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Influence of Socio-Demographic Factors on Academic and Career Aspirations in Secondary Schools of Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract

This study investigates how socio-demographic factors shape career development among secondary school students in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. Using a quantitative cross-sectional approach, the research surveyed 450 students from Texas International College (Kathmandu), Tripadma Secondary School (Lalitpur), and Bageshwori Secondary School (Bhaktapur), selected through stratified random sampling. Data analysis employed statistical methods including frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests to examine relationships between demographic characteristics and career aspirations. The findings reveal pronounced geographic disparities, with 72% of respondents coming from Bagmati Pradesh, indicating significant regional inequalities in educational access. Students demonstrate a dual motivational pattern, combining immediate job-seeking behavior (54.7% actively seeking employment) with sustained academic effort (36.7% achieving B+ grades), reflecting the tension between economic pressures and educational goals. Furthermore, economic background substantially influences career choices, as evidenced by 33.6% of students from agriculture-dependent households prioritizing financial security over personal aspiration. While the education system maintains standardized pathways, it lacks adequate personalized career guidance, resulting in difficult school-to-work transitions. The study concludes that effective career development in Nepal necessitates comprehensive strategies that address both structural barriers and individual needs. Recommendations include implementing targeted regional development programs alongside enhanced career counseling services to better align student aspirations with practical career opportunities and foster more equitable educational outcomes across diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Keywords: Career Development, socio-demographic factors, educational disparities, school-to-work transition, Kathmandu valley

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1. Introduction

Education serves as the fundamental catalyst for individual and societal progress, equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and values essential for thriving in a rapidly changing world. Internationally recognized as more than mere skill acquisition, education represents a transformative force for fostering critical thinking, sustainability, and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2023). Delors Commission (1996) emphasized education's role in learning to know, to do, to be, and to live together, establishing it as a cornerstone of human development. This perspective is embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN, 2015). The World Bank (2018) further underscores education's crucial role in sustainable development, particularly in enhancing employability, fostering innovation, and reducing poverty.

Career aspirations planning play a pivotal role in bridging this gap. As Gashi & Kadriu (2022) emphasize, effective career planning helps students understand their abilities and explore various life options, leading to better academic performance and goal achievement. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) defines this process as students setting "learning goals based on personal, academic, and career interests," supported by teachers, counselors, and parents. However, in Nepal, career planning remains underdeveloped, with many students lacking clear career paths due to insufficient structured guidance (Agrawal, 2007).

In Nepal's context, the education system has made notable progress in increasing access and promoting literacy through its structured approach of basic, secondary, and higher education levels (MoE, 2022a). However, a critical challenge persists: a significant misalignment between educational outputs and labor market demands. The expansion of education has not corresponded with economic needs, creating a structural imbalance in the job market despite increasing numbers of college graduates (MoE, 2022a). This disconnect manifests in students' difficult transition from education to employment, reflecting systemic failures in career development structures.

The problem is compounded by socio-demographic factors that significantly influence career choices. Geographic disparities are evident in the heavy concentration of educational opportunities in Kathmandu Valley, creating systematic disadvantages for students from remote provinces like Karnali. This aligns with Marxist educational critiques that view schooling as potentially reproducing existing social inequalities (Cole, 2019). Economic realities further shape aspirations, as many students from

agriculture-dependent families (comprising 33.6% of the study sample) prioritize immediate physiological and safety needs over self-actualization in career decisions, consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Khalaf, 2019). Students' academic and motivational patterns reveal additional complexity. Through the lens of Goal Orientation Theory (Elliott & Dweck, 2005), many demonstrate a hybrid motivation: combining performance-driven job seeking with mastery-focused academic achievement. This reflects the challenging reality where students must balance immediate employment pressures with long-term skill development (Svinicki, 2009).

The core problem this research addresses is the critical misalignment between secondary school students' career development planning and their subsequent academic and employment trajectories in Kathmandu Valley. This misalignment stems from underdeveloped institutional support systems and influential socio-demographic factors, resulting in inadequate career readiness among students. Despite reasonable academic performance—with a significant proportion achieving B+ grades and above in their Secondary Education Examination—over half (54.7%) of respondents primarily seek job opportunities, while others engage in freelance (23.3%) or part-time work (22%). This indicates a transitional population struggling to convert academic preparation into sustainable career pathways. The systemic failure is twofold: first, a disconnect between school-acquired skills and labor market requirements, similar to challenges observed in China's educational expansion (Wu, 2017); second, insufficient infrastructure for systematic career planning within schools.

