study destination counselling. This population is theoretically appropriate: consultancy-enrolled students represent the most proximal and operationally relevant stage of the decision process individuals who have already moved beyond the predisposition and search stages of educational choice and are actively engaged in implementing their abroad study decision.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A total of 135 students constituted the study's sample, drawn from five consultancies using a combination of purposive and simple random sampling. Purposive sampling was employed at the consultancy selection level, selecting offices whose client profiles spanned a range of preferred destinations (Japan-focused, Australia/UK-focused, and multi-destination). Simple random sampling was then applied within each consultancy, assigning each attending student an equal probability of inclusion to

minimise selection bias. Each consultancy contributed approximately 27 respondents.

A sample of 135 is adequate for a descriptive study of this scope, where the analytical objective is frequency distribution and cross-tabulation rather than inferential statistical modelling. The geographic restriction to Banepa is acknowledged as a limitation and is discussed in Section 6.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire adapted from Shrestha's (2021) previously validated instrument, with additional items addressing this study's focus on decision-making authority. The questionnaire comprised three sections: demographic data (gender, age, ethnicity); socioeconomic background (school type, faculty, family income, parental occupation); and study-abroad intention data (destinations, motivations, funding source, decision-maker identification, and planning timeline). Participation was fully voluntary, no time constraint was imposed, and sensitive items used categorical response options to reduce social desirability bias.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Completed questionnaires were coded and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics software for descriptive analysis. Frequency distributions and percentage profiles were computed for all categorical variables and presented through frequency tables and graphical representations pie charts and bar charts enabling intuitive visual comparison across categories. The central dependent variable decision-making authority (student versus family) was cross-referenced descriptively against all demographic and socioeconomic variables to identify patterns of association. No inferential statistical tests were applied in the original data collection; opportunities for additional inferential analysis are noted in the relevant results subsections.

Secondary data were drawn from official Nepalese governmental publications, international organisation reports, and prior peer-reviewed research to contextualise primary findings within the broader national and global migration literature.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Informed voluntary participation was ensured throughout. No respondent was compelled to

participate; all were informed of the study's academic purpose. Anonymity was fully maintained no questionnaire contains identifying information and data were used exclusively for research purposes under the supervision of VS Niketan College, Pokhara University.

3.7 Limitations of Methodology

Four limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, geographic restriction to Banepa limits generalisability; findings represent the consultancy-attending student population in this district, not the full Nepal-wide abroad-aspiring population. Second, consultancy-based sampling excludes students at earlier decision stages, from rural areas, or using direct-application channels. Third, self-reported decision-making authority data are vulnerable to social desirability bias in both directions' respondents may over- or under-attribute personal agency depending on cultural framing. Fourth, the absence of inferential statistical analysis (chi-square, logistic regression) prevents identification of which subpopulations are more likely to self-determine versus defer to family; this is the most pressing methodological limitation for future research to address.

4. Results

This section presents findings organised into four subsections: (4.1) demographic profile of respondents, (4.2) socioeconomic background, (4.3) study-abroad intentions and behaviour, and (4.4) decision-making agency the core finding. All percentages are based on the total sample of $N = 135$ unless otherwise stated. Non-respondents to individual items are reported separately and excluded from denominator calculations for percentage figures.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

4.1.1 Gender Distribution

Table 1 and Figure 2 present the gender distribution of the 135 respondents. Male respondents constituted the majority ($n = 75$; 55.6%), followed by female respondents ($n = 55$; 40.7%). Five participants (3.7%) did not disclose their gender. The predominance of male respondents is consistent with prior studies on Nepalese student migration (Acharya, 2012; Shrestha, 2021) and likely reflects both the historically greater educational mobility of male students in Nepal and the gender composition of consultancy-attending clientele in Banepa.

Table 1. Gender distribution of study participants ($N = 135$)

Gender	Count	Percentage (%)
Male	75	55.6
Female	55	40.7
Non-respondent	5	3.7
Total	135	100.0

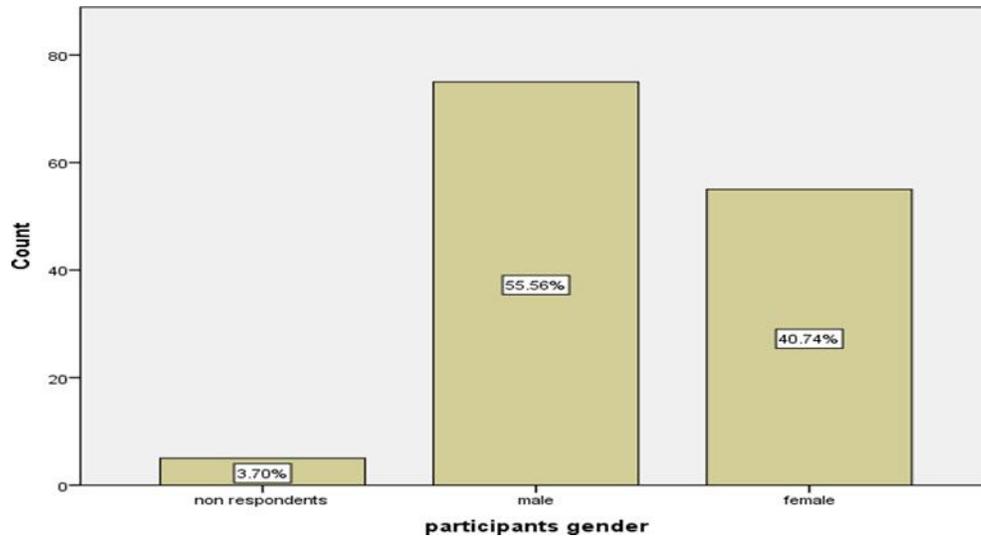


Figure 2. Proportional distribution of study participants by gender

4.1.2 Age Distribution

Table 2 and Figure 3 display the age distribution of participants. The largest cohort was 20–24 years ($n = 60$; 44.4%), followed by 15–19 years ($n = 55$; 40.7%). Together, these two cohorts account for 85.2% of the sample, confirming that student migration is predominantly a late-adolescent and early-adulthood phenomenon concentrated among post-secondary school completers. The 25–29 cohort comprised 9.6% ($n = 13$), while respondents aged 30–34 ($n = 6$; 4.4%) and 35+ ($n = 1$; 0.7%) represent a meaningful proportion indicating that abroad study aspiration extends into mid-adulthood, potentially reflecting individuals seeking career re-entry through foreign qualifications.

