# Students' Decision on The Choice of Academic Disciplines After Secondary Level Education

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the factors influencing high school students' selection of academic disciplines in Nepal, using data collected through a structured questionnaire from 260 students in Pokhara Metropolitan City. A mixed methods approach was employed, with two colleges selected through purposive sampling and all students surveyed. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses revealed that personal interest is the primary factor in course selection, followed by career prospects, course practicality, financial concerns, and parental guidance, while peer influence is minimal. Challenges such as financial constraints, limited career knowledge, and pressures from academic expectations and parental influence were more pronounced among students from lower-income families and those with higher GPAs. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions, including career guidance, financial aid, and improved access to career information, to support students in making informed academic decisions.*

***Keywords:*** *Academic discipline choices, career guidance programs, financial constraints, parental pressure, post-secondary education.*

## INTRODUCTION

Choosing a career is one of the most pivotal decisions that students face, as it has a profound impact on their academic and professional futures. This decision is particularly crucial during

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high school, a time when students must navigate a complex interplay of personal aspirations, family expectations, peer influences, societal norms, and economic factors. The significance of making a well-informed choice at this stage cannot be overstated, as it often determines the trajectory of their lives and future satisfaction.

Various factors influence the career decision-making process. Personal interests and abilities are primary drivers, directing students towards fields where they feel both passionate and capable. Research by (Agarwala, 2008: Kazi et al., 2016; Musoba et al., 2018) underscores the critical role that individual interests and perceived competencies play in shaping career choices. Moreover, the scope of the course, its potential to offer future opportunities and career prospects is another key consideration. This is increasingly aligned with a preference for applied, practical courses that provide hands-on experiences directly relevant to the job market.

Family expectations can also exert considerable pressure, often pushing students towards prestigious or financially rewarding careers, even when these do not align with their true interests. Studies by (Olayinka, 2005; Grissmer, 2003) highlight the strong influence of parental guidance, with higher levels of parental education frequently leading to more ambitious and informed career choices (Ogunlade, 1973).

Peer influence is another significant factor, as students often look to their friends when making decisions, with peer choices having a strong impact on their own career paths (Pascual, 2014). Societal trends and perceptions of various careers further shape students' views on what is desirable or prestigious. (Dani & Desai, 2018) observe that societal norms and expectations frequently dictate which careers are valued, complicating the decision-making process. Economic factors are also crucial; the security of education, potential future earnings, and job stability are significant considerations. As noted by Kazi and Akhlaq (2017), Kerka (1998), and Pascual (2014), students are acutely aware of the financial implications of their choices, often steering them towards careers perceived as stable and lucrative. Additionally, guidance from parents, tutors, and mentors is essential in shaping these decisions, providing direction and support during this critical period (Musoba et al., 2018).

Despite these influences, students often encounter significant challenges in making informed choices. Limited access to career counseling is a major issue, leaving many students without adequate guidance to thoroughly explore different career options, leading to uncertainty and unpreparedness (Mtemeri, 2017; YouScience, 2022). This uncertainty often results in decisions being made without a full understanding of the long-term consequences. Additionally,

many students experience confusion about their future pathways, a problem intensified by societal pressures to make early decisions seen as crucial to their success (YouScience, 2022). These challenges are particularly acute for students facing socio-economic barriers, such as financial constraints or limited educational resources, which can limit their options and force them into choices driven by necessity rather than genuine interest (Pascual, 2014; Dani & Desai, 2018).

In Nepal, these challenges are further exacerbated by the country's unique socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations. Each year, approximately 400,000 students' complete grade 12 and are confronted with the daunting task of choosing a college major—a decision often viewed as crucial to their future success. Despite the importance of this decision, comprehensive research on the factors influencing students' course selection within the Nepali context is notably lacking.