The problem is exacerbated by socio-demographic determinants. Research data reveals substantial regional disparities, with 72% of students from Bagmati Pradesh compared to only 1.33% from Karnali Pradesh, highlighting unequal access to quality career guidance. Gender influences institutional and stream choices, with female students dominating certain schools and the Management stream, potentially reflecting societal norms. Caste and economic background also play crucial roles, as students from agriculture-dependent families often make career choices based on economic necessity rather than personal aspiration, limiting social mobility potential (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Current career guidance systems in Nepalese schools lack the sophistication to address these complex intersections of factors. As Chuhan (2019) notes, career planning in Nepal remains heavily influenced by external pressures like family expectations and financial constraints, with rural and disadvantaged students facing particularly limited access to quality counseling. Therefore, the problem extends beyond unemployment to encompass fundamental deficiencies in how students navigate career decision-making processes within structural constraints.

This study aims to investigate these complex relationships to provide evidence-based recommendations for developing more equitable and effective career guidance systems in Kathmandu Valley's secondary schools, potentially serving as a model for national educational reform. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate this critical nexus. By analyzing the socio-demographic profiles, academic backgrounds, and career readiness of students from selected schools in the Kathmandu Valley, this research aims to unravel the relationships between gender, caste, institutional affiliation, and subject stream choices. The findings are intended to identify scalable strategies to enhance career readiness and inform policy interventions that can effectively bridge the gap between education and meaningful employment for Nepal's youth.

2. Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to analyze the socio-demographic profiles and academic backgrounds of student respondents, while examining relationships between their gender, caste, institutional affiliation, and subject stream choices.This study used quantitative research method utilizing a cross-sectional survey strategy to identify career-related problems and justify current conditions and practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Urestsky & Henneberger, 2022). The research followed a descriptive and explanatory design to investigate factors affecting career development planning, with a focus on career information, path education, counseling systems, and goals. The study was conducted in the Kathmandu Valley, a key destination for higher education in Nepal, with samples drawn from Texas International College (Kathmandu), Tripadma Secondary School (Lalitpur), and Bageshwori Secondary School (Bhaktapur) due to their strong academic offerings and reputation. From a total population of 2,560 secondary level students, a sample of 450 respondents was selected using a combination of convenience sampling for institutions and random sampling for students within selected sections, meeting the sample size requirements for multivariate analysis as suggested by Wolf et al. (2013). Data collection involved primary sources through survey questionnaires administered to students from management, science, and arts streams.

The data were analyzed using SPSS, employing frequency distributions, percentages, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests (Field, 2009) to present and interpret the findings.This study interprets career development through multiple theoretical lenses. The Marxist perspective examines how education may reinforce social inequalities in career paths (Cole, 2019), while Goal Orientation Theory analyzes how students' learning motivations influence career planning approaches

(Svinicki, 2009). These are complemented by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which suggests career choices are shaped by students' position on the needs spectrum from survival to self-actualization.

3. Results

3.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

This section presents demographic profile of the study's respondents, highlighting key characteristics that contextualize the research findings. The data encompasses gender distribution, marital status, and geographical representation across provinces and local levels. These demographic variables provide crucial background for understanding the study population's composition and help identify potential patterns in educational and career development pathways. The profile reveals a predominantly young, unmarried cohort with distinctive regional concentrations that reflect Nepal's diverse social and geographical landscape.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Demographic and Geographic Profile

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Sex Group	Female	234	52.00
	Male	213	47.33
	LGBTI	3	0.67
Marital Status	Unmarried	444	98.67
	Married	6	1.33
Province	Koshi Pradesh	36	8.00
	Madhesh Pradesh	28	6.22
	Bagmati Pradesh	324	72.00
	Gandaki Pradesh	18	4.00
	Lumbini Pradesh	17	3.78
	Karnali Pradesh	6	1.33
	Sudur Paschim Pradesh	21	4.67
Local Level	Metropolitan	65	14.44
	Sub-metropolitan	9	2.00
	Municipality	272	60.44
	Rural Municipality	104	23.11
Total		450	100.00

The data shows the sample is predominantly unmarried (98.7%) and has a slightly higher representation of female students (52%) compared to male (47.3%), with a small LGBTI representation (0.7%). The dominance of unmarried students aligns with the research context of higher education. Geographically, the majority of respondents (72%) are from Bagmati Pradesh, reflecting the study's focus on Kathmandu Valley. The remaining provinces are represented to a lesser extent, with Karnali Pradesh having the lowest participation. At the local level, most respondents (60.4%) were from the municipality level.