Table 2. Age group distribution of study participants ($N = 135$)

Age Group	Count	Percentage (%)
15–19	55	40.7
20–24	60	44.4
25–29	13	9.6
30–34	6	4.4
35+	1	0.7
Total	135	100.0

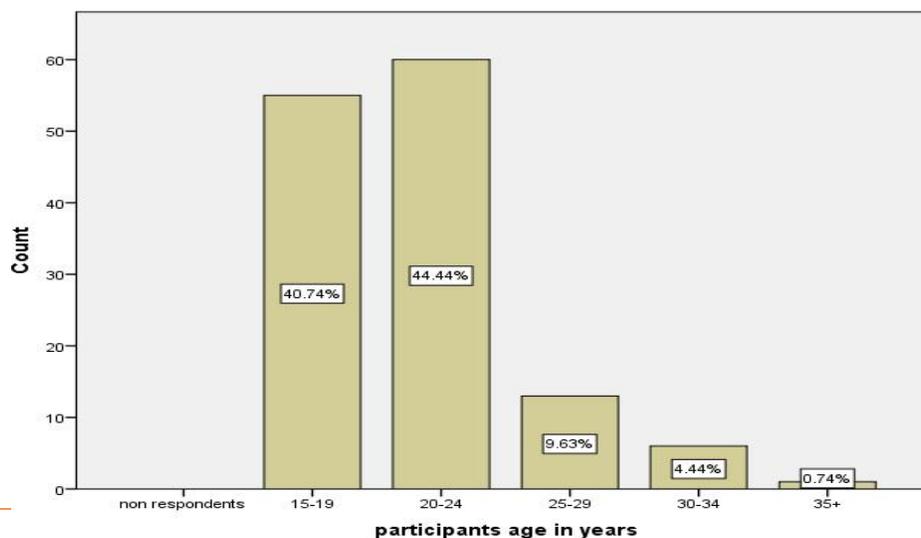


Figure 3. Distribution of study participants across age cohorts

4.2 Socioeconomic Background of Respondents

Socioeconomic background in the Nepalese context is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing ethnic and caste identity, secondary school type, academic faculty, family income, and parental occupation. Each dimension is reported below, followed by an integrated interpretation of their collective significance for the study's theoretical framing.

4.2.1 Ethnicity and Caste Identity

Nepal's ethnic and caste composition is among the most internally diverse in South Asia, with over 125 recorded ethnic groups (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2011). Table 3 and Figure 4 present the ethnic distribution of study participants. The Brahmin caste group constituted the largest single category ($n = 42$; 31.1%), followed by Chhetri ($n = 29$; 21.5%), Tamang ($n = 27$; 20.0%), and Newar ($n = 14$; 10.4%). The Magar group represented 3.7% ($n = 5$), other groups collectively 3.0% ($n = 4$), and 14 participants (10.4%) did not disclose their ethnicity.

The overrepresentation of Brahmin and Chhetri groups historically privileged caste communities with higher educational attainment, greater urban exposure, and stronger diaspora networks is consistent with prior research and reflects both historical educational advantages and established transnational connections that facilitate migration (Shrestha, 2021). The substantial representation of Tamang participants (20.0%) likely reflects the geographic proximity of the study site to Kavrepalanchok, a district with significant Tamang population density.

Table 3. Ethnic and caste group distribution of study participants ($N = 135$)

Ethnic/Caste Group	Count	Percentage (%)
Brahmin	42	31.1
Chhetri	29	21.5
Tamang	27	20.0
Newar	14	10.4
Magar	5	3.7
Other	4	3.0
Non-respondent	14	10.4
Total	135	100.0

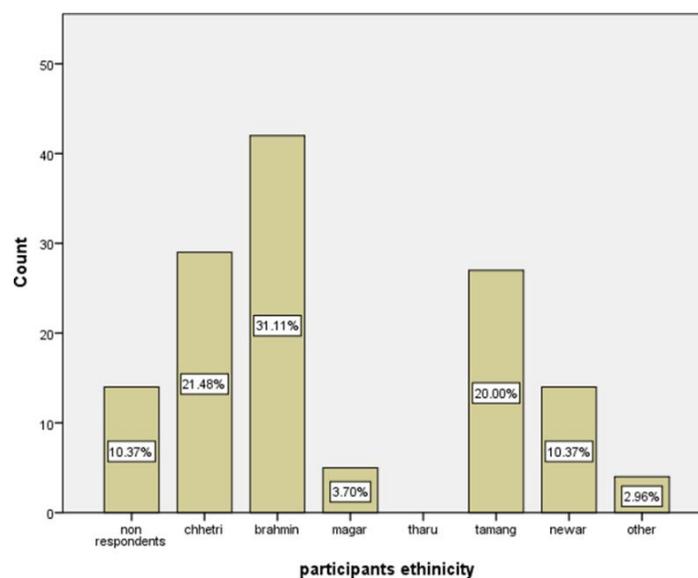


Figure 4. Ethnic and caste group composition of the study sample

4.2.2 Secondary School Type

School type government-funded, community, or private is a critical proxy for socioeconomic status in Nepal, where private school attendance strongly correlates with higher family income, English-medium instruction, and superior academic preparation (Bhattarai, 2021). Table 4 and Figure 5 present these data. A substantial majority attended private secondary schools ($n = 83$; 61.5%), followed by government-funded schools ($n = 39$; 28.9%) and community schools ($n = 10$; 7.4%). Three participants (2.2%) did not respond.

The disproportionate representation of private school graduates signals that access to the international education pipeline remains significantly stratified by secondary institution type. Private school students benefit from English-medium instruction, exposure to international curricula, and stronger family networks connected to migration all of which lower the informational and procedural barriers to abroad study. Nevertheless, the non-trivial proportion of government school graduates (28.9%) indicates that abroad study aspiration is not confined to the urban private school elite, a finding with important policy implications.