Insights from research in other countries, such as studies conducted in Nigeria by Ola-Adebomi (2014) and in Pakistan by Kazi and Akhlaq (2017), emphasize the significant impact of parental influence and socio-economic factors on career choices. These studies highlight the universal complexity of career decision-making, underscoring the need for context-specific research in Nepal.

Given these complexities, the present study aims to fill this research gap by thoroughly investigating the factors influencing course selection among high school students in Pokhara Metropolitan City, Nepal. Specifically, the study seeks to evaluate the key factors influencing high school students' academic and career path decisions after grade 12, with a focus on understanding the clarity of their choices and the challenges they face in making these crucial decisions. By addressing these objectives, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of educational decision-making in Nepal and offer practical insights for enhancing the guidance and support provided to high school students during this critical phase of their academic journey. The findings will be especially valuable for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the Nepali education system as they work to improve career guidance and educational outcomes for future generations.

This study is guided by several key theories in career development and decision-making. Super's career development theory emphasizes that career choices are shaped by an individual's self-concept and the development of personal interests over time, which plays a crucial role in determining academic pathways. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provides a framework for understanding how personal self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and external factors

such as family support and socioeconomic conditions influence students' decision-making processes. Additionally, expectancy-value theory suggests that individuals make choices based on the value they place on future outcomes and the likelihood of achieving success in their chosen fields. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive lens through which to explore the factors influencing students' selection of academic disciplines, emphasizing the interaction between personal motivations and external influences.

## DATA AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Pokhara Metropolitan City, Nepal, chosen for its diverse student population and representation of both government and private high schools. Firstly, the schools were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide a representative sample of the student population. Subsequently, a census approach was adopted, wherein all students from the selected schools were included in the study. This method ensured that the final sample accurately reflected the diversity of the target population. The final sample consisted of 260 students, with 108 (41.5%) from the Management stream and 152 (58.5%) from the Science stream, aligning with the proportional representation of students in these academic tracks within the selected schools.

A mixed-methods research design was employed to comprehensively address the study's objectives. This approach was particularly appropriate as it allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was gathered through structured questions that enabled the measurement and analysis of variables like socio-economic background, academic performance, and parental influence. The qualitative data, obtained through open-ended questions, provided deeper insights into the personal factors and motivations behind students' choices. This combination of data ensured a holistic understanding, making the mixed methods design essential for exploring both measurable influences and subjective experiences.

Data collection was conducted using structured questionnaires, which included nominal and ordinal scale questions to capture key factors such as academic preferences, personal interests, and financial concerns. The questionnaire was piloted with 28 students to ensure validity and reliability, with adjustments made based on feedback to improve clarity and effectiveness.

The data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize key variables, The qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights. Although qualitative data saturation

was not formally calculated, recurring themes in the responses indicated sufficient saturation.

Ethical approval was obtained before the study, and all participants were informed about the research's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Selected Background Characteristics of the Respondents

This study encompassed a diverse group of 260 students, with ages ranging from 16 to 18 years old. Of these (55.4%) were 17 years old, followed by 16-year-olds (33.5%). The data indicates that a significant proportion of students (58.5%) were enrolled in the Science stream, while 41.5% were in the Management stream. Academic achievement was generally high, with 58% of students attaining 'A' or 'A+' grades in SEE.

**Table 1**

*Demographic and Academic Characteristics of the Respondents*

| Variables | Categories | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 16 | 87 | 33.5 |
| | 17 | 144 | 55.4 |
| | 18 | 29 | 11.2 |
| Faculty | Science | 152 | 58.5 |
| | Management | 108 | 41.5 |
| GPA | A+ | 56 | 21.5 |
| | A | 95 | 36.5 |
| | B+ | 68 | 26.2 |
| | B | 38 | 14.6 |
| | C | 3 | 1.2 |
| Father's Education | Below 5 | 23 | 8.8 |
| | Below 12-Above 5 | 167 | 64.2 |
| | Bachelor's | 42 | 16.2 |
| | Master's | 27 | 10.0 |
| Income | Below 5 Lakhs | 123 | 47.3 |
| | 5–10 Lakhs | 98 | 37.7 |
| | Above 10 Lakhs | 39 | 15.0 |

Regarding socioeconomic background, most respondents came from families where the

father's education was between 5th and 12th grade (64.2%). Income distribution showed that 47.3% of families earned below 5 Lakhs annually, while 37.7% earned between 5 and 10 Lakhs.