3.2 Socio-Cultural and Economic Profile

This section examines the socio-cultural and economic foundations shaping career development among Nepalese students. The interplay of caste, religion, family structure, and economic background creates a distinctive framework influencing educational and career pathways. Understanding these contextual factors is essential to comprehend how students navigate opportunities and constraints in their professional development within Nepal's unique cultural landscape.

Table 2. Socio-Cultural and Economic Profile of the Respondents

Characteristic	Response	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Caste/Ethnicity	Janjati	289	64.20
	Chhetri	95	21.10
	Brahmin	37	8.20
	Dalit	29	6.40
Religion	Hindu	336	74.70
	Buddhist	58	12.90
	Christian	41	9.10
	Kirat	14	3.10
	Other	1	0.20
Family Type	Nuclear	227	50.40
	Joint	223	49.60
Sources of Family Income	Agriculture	151	33.60
	Other	150	33.30
	Government/Private Job	96	21.30
	Foreign Employment	38	8.40
	Business Enterprises	15	3.30
Total		450	100.00

The data shows the sample is predominantly Hindu (74.7%), with Janjati communities forming the majority (64.2%), reflecting Nepal's demographic composition. In terms of household structure, respondents are almost evenly split between Nuclear (50.4%) and Joint (49.6%) families. Economically, the most common sources of family income are Agriculture (33.6%) and other diverse sources (33.3%), underscoring the agrarian base and economic diversification of the respondents' backgrounds.

3.3 Academic Background and Employment Status

This section outlines the academic and current engagement status of the study's respondents, providing critical context for their career development stage. The data encompasses students' secondary education achievement, current employment status, institutional affiliation, and chosen field of study. The distribution reveals a cohort in a transitional phase, primarily engaged in seeking employment opportunities while pursuing higher secondary education across three main streams. This combination of academic engagement and early career exploration characterizes a pivotal moment in these students' professional development, reflecting the intersection of educational preparation and initial workforce entry in the Nepalese context.

Table 3. Academic Background and Employment Status of the Respondents

Characteristic	Response	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
SEE Grade Obtained	B+	165	36.70
	B	98	21.80
	A	110	24.40
	A+	21	4.70
	C+	47	10.40
	C and Below	9	2.00
Current Employment Status	Looking for job opportunities	246	54.70
	Freelance	105	23.30
	Part-time job	99	22.00
Currently Studying Institution	Texas International College	150	33.30
	Tripadma Secondary School	150	33.30
	Bageshwori Secondary School	150	33.30
Subject Stream	Management	176	39.11
	Science	175	38.89
	Arts	99	22.00
Total		450	100.00

The academic and professional status of the respondents reveals key trends. Academically, the largest cohort (36.7%) achieved a B+ in their SEE, indicating a generally strong foundational performance, with only a small fraction (2%) scoring below a C+. This academic background coincides with a transitional career phase, as over half of the respondents (54.7%) are actively seeking job opportunities. A significant portion is already engaged in the workforce through freelance (23.3%) or part-time work (22%). The sample is evenly distributed across three educational institutions. In their current studies, the student body is almost equally split between the Management (39.1%) and Science (38.9%) streams, with Arts being the choice for the remaining 22%. This highlights a strong orientation towards these two dominant fields.

3.4 Cross Tabulation of Sex Group with Institution and Subject Stream

This cross-tabulation analysis examines the relationship between gender distribution and key educational choices among the study's respondents. The data presents a comparative overview of how male and female students are distributed across different educational institutions and academic streams. By analyzing these patterns, we can identify potential gender-based trends in institutional preference and subject selection. The findings reveal distinct variations in how different genders access educational opportunities and make academic pathway decisions, providing valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of educational participation in the Nepalese context. This analysis helps illuminate the complex interplay between gender identity and educational trajectories within the study population.

Table 4. Cross-Tabulation

Sex Group	Currently Studying Institution			Subject Stream		
	Texas Int'l College	Tripadma S.S.	Bageshwori S.S.	Science	Management	Arts
Female	85	94	56	82	96	57
% within Sex Group	36.2%	40.0%	23.8%	34.9%	40.9%	24.3%
Male	65	56	94	81	77	57
% within Sex Group	30.2%	26.0%	43.7%	37.7%	35.8%	26.5%
Total	150	150	150	163	173	114
% of Total	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	36.2%	38.4%	25.3%

The cross-tabulation analysis reveals distinct patterns in the distribution of students by gender across institutions and subject streams. Regarding educational institutions, female students show a higher concentration at Texas International (56.7%) and Tripadma (62.7%), while male students are the majority at Bageshwori Secondary School (62.7%). In terms of academic streams, female students are more represented in the Management stream (55.5%). The Science stream shows a nearly equal gender split, and the Arts stream has a perfect 50/50 balance between male and female students. Overall, these findings indicate a significant female presence in the sample, particularly in management studies.