Table 4. Secondary school type attended by study participants ($N = 135$)

School Type	Count	Percentage (%)
Private	83	61.5
Government-Funded	39	28.9
Community	10	7.4
Non-respondent	3	2.2
Total	135	100.0

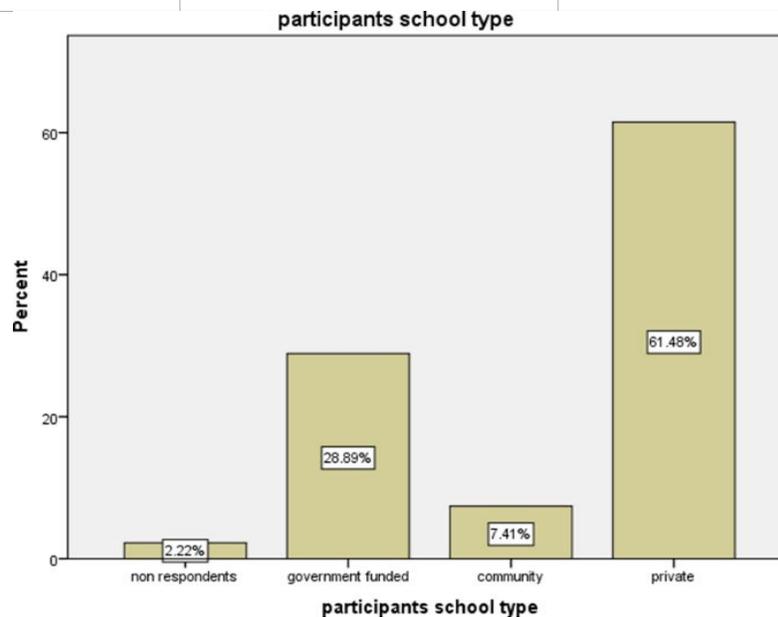


Figure 5. Secondary school type distribution among study participants

4.2.3 Academic Faculty Background

Table 5 and Figure 6 present the academic faculty of participants' most recently completed or current qualification. Management faculty graduates constituted by far the largest group ($n = 76$; 56.3%), followed by science faculty ($n = 30$; 22.2%) and education faculty ($n = 16$; 11.9%). Tourism (2.2%), social sciences (1.5%), nursing (1.5%), and other faculties (1.5%) collectively accounted for a marginal share, with four participants (3.0%) as non-respondents.

The dominance of management graduates reflects the alignment between management qualifications and post-study work opportunities in Japan, Australia, and the UK. Management programmes in Nepal's private colleges are frequently delivered in English-medium formats that familiarise students with internationally relevant business content, raising awareness of foreign qualification premiums. The science graduate representation of 22.2% is also notable given Japan's active recruitment of STEM talent.

Table 5. Academic faculty distribution of study participants (N = 135)

Faculty	Count	Percentage (%)
Management	76	56.3
Science	30	22.2
Education	16	11.9
Tourism	3	2.2
Social Sciences	2	1.5
Nursing	2	1.5
Other	2	1.5
Non-respondent	4	3.0
Total	135	100.0

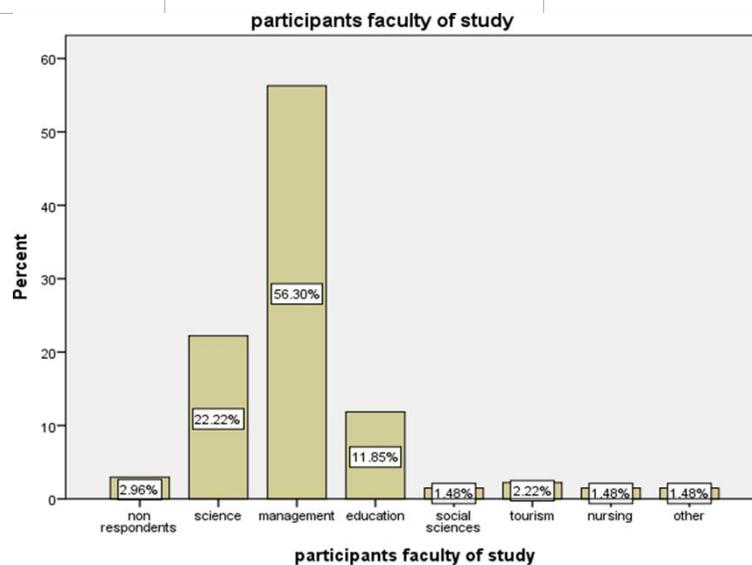


Figure 6. Academic faculty background of study participants

4.2.4 Family Annual Income

Table 6 and Figure 7 present the distribution of family annual income among participants, expressed in Nepalese Rupees (NPR). The most prevalent income bracket was NPR 150,000–200,000 (n = 36; 26.7%), followed by NPR 100,000–150,000 (n = 26; 19.3%), NPR 50,000–100,000 (n = 24; 17.8%), and below NPR 50,000 (n = 23; 17.0%). Only 8.9% (n = 12) reported family income between NPR 200,000–250,000, and 6.7% (n = 9) above NPR 250,000. Five participants (3.7%) were non-respondents.

These figures reveal a striking structural tension at the heart of Nepal's student migration phenomenon. The modal income bracket of NPR 150,000–200,000 is well below the estimated annual cost of international tuition and living expenses, which for destinations such as Australia or the UK typically exceed NPR 1,500,000–2,500,000 per year. This income–aspiration gap implies that the financial commitment to abroad education represents a substantial sacrifice for most families often involving property sales, remittance leveraging, or indebtedness and reinforces the finding that parental financial support, while dominant (74.8% of funding sources), is stretched to its limits. The presence of 17.0% of respondents from families earning below NPR 50,000 annually is particularly striking, suggesting that even severely constrained households are not immune to the aspirational pull of abroad study.

Table 6. Annual family income distribution of study participants (N = 135; in NPR)

Annual Family Income (NPR)	Count	Percentage (%)
< 50,000	23	17.0

50,000–100,000	24	17.8
100,000–150,000	26	19.3
150,000–200,000	36	26.7
200,000–250,000	12	8.9
> 250,000	9	6.7
Non-respondent	5	3.7
Total	135	100.0

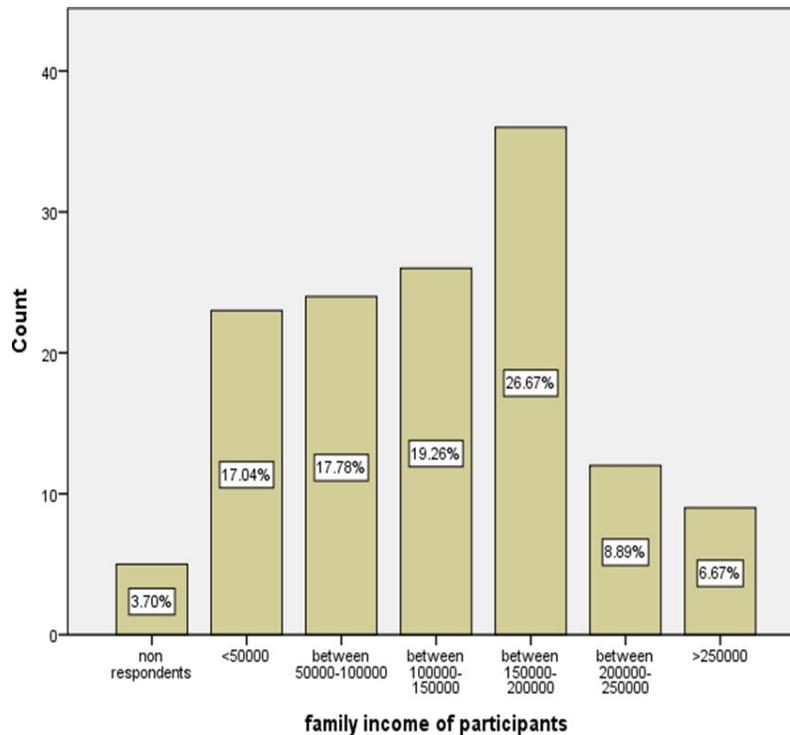


Figure 7. Annual family income distribution among study participants (NPR)