## Information Sources for Career Decisions

**Table 2**

*Students' Perceptions of Information Sources*

| Source of Information | 1 (Not at all) | 2 (Slightly) | 3 (Moderately) | 4 (Significantly) | 5 (Highly) | Weighted Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Counselors | 18.15 | 18.50 | 37.50 | 13.10 | 13.10 | 2.86 | 0.34 |
| Family | 2.70 | 14.20 | 23.50 | 25.00 | 34.60 | 3.75 | 0.82 |
| Friends | 10.00 | 26.20 | 40.40 | 12.70 | 10.80 | 2.88 | 0.45 |
| Teachers | 3.10 | 14.60 | 27.30 | 32.70 | 22.30 | 3.56 | 1.02 |
| Internet | 0.80 | 8.80 | 22.30 | 24.60 | 44.20 | 4.05 | 0.52 |
| Career Fairs | 24.60 | 16.90 | 22.70 | 18.50 | 17.50 | 2.88 | 0.38 |

Students primarily relied on the internet (mean score 4.05) and family (3.75) for career information, with teachers also being influential (mean score 3.56). However, counselors (2.86) and friends (2.88) had less impact, indicating a gap in personalized guidance. This trend aligns with global findings, such as those by YouScience (2022) and Mtemeri (2017), which highlight the increasing reliance on digital platforms for career advice and the need for more effective career counseling to address this gap.

## Distribution of Career Path Clarity Among Students by Faculty and GPA

**Table 3**

*Career Path Clarity Distribution by Faculty and GPA Among Students*

| Category | Certain | Uncertain | Total | Certain % | Uncertain % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Students | 127 | 133 | 260 | 48.80 | 51.20 |
| Faculty | | | | | |
| Management | 63 | 45 | 108 | 58.30 | 41.70 |
| Science | 64 | 88 | 152 | 42.10 | 57.90 |
| GPA | | | | | |
| Above 3.6 | 32 | 24 | 56 | 57.10 | 42.90 |
| Grade A | 40 | 55 | 95 | 42.10 | 57.90 |
| Grade B+ | 32 | 36 | 68 | 47.10 | 52.90 |

| Grade B | 22 | 16 | 38 | 57.90 | 42.10 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |

The analysis reveals that nearly half (49%) of the students have a clear idea of their course selection, with a significant proportion coming from the Management stream. Specifically, more than half (58.3%) of the students in the Management faculty exhibit clarity in their academic pathways, compared to a lesser 42.1% in the Science faculty. Additionally, students with higher GPAs, particularly those above 3.6, show a pronounced clarity in their academic direction, with 57.1% demonstrating confidence in their choices. These findings underscore that while academic performance and faculty choice significantly influence students' clarity regarding their future paths, there remains a considerable need for additional guidance, particularly for students in the Science faculty and those with mid-range GPAs. Providing targeted support for these groups could substantially improve their confidence in academic decision-making and better prepare them for their future careers.

## Factors Associated with the Choice of Academic Disciplines
**Table 4**

*Impact of Factors Considered by Students*

| Factors | 1 (Not at all) | 2 (Slightly) | 3 (Moderately) | 4 (Significantly) | 5 (Highly) | Weighted Mean | Standard deviation |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Cost of Course | 19.6 | 23.8 | 35.0 | 20.0 | 15.0 | 3.00 | 1.30 |
| Ability | 9.2 | 23.8 | 28.5 | 22.7 | 15.8 | 3.12 | 1.20 |
| Scope | 14.2 | 16.2 | 28.5 | 19.2 | 21.2 | 3.17 | 1.33 |
| Practical vs. Theoretical | 6.9 | 16.2 | 38.8 | 24.8 | 13.1 | 3.21 | 1.08 |
| Trends | 25.4 | 18.1 | 25.4 | 17.3 | 13.8 | 2.76 | 1.37 |