3.5 Association between Institution and Subject Stream

This analysis examines the relationship between students' educational institutions and their chosen academic streams through cross-tabulation and statistical measures of association. The data presents the distribution of students across science, management, and arts disciplines within three different secondary schools, allowing for comparative analysis of institutional patterns in subject selection. Various statistical tests, including Pearson Chi-Square and measures such as Cramer's V, are employed to determine whether significant associations exist between these variables. The findings provide insights into the institutional dimensions of academic stream distribution and help identify potential patterns in educational pathway choices across different learning environments.

Table 5. Cross-Tabulation and Association between Institution and Subject Stream

Currently Studying	Subject Stream			Total
	Science	Management	Arts	
Texas International College				
Count	53	52	45	150
% within Institution	35.3%	34.7%	30.0%	100%
% within Subject Stream	32.5%	30.1%	39.5%	33.3%
Tripadma Secondary School				
Count	51	60	39	150
% within Institution	34.0%	40.0%	26.0%	100%
% within Subject Stream	31.3%	34.7%	34.2%	33.3%
Bageshwori Secondary School				
Count	59	61	30	150
% within Institution	39.3%	40.7%	20.0%	100%
% within Subject Stream	36.2%	35.3%	26.3%	33.3%
Total Count	163	173	114	450
% of Total	36.2%	38.4%	25.3%	100%

Based on the cross-tabulation of students from three secondary schools and their chosen subject streams, statistical analysis was conducted to determine if a significant association exists between the institution attended and the academic stream. The results from the Pearson Chi-Square test, yielding a p-value of 0.34, indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between these two variables, as the value exceeds the standard 0.05 threshold for significance. This conclusion is further reinforced by weak measures of association, including a Cramer's V of 0.07 and a Phi coefficient of 0.10, both confirming the negligible strength of any potential relationship. Therefore, it can be concluded that a student's selection of a subject stream is independent of the specific secondary school they attend, and the initial sample demonstrates no institutional bias in academic stream distribution.

3.6 Association between Institution and Caste Group

This cross-tabulation analysis explores the distribution of caste groups across different educational institutions. The data reveals how students from Brahmin, Chhetri, Janjati, and Dalit backgrounds are represented in three secondary schools, providing insights into potential patterns of caste-based educational access. Statistical measures, including Pearson Chi-Square and Cramer's V, are employed to assess the strength and significance of associations between institutional affiliation and caste composition. The analysis helps illuminate the complex relationship between social structure and educational opportunity in the Nepalese context, offering valuable perspectives on equity in educational access across different caste groups.

Table 6. Cross-Tabulation

Currently Studying	Caste Group				Total
	Brahmin	Chhetri	Janjati	Dalit	
Texas International College					
Count	18	35	84	13	150
% within Institution	12.0%	23.3%	56.0%	8.7%	100%
% within Caste Group	48.6%	36.8%	29.1%	44.8%	33.3%
Tripadma Secondary School					
Count	11	31	102	6	150
% within Institution	7.3%	20.7%	68.0%	4.0%	100%
% within Caste Group	29.7%	32.6%	35.3%	20.7%	33.3%
Bageshwori Secondary School					
Count	8	29	103	10	150

Currently Studying	Caste Group				Total
	Brahmin	Chhetri	Janjati	Dalit	
% within Institution	5.3%	19.3%	68.7%	6.7%	100%
% within Caste Group	21.6%	30.5%	35.6%	34.5%	33.3%
Total Count	37	95	289	29	450
% of Total	8.2%	21.1%	64.2%	6.4%	100%

The cross-tabulation shows the distribution of different caste groups across the three institutions. The Pearson Chi-Square test results in a p-value of 0.13, which is greater than the 0.05 significance level. This indicates that there is no statistically significant association between the institution a student attends and their caste group. The weak strength of this non-significant relationship is confirmed by the low values of Cramer's V (0.10)**.** Therefore, the caste composition is not significantly different across the three schools.