4.2.5 Parental Occupation

Figures 8 and 9 present the occupational profiles of participants' fathers and mothers respectively. Among fathers, the dominant category was agriculture (39.3%), followed by government service (13.3%), 'other' occupational sectors (8.9%), professor/academic (6.7%), household occupation (3.0%), engineering (2.2%), and medicine (1.5%). Among mothers, household work dominated (33.3%), followed by other sectors (26.7%), agriculture (5.9%), business (5.2%), government service (3.7%), teaching (3.0%), medicine (0.7%), engineering (0.7%), and professor (0.7%).

The predominance of agricultural occupation among fathers and household occupation among mothers indicates that the majority of aspiring abroad students originate from families in which neither parent is employed in a professional, technical, or formally salaried sector. This occupational profile is consistent with the income distribution documented above and implies that the financial commitment to abroad education is made largely by families operating in Nepal's informal and subsistence economic sectors, for whom the investment represents a disproportionate share of household assets.

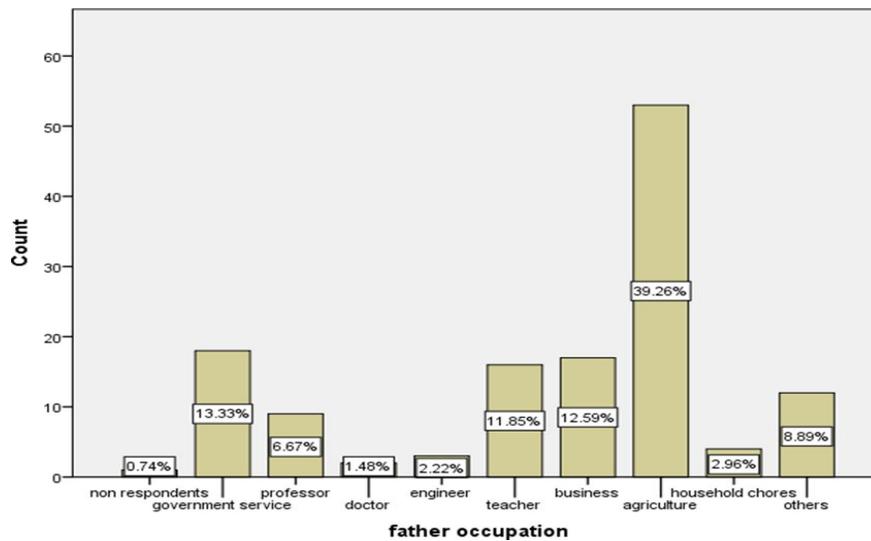


Figure 8. Occupational distribution of participants' fathers

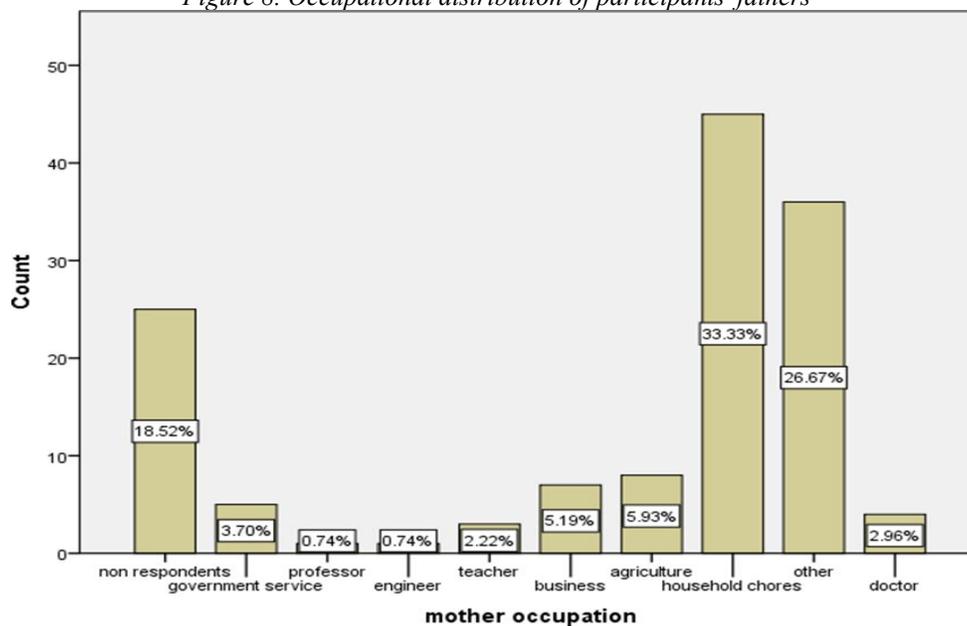


Figure 9. Occupational distribution of participants' mothers

4.3 Study-Abroad Intentions and Behaviour

4.3.1 Funding Sources for Abroad Education

Table 7 and Figure 10 present the primary funding sources identified by participants. An overwhelming majority ($n = 101$; 74.8%) identified their parents as the primary funding source. Scholarships ($n = 9$; 6.7%) and earning abroad through work-study arrangements ($n = 9$; 6.7%) each accounted for 6.7% of responses. Relatives living abroad were identified as the primary funder by 5.9% ($n = 8$) and other sources by 5.2% ($n = 7$). One participant did not respond. The near-exclusive reliance on parental funding despite the modest income profiles documented in Section 4.2.4 reflects the deeply embedded financial sacrifice model of educational investment in Nepalese family behaviour. The low utilisation of scholarships (6.7%) suggests limited scholarship awareness, inadequate availability in Nepal's preferred destinations, or language barriers precluding access. The 'earning abroad' category reflects students planning part-time employment under student visa conditions.