The findings suggest that students place considerable importance on practical learning and personal abilities when selecting academic disciplines, as these factors provide direct connections to future career paths. The high weighted mean for "Practical vs. Theoretical" (3.21) combined with its relatively low standard deviation (SD = 1.08) shows a consistent preference among students for education that blends theoretical knowledge with practical skills, preparing them for real-world challenges. Similarly, factors like scope (mean score 3.17, SD = 1.33) and personal abilities (mean score 3.12, SD = 1.202) play crucial roles in shaping students' choices, indicating a relatively high but somewhat varied perception of their

importance in supporting long-term career goals.

While the cost of the course (weighted mean 3.002, SD = 1.30) is considered, it shows more variability in responses, suggesting that it holds varying degrees of importance among students, depending on individual circumstances. In contrast, the low weighted mean for societal trends (2.762) and its higher standard deviation (SD = 1.37) highlight that while some students may be influenced by current trends, most prioritize sustainable, long-term career paths aligned with their abilities and aspirations over following market popularity. These results are consistent with global research, such as (A. S. Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Musoba et al., 2018) which highlight the growing emphasis on the practical applicability of education and the development of job-relevant skills, with varying degrees of importance across different factors.

**Post-Secondary Education and Career Path Influences Among Students**
**Table 5**

*Post-Secondary Plans and Career Path Influences*

| Variables | Categories | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Post-12th Grade Plans | Doing Bachelor's in Nepal | 78 | 30.0 |
| | Going Abroad for Study | 82 | 31.5 |
| | Getting into Work | 6 | 2.3 |
| | Choosing Foreign Employment | 41 | 15.8 |
| | Confused | 41 | 15.8 |
| | Others | 12 | 4.6 |
| Factors Influencing Career Path | Personal Interest | 146 | 56.2 |
| | Parental Influence | 26 | 10.0 |
| | Financial | 42 | 16.2 |
| | Peer Influence | 3 | 1.2 |
| | Future Growth | 43 | 16.5 |

The data reveals that students have varied plans following their 12th grade, with a notable split between those aiming to study abroad and those planning to pursue higher education in Nepal. Studying abroad emerges as a slightly more popular choice, reflecting students' aspirations for broader career opportunities and international exposure. On the other hand, a significant portion of students remains undecided, indicating a need for more effective career counseling to help them clarify their goals.

Interestingly, foreign employment is considered by a portion of students, suggesting

economic motivations behind career decisions, particularly for those looking to support themselves or their families. In contrast, entering the workforce immediately after school is the least favored option, which may reflect the perception that further education is necessary to secure stable and well-paying jobs.

When examining the factors influencing career path selection, personal interest is the most significant driver, guiding over half of the students' decisions. This aligns with global research, (Musoba et al., 2018) where personal passions are increasingly seen as essential in shaping career choices. Future growth prospects and financial considerations are also critical, underscoring a pragmatic approach where students evaluate the long-term benefits and economic viability of their chosen paths.

Parental influence, while present, plays a moderate role, and peer influence is minimal, which contrasts with other studies like Pascual (2014), where peer pressure has been more significant. This suggests that students in this context are making more independent decisions, prioritizing personal and practical considerations over social influence.