4. Discussions of Findings

The findings of this study present a complex picture of career development among secondary school students in Nepal, which can be deeply interpreted through the interplay of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. The demographic composition of the sample—predominantly unmarried, Hindu, Janjati students from Bagmati Pradesh—accurately mirrors Nepal's national demographics, yet this very representativeness reveals underlying structural patterns. From a Marxist perspective, the heavy concentration of the study sample in Kathmandu Valley institutions is not a neutral phenomenon but a manifestation of geographic and economic stratification. Cole (2019) argues that education often serves to reproduce existing class relations, and in this case, the underrepresentation of students from provinces like Karnali (1.33%) demonstrates how access to quality secondary education, a key precursor to career advancement, is unevenly distributed. This creates a pre-structured career path where students from more developed regions are systematically advantaged, reinforcing the very inequalities that critical education theory seeks to expose.

The academic and career readiness of the respondents further illuminates their motivational drivers when analyzed through the lens of Goal Orientation Theory. The fact that over half (54.7%) are actively seeking jobs, coupled with significant engagement in freelance (23.3%) and part-time work (22%), suggests a strong performance-approach orientation, where students are motivated by demonstrating their ability and securing external validation (Elliott & Dweck, 2005). This is a pragmatic

response to an economy with limited opportunities. However, their solid academic performance, with the largest cohort achieving a B+ grade, indicates a concurrent mastery orientation, a focus on developing competence that Svinicki (2009) links to long-term growth. This hybrid motivation reflects the complex reality faced by students in developing economies: they must simultaneously cultivate deep learning (mastery) while competitively positioning themselves for immediate employment (performance).Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs further clarifies this negotiation between aspiration and necessity. The significant reliance of students' families on agriculture (33.6%) and other basic livelihoods suggests that for many, foundational physiological and safety needs are primary drivers. This economic reality directly shapes career choices, predisposing students toward paths perceived as secure and financially rewarding, potentially at the expense of personal passion or self-actualization. This aligns with Khalafs (2019) assertion that career development is a lifelong journey of awareness, but one that is often constrained by socioeconomic context. The high number of students looking for work may not merely reflect ambition but also a pressing need to contribute to family security, a factor that career development models in Western contexts often take for granted.

The geographic concentration in Bagmati Pradesh and underrepresentation from provinces like Karnali demonstrate persistent regional inequalities in educational access, aligning with Marxist critiques of how education systems can reproduce existing social hierarchies (Cole, 2019). Students demonstrate a hybrid motivational orientation, combining performance-driven job seeking with mastery-focused academic achievement, reflecting the need to balance immediate employment pressures with long-term development (Elliott & Dweck, 2005; Svinicki, 2009). The significant reliance on agricultural family incomes (33.6%) suggests many students operate at basic need levels, directing career choices toward financial security rather than self-actualization (Khalaf, 2019). While the lack of significant institution-stream association indicates standardization, it may also reveal insufficient targeted career guidance. These findings collectively underscore that effective career development in Nepal must address both structural barriers and the complex negotiation between student aspirations and socioeconomic constraints, particularly given the challenging school-to-work transition (Shukla, 2021).

5. Conclusion and Policy Implication

Based on the comprehensive analysis of findings, this study concludes that career development among Nepalese secondary school students is fundamentally shaped by the

tension between structural constraints and individual agency. The persistent geographic and socioeconomic disparities in educational access, particularly the overwhelming concentration of students in Bagmati Pradesh, demonstrate how existing social hierarchies continue to reproduce inequality through the education system. This structural reality forces students to navigate a complex landscape where their career motivations become necessarily hybrid - simultaneously pursuing mastery-oriented academic achievement while demonstrating performance-driven job-seeking behavior. The predominance of students from agricultural family backgrounds further reinforces how career choices remain heavily influenced by basic economic security needs rather than self-actualization.

The study reveals that while Nepal's education system has achieved some success in standardizing educational pathways, as evidenced by the lack of significant institutional bias in subject stream selection, this standardization has not adequately addressed the critical need for personalized career guidance. The challenging school-to-work transition, marked by high anxiety and limited support systems, threatens to undermine both individual well-being and national human resource development. Ultimately, effective career development in Nepal requires interventions that simultaneously address structural barriers while supporting students' navigation of the complex interplay between their aspirations and socioeconomic realities. Future policies must recognize that career development cannot be divorced from broader issues of regional development, economic opportunity, and targeted educational support that acknowledges the unique pressures facing Nepalese youth.

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