Table 7. Primary funding sources for abroad education identified by study participants ($N = 135$)

Funding Source	Count	Percentage (%)
Parents	101	74.8

Scholarships	9	6.7
Earning Abroad (Work-Study)	9	6.7
Relatives Living Abroad	8	5.9
Other	7	5.2
Non-respondent	1	0.7
Total	135	100.0

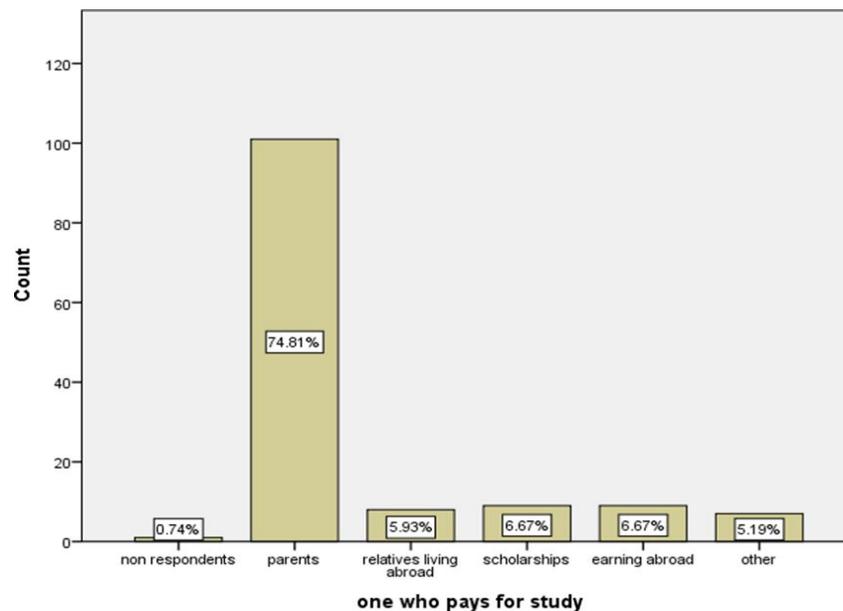


Figure 10. Proportional distribution of primary funding sources for abroad education

4.3.2 Preferred Study Destinations

Table 8 and Figure 11 present participants' preferred study destinations. Japan emerged as the most preferred ($n = 42$; 31.1%), followed by 'other' destinations comprising primarily Canada and South Korea ($n = 33$; 24.4%), Australia ($n = 27$; 20.0%), the United Kingdom ($n = 15$; 11.1%), the United States ($n = 13$; 9.6%), and New Zealand ($n = 5$; 3.7%).

Japan's ranking as the top preferred destination is a distinctive and significant finding that diverges from the global pattern of Anglophone destination preference commonly documented in the international student mobility literature. Several factors likely account for Japan's leading position. Japan has actively pursued international student recruitment from South and Southeast Asia as part of its demographic strategy to address labour force contraction. Japan's student visa regime permits 28 hours of part-time work per week during term and full-time work during vacations, making it attractive for lower-income students who depend on supplementary income. Japan offers post-study working visa options, and its language schools and vocational colleges provide structured pathways to professional employment. Additionally, Nepal's growing cultural connectivity with Japan through a significant Nepalese diaspora in Japanese restaurant and service industries has generated the network effects that social network theory predicts would accelerate destination preference convergence. Research on study destination preference using push-pull theory confirms that post-graduation work rights, career development pathways, language training accessibility, and cost structures collectively shape destination selection factors that position Japan as the rationally preferred choice for cost-constrained students simultaneously seeking educational credentials and employment security (Nikou et al., 2023).

Table 8. Preferred study destinations identified by study participants ($N = 135$)

Preferred Destination	Count	Percentage (%)
Japan	42	31.1

Australia	27	20.0
Other (Canada, South Korea, etc.)	33	24.4
United Kingdom	15	11.1
United States of America	13	9.6
New Zealand	5	3.7
Total	135	100.0

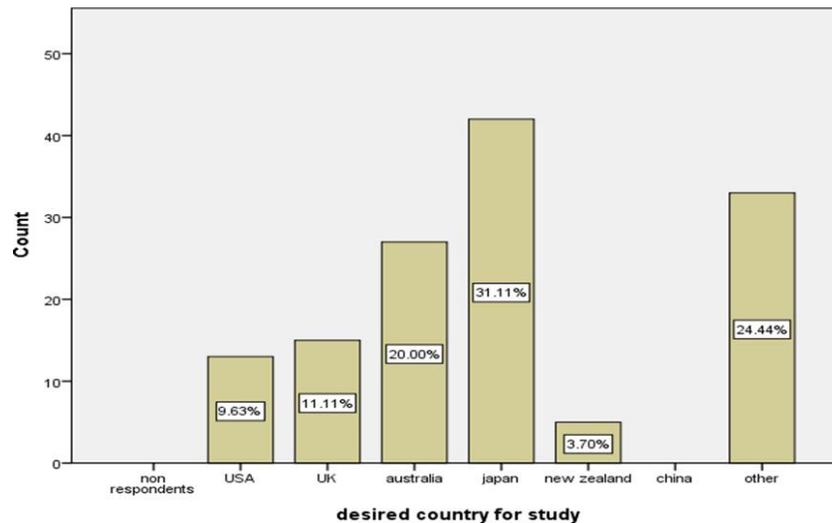


Figure 11. Preferred international study destinations among survey participants

4.3.3 Motivational Factors for Abroad Education

Table 9 and Figure 12 present the motivational factors cited as primary drivers of abroad study aspiration. Educational motives dissatisfaction with domestic education quality and aspiration for superior foreign academic programmes were the most frequently cited motivation ($n = 53$; 39.3%). Economic motives including employment prospects, salary expectations, and financial return on educational investment were identified as primary by 24.4% ($n = 33$). Social motives prestige, community standing, and social network expectations were cited by 10.4% ($n = 14$). Twin motives (simultaneous educational and economic drivers) characterised 7.4% ($n = 10$) of respondents. Other motivations accounted for 13.3% ($n = 18$), and 5.2% ($n = 7$) did not respond.

The dominance of educational motives confirms that students are primarily propelled by dissatisfaction with Nepal's domestic higher education system a robust push factor rather than purely economic calculation. The combined weight of economic motives (24.4%) and twin motives (7.4%) means that a substantial 31.8% of respondents identified economic considerations as at least co-primary drivers, underscoring the investment calculus underpinning the migration decision. Social motives at 10.4% represent a meaningful secondary dimension, consistent with social network theory's emphasis on prestige and community referencing.