**Barriers to Choosing a Career Path**

**Table 6**

*Barriers to Choosing a Career Path*

| Barriers | 1 (Not at all) | 2 (Slightly) | 3 (Moderately) | 4 (Significantly) | 5 (Highly) | Weighted Mean | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Financial | 13.6 | 16.9 | 32.7 | 22.3 | 14.2 | 3.06 | 1.23 |
| Lack of Knowledge | 26.20 | 18.5 | 23.5 | 16.9 | 15 | 2.76 | 1.39 |
| Family Obligations | 58.5 | 20.4 | 25.0 | 6.2 | 5.4 | 1.79 | 1.17 |

The analysis revealed varying levels of impact for the barriers to career clarity among students, as indicated by the computed weighted means and standard deviations. Financial constraints had a weighted mean of 3.06 (SD = 1.23), suggesting that students perceive this factor as a moderate barrier. However, the relatively lower variability in responses indicates more consistency in students' views about financial constraints. Similarly, family obligations had a lower mean of 1.79 (SD = 1.17), indicating that students see this as a minor barrier with relatively consistent perceptions across the sample.

These findings align with the research by Pascual, (2014), observed that while financial concerns are prevalent, they often rank lower than factors such as personal interest and career

relevance in students' decision-making processes. This reflects the current data, where financial constraints, though present, do not significantly affect career clarity. Likewise, the minimal impact of family obligations mirrors the conclusions of Olayinka (2005) and Grissmer (2003), who found that family pressures tend to be outweighed by students' personal ambitions and academic goals.

**Impact of GPA, Parents' Education, and Income on Students' Perception of Pressure**
**Table 7**

*Parental Pressure by Family Income and Father's Education*

| Factor | Category | Students Feeling Pressured(%) | Students Not Feeling Pressured (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| GPA | High GPA (Above 3.6, Grade A) | 35.1 | 64.9 |
| | Lower GPA (Grade B, B+, C) | 14.9 | 85.1 |
| Parents Education | Below 5 | 13.0 | 87.0 |
| | Above 5 - Below 12 | 10.8 | 89.2 |
| Income of Parents | Bachelor's | 16.7 | 83.3 |
| | Master's | 34.6 | 65.4 |
| Parents Income | Below 5 Lakhs | 19.5 | 80.5 |
| | Above 5- Below 10 | 15.3 | 84.7 |
| | Above 10 lakhs | 0.0 | 100 |

The data reveals that students with higher GPAs (above 3.6) face significantly more pressure in choosing their academic paths, with 35.1% feeling pressured, compared to just 14.9% of those with lower GPAs. This trend aligns with Grissmer (2003), who noted that high-achieving students often face greater expectations, leading to increased stress. Additionally, students from lower-income families experience the pressure compared to those from middle-income families, while none from higher-income families report such pressure, consistent with (Ogunlade, 1973) Ogunlade's (1973) findings that financial constraints heighten decision-making stress. Parental education is also a critical factor; students whose fathers hold a master's degree are over twice as likely to feel pressured as those with less-educated parents, reflecting Olayinka's (2005) observation that higher parental expectations can significantly increase academic pressure. These findings underscore the need for targeted support to help students, particularly those under greater pressure due to academic performance, family income, or parental expectations, make informed and confident decisions about their futures.

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study successfully meets its objectives by identifying the clarity, key factors, and challenges that influence high school students' choices of academic disciplines in Nepal. It reveals that while nearly half of the students have clarity about their academic paths, many remain uncertain, particularly those in the Science faculty and with mid-range GPAs. The study highlights that personal interest is the most significant factor in course selection, followed by future career prospects, financial considerations, and the appeal of practical, hands-on learning. Peer influence, however, plays a minimal role. Additionally, students face challenges such as financial constraints, inadequate career guidance, and pressure from academic performance and family expectations. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, including enhanced counseling, financial aid, and improved access to career information, to help students navigate these challenges, make well-informed decisions, and achieve academic and professional success.

Schools and colleges should also focus on character development and entrepreneurship skills, essential for real-world success. Implementing comprehensive counseling programs in colleges can guide students in understanding their options and making informed choices about their studies and careers. Investigating the influence of emerging educational trends, such as digital learning, alongside psychological factors like stress and anxiety, would provide deeper insights into how these elements shape students' decision-making.

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