Table 9. Primary motivational factors for abroad education among study participants ($N = 135$)

Motivational Factor	Count	Percentage (%)
Educational Motives	53	39.3
Economic Motives	33	24.4
Other Motives	18	13.3
Social Motives	14	10.4
Twin Motives (Educational + Economic)	10	7.4

Non-respondent	7	5.2
Total	135	100.0

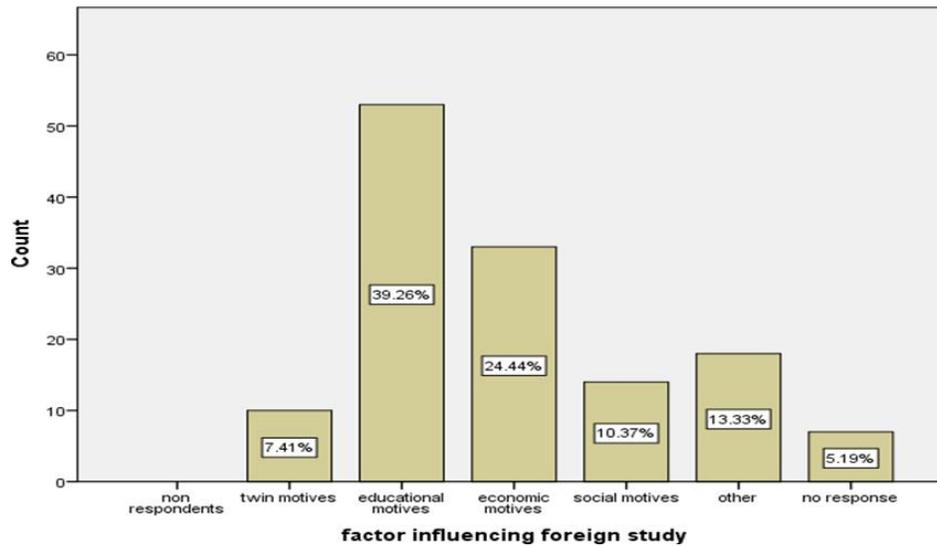


Figure 12. Primary motivational factors driving study-abroad aspiration among participants

4.3.4 Timeline for Planning Abroad Study

Table 10 and Figure 13 present when participants first formed concrete plans to study abroad. The largest proportion did so after completing their +2 or equivalent qualification (n = 68; 50.4%), situating the post-secondary transition as the critical decision window. However, a substantial 28.9% (n = 39) reported forming plans before completing their +2 at the high school stage while 11.1% (n = 15) and 8.1% (n = 11) reported forming plans after and before their Secondary Education Examination (SEE) respectively. Two participants (1.5%) did not respond.

These temporal data carry important implications for policy design. While 50% of planning occurs at the post-+2 stage precisely when consultancies are most actively engaged the 37% who formed plans at or before the SEE level indicates that abroad study aspiration is forming during secondary schooling. Both school-level career counselling and government awareness campaigns need to engage students well before the post-secondary stage.

Table 10. Reported timeline for planning abroad study among participants (N = 135)

Planning Stage	Count	Percentage (%)
After +2 or Equivalent	68	50.4
Before +2 or Equivalent	39	28.9
After SEE	15	11.1
Before SEE	11	8.1
Non-respondent	2	1.5
Total	135	100.0

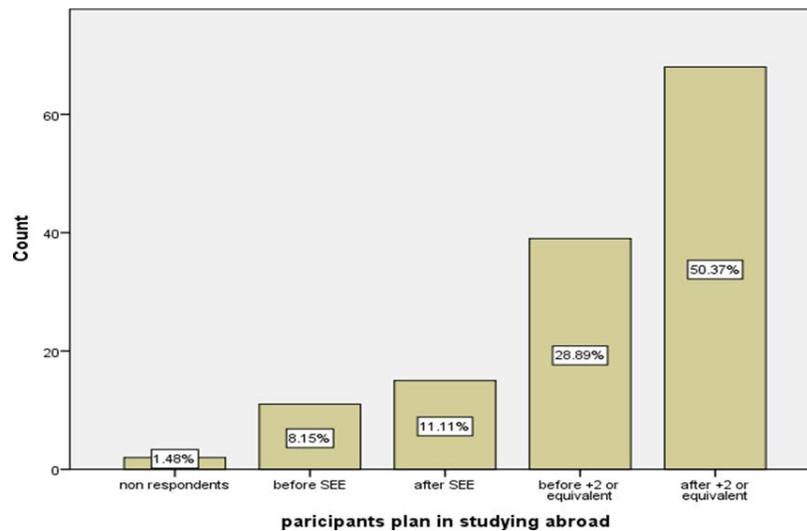


Figure 13. Reported timeline at which study participants formed plans for abroad education

4.4 Decision-Making Agency: The Core Finding

Table 11 and Figure 14 present the study's central empirical finding: the distribution of decision-making authority between students and their family members. Of the 135 respondents, 77 (57.0%) identified themselves as the primary decision-maker, while 58 respondents (43.0%) attributed the primary decision to family members.

Table 11. Distribution of decision-making authority among study participants ($N = 135$)

Decision Maker	Count	Percentage (%)
Student Themselves	77	57.0
Family Members	58	43.0
Total	135	100.0

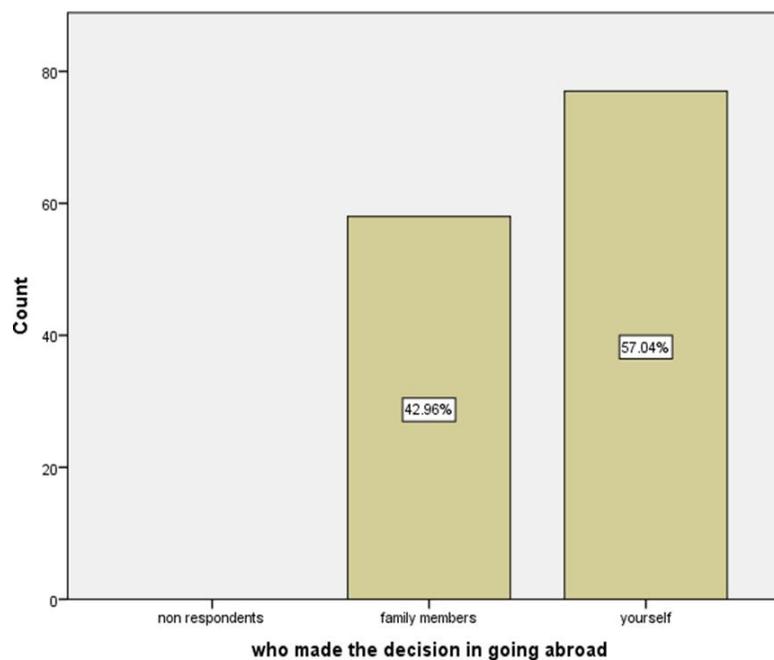


Figure 13. Distribution of primary decision-making authority: student versus family members

The finding that a majority of students (57.0%) identified themselves as the primary decision-maker is the study's most theoretically significant result. In Nepal, where collectivist family norms and hierarchical intergenerational deference are deeply embedded cultural expectations, the emergence of student self-determination as the dominant modality of educational decision-making represents a meaningful departure from normative expectations. This finding is explored in depth in the Discussion section, where it is interpreted in relation to push-pull theory, social network theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

5. Discussion

5.1 Student Autonomy in Educational Decision-Making: Interpreting the Core Finding

The central finding that 57.0% of Nepalese students aspiring to study abroad identify themselves as the primary decision-maker demands careful theoretical interpretation one that resists both over-inflating student autonomy and under-appreciating the social conditions that shape it. The binary questionnaire framing (student versus family) necessarily simplifies what is, in most cases, a more gradual and iterative negotiation between student aspiration and family sanction. Nevertheless, the majority reporting primary self-determination constitutes evidence against the assumption, implicit in much South Asian migration literature, that parental authority uniformly dominates educational decisions in collectivist societies.

Within the TPB framework (Ajzen, 1991), the 'attitude toward behaviour' component reflects the student's positive evaluation of abroad study as both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable a disposition well established in this sample given the strong motivation profiles recorded. The 'perceived behavioural control' component reflects the student's assessment of the feasibility of going abroad, a perception likely reinforced by the consultancy environment, which converts the abstract aspiration to study abroad into an operationally legible sequence of achievable steps. In effect, the consultancy elevates perceived behavioural control, and with it, student self-determination.

The 43.0% of respondents who attributed the primary decision to family members equally demands interpretation. In the Nepalese household context, family-driven decisions are not necessarily expressions of coercion or overriding parental authority. They may reflect cases in which the student shares the family's assessment but acknowledges the family as the proximate initiating agent for example, when a parent identifies a consultancy, initiates contact, or provides economic means that transforms abstract aspiration into concrete plan. The subjective norms dimension of TPB is relevant here: social pressure from family in the form of encouragement, example-setting by siblings or relatives abroad, and parental financial facilitation all

constitute normative influences that may not register as 'decisions made by the family' in the student's self-report, even though they structure the choice environment.

Taken together, the 57.0/43.0 split suggests a decision-making environment in which individual student agency is real and dominant in the majority of cases, but is never fully decoupled from family relational context consistent with what might be described as 'negotiated autonomy' rather than either pure individual choice or full family determination.

5.2 The Consultancy as Institutional Decision Catalyst

A finding that runs across multiple dimensions of this study is the centrality of educational consultancies as institutional nodes in the migration decision process. The sampling frame itself reflects how thoroughly aspirant students have embedded their migration intentions within commercial service organisations. Consultancies function not merely as administrative processors but as decision catalysts: by curating destination information, matching students to institutions within their budget, and managing visa applications, they lower cognitive and procedural barriers to migration and convert abstract aspiration into actionable steps. This partially explains the high levels of reported student agency by the time a student enrolls at a consultancy, the decision to migrate has typically already been internalised; consultancy engagement represents implementation, not origination.

5.3 Socioeconomic Stratification and the Accessibility of Abroad Education

The socioeconomic profile reveals a population concentrated in upper-lower and lower-middle income strata. The modal family income of NPR 150,000–200,000 is extremely modest relative to international tuition costs. The near-exclusive reliance on parental funding (74.8%) despite these constraints' points to intense financial sacrifice likely including liquidation of agricultural assets, property, or gold, or the leveraging of remittance income that characterises how Nepalese families fund international education.

The dominance of private school graduates (61.5%) is consistent with the prediction that secondary school type functions as a gateway variable in access to the international education pipeline. Private schools in Nepal deliver English-medium instruction, international-awareness curricula, and stronger preparation for language proficiency tests. This preparation not only equips students for abroad study but also signals aspirational orientation from early adolescence, potentially accelerating the formation of abroad study plans consistent with the 28.9% of respondents who reported planning before +2 completion.

The overrepresentation of Brahmin and Chhetri students, and the underrepresentation of Magar, Dalit, and other historically marginalised groups, reflects persistent structural inequality in Nepal's educational access. While this pattern is consistent with prior research (Acharya, 2012), its reproduction here suggests that the

international education pipeline despite its nominal accessibility remains substantially structured by caste-based advantages in educational attainment, social capital, and access to migration networks.

5.4 Japan as Preferred Destination: A Theoretically Significant Departure

Japan's position as the most preferred destination (31.1%) represents a theoretically significant departure from global norms that cannot be fully captured by generic push-pull frameworks. Japan's appeal to this population concentrated in Kavrepalanchok, predominantly management-background, moderately income-

constrained likely reflects a destination-specific social network effect. Nepal's diaspora in Japan has grown substantially over the past decade, largely in the restaurant and food service sector, generating a migration corridor with established informational, social, and financial support structures that reduce the risks and costs of Japan-bound migration.

Japan's language school and vocational college system provides a structured entry pathway at tuition levels substantially below Australian, UK, or US universities. For students from constrained financial backgrounds, Japan's lower cost structure and work-permit generosity make it a rationally superior option the convergence point where push-pull forces, social network support, and financial feasibility meet.

5.5 Motivational Factors and Theoretical Validation

The distribution of motivational factors educational (39.3%), economic (24.4%), social (10.4%), twin (7.4%) provides partial validation of push-pull theory. Educational motives map onto the push dimension of Lee's (1966) model: students are propelled away from Nepal's domestic educational environment by its perceived inadequacy and toward foreign institutions by their perceived superiority. Economic motives encompass both push elements (limited career prospects and low salaries in Nepal) and pull elements (improved employment prospects and higher income returns abroad). Social motives operationalise the subjective norms dimension of Ajzen's (1991) TPB and the social referencing mechanisms of Massey et al.'s (1993) social network theory students are influenced by peers and family members who have successfully migrated and value the prestige conferred by foreign credentials.

The relatively modest representation of social motives (10.4%) as the primary driver may reflect a methodological artefact of the questionnaire's forced-choice structure, which required respondents to identify a single primary motive. In reality, the motivational architecture of the migration decision is almost certainly multidimensional; even respondents selecting educational motives as primary are likely simultaneously influenced by social referencing and

economic calculation. The 7.4% who explicitly identified twin motives affirm this multidimensionality.

5.6 Comparison with Prior Research

The findings are broadly consistent with, and extend, the conclusions of prior Nepal-focused research. Acharya (2012) found that educational investment motives and push-pull dynamics were the primary drivers of Nepalese student migration consistent with the dominance of educational and economic motives here. Shrestha (2021) found that family members and friends abroad constitute a critical network resource for aspiring migrants consistent with this study's social motive and network implications. Tamang and Shrestha's (2021) narrative evidence for the role of political instability and educational system inadequacy as push factors is directly reflected in the educational motive dominance found here. This study's unique contribution is its direct empirical resolution of the decision-making agency question: prior studies discuss migration motivations and structural drivers without specifying who, within the household, ultimately decides. The present finding that 57.0% of students self-identify as primary decision-makers provides a baseline that contextualises prior motivation and network findings within a relational decision-making structure one in which individual student aspiration, rather than family authority, is the more commonly dominant force.

6. Limitations

This study's findings must be interpreted within several acknowledged boundaries. First, the geographic restriction to five consultancies in Banepa limits generalisability to other urban centres, rural districts, and the Kathmandu Valley, where the student migration population may display substantially different demographic, socioeconomic, and motivational profiles. Banepa-specific social network structures, income distributions, and consultancy service offerings may introduce local contextual factors not present elsewhere in Nepal.

Second, consultancy-based sampling, while strategically appropriate for reaching the operationally active segment of the aspiring student population, systematically excludes students at earlier stages of the decision process, those in rural areas with limited consultancy access, and those from higher-income families who may use private channels or direct university applications. Findings should be understood as representative of the consultancy-attending student population, not the full population of abroad-aspiring Nepalese students.

Third, the self-report design is subject to social desirability bias particularly on the sensitive decision-making authority item, where respondents may have inflated their attribution of decision authority to project autonomy, or under-attributed their agency out of cultural norms of filial deference. The binary forced-choice structure further compresses what is, in practice, a more

nuanced and iterative negotiation between student and family.

Fourth, the absence of inferential statistical analysis including tests of association between the decision-making authority variable and demographic and socioeconomic variables limits the study's capacity to identify which subpopulations are more likely to exercise self-determination. Chi-square analysis and binary logistic regression, applied to the existing dataset, could substantially enhance analytical depth and are strongly recommended in any follow-up research.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to answer a deceptively simple but empirically underexplored question: in the context of contemporary Nepalese student migration for higher education, who makes the ultimate decision the student or their family? Drawing on primary survey data from 135 consultancy-enrolled students in Banepa, Nepal, it finds that a majority (57.0%) identified themselves as the primary decision-maker, with 43.0% attributing the decision primarily to family members. This challenges the implicit assumption in much South Asian migration scholarship that family authority uniformly dominates educational decisions in collectivist societies. Instead, Nepalese students particularly those already engaged with the consultancy system exercise a substantial and often primary degree of agency in determining their educational trajectories.

The socioeconomic profile of the aspiring student population is instructive: predominantly young (85.2% aged 15–24), male-skewed (55.6%), dominated by private school graduates (61.5%) and management faculty students (56.3%), concentrated in upper-lower to lower-middle income households (modal income NPR 150,000–200,000), and overwhelmingly reliant on parental financial support (74.8%). Japan is the most preferred destination (31.1%), followed by Australia (20.0%), reflecting Nepal-specific social networks and the cost-accessibility of Japan's education pathway. Educational motives (39.3%) and economic motives (24.4%) dominate the motivational landscape, validating push-pull theory as the primary structural framework.

Theoretically, the findings partially support the Theory of Planned Behaviour by demonstrating the salience of individual attitude and perceived behavioural control in driving migration intention, while also confirming the relational dimensions of the decision through the significant minority of family-driven cases and the structural embeddedness of aspirations within social networks. Push-pull theory is confirmed as the dominant motivational framework, with educational push factors as the strongest single driver. Practically, the study generates an empirical baseline on the Nepalese consultancy-attending student population that

provides actionable intelligence for policymakers, educational institutions, the consultancy sector, and destination-country universities. Understanding that students are predominantly self-determining but make that determination within a financial and relational architecture provided by family is essential for designing effective and appropriately targeted interventions.

8. Implications

8.1 Policy Implications for the Government of Nepal

The findings present a compelling case for urgent government intervention. The dramatic increase in NOC issuances between 2021 and 2022 represents a structural challenge to Nepal's human capital accumulation that will compound over time if unaddressed. The dominance of educational dissatisfaction as the primary motivational factor (39.3%) points directly to the quality and relevance of the domestic higher education system as the primary policy lever. Investments in research infrastructure, English-medium instruction, industry-linked curricula, and graduate employment outcomes could meaningfully reduce the push factors driving students abroad.

Targeted scholarship programmes particularly for science, technology, engineering, and management students with return-to-Nepal employment commitments could increase the domestic pull. Career counselling at the +2 level could redirect students before the consultancy pipeline captures them. The presence of 17% of respondents from families earning below NPR 50,000 also signals that economic vulnerability is a material emigration driver, warranting welfare-based interventions alongside educational reforms.

8.2 Implications for the Educational Consultancy Sector

The identification of students rather than family members as the primary decision-maker carries significant implications for consultancy marketing strategy and service design. If students are primarily self-determining, communication strategies should be directly student-oriented: digital marketing targeting young adults' social media consumption patterns, peer-referral incentive programmes, and service design that treats the student as the primary client. The Japan preference among this sample suggests consultancies in similar demographic contexts should ensure Japan-specialist expertise is a core service offering, including JLPT preparation, Japanese visa processing, and Japan-specific university partnerships.

At the same time, the 43.0% of family-driven decisions should not be disregarded. Family-oriented communication events targeting parents, information materials in Nepali rather than exclusively English, and transparent cost breakdowns remains strategically important for a substantial portion of the client base.

8.3 Implications for Destination-Country Institutions and Governments

Japanese, Australian, and UK institutions should recognise Nepalese students as a strategic recruitment

priority. Given that financial feasibility is a critical selection variable, targeted scholarship programmes and partial bursaries for Nepalese students could yield strong recruitment returns. Destination-country governments should ensure immigration pathways are transparent and well-communicated through the consultancy infrastructure, which this study confirms is the primary decision-operationalisation channel for this population.

8.4 Directions for Future Research

Future research should apply inferential methods chi-square analysis and binary logistic regression to the existing dataset to identify which socioeconomic and demographic variables predict self-versus family decision-making. Longitudinal tracking of consultancy-enrolled students through actual migration outcomes, qualitative interviews with students and parents to capture household negotiation dynamics, and comparative replication across Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, and rural districts would each substantially deepen the understanding this baseline has initiated.

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