

NEPALI STUDENTS IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE SCHOOLS: INVESTIGATING MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY

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Abstract: *The rapidly growing number of Nepali students in Japan represents a significant yet under-researched student population in international education research. This paper investigates Nepali students' motivations for educational mobility and experiences in Japanese language schools (nihongo gakkō), key institutions for hosting international students. Drawing on semi-structured interview narratives with eight Nepali students, this study argues that their mobility signifies a new trend and greater accessibility in educational mobility, primarily driven by non-academic aspirations. The findings suggest that the motivations behind Nepali students' mobility essentially lie in the inherent dream of upward social mobility and are strongly influenced by emerging mobility infrastructures. This study aims to enrich the current scholarship on marginal student mobility by shedding light on the mobility motivation of Japan's rapidly growing Nepali student population.*

Keywords: *Educational mobility, language schools, mobility motivation, Nepali students, social mobility*

Introduction

Educational mobility has become a mass aspiration among youth from the Global South and is often viewed as a transformative pathway to life opportunities and social advancement. These aspirations are shaped by the intersection of disappointment with the home context (Bal, 2013) and the cosmopolitan imaginaries of the host country (Stein & De Andreotti, 2016), often reinforced through social media, social networks, and recruitment agents (Collins, 2013). While international student mobility (ISM) is diversifying in terms of student profiles and destination countries (Brunner et al., 2023), much of the scholarly focus remains on elite, Global North-centered academic mobility (Lipura & Collins, 2020). The mobility of less-privileged students pursuing non-academic degrees in non-traditional destinations remains underexplored.

Japan has been a popular destination for many Nepali youths from less-privileged backgrounds, marking a notable shift from their earlier preference for Anglophone countries. Over the past decade, the number of Nepali students in Japan has grown dramatically, from 3,188 in 2013 to 37,878 in 2023 and then to 64,816 in 2024, an increase of more than 70% from the previous year, making them the second-largest group of international students in Japan after China (JASSO, 2025). In the fiscal year 2023/24, Nepali students coming to Japan represented the largest share of Nepal's outbound student population. Of the 112,593 No Objection Certificates (NOCs) issued by Nepal's Ministry of Education for study abroad, 34,731 were for Japan, of which 33,697 were specifically for Japanese language schools (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2024). Despite this rising trend, the experiences and motivations of this student population remain under investigated.

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This study addresses the existing literature gap by investigating the educational mobility trajectories of eight Nepali students enrolled in five different Japanese language schools in the Hokuriku region of Japan, specifically in the city of Hokuriku. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and field notes collected in 2023, this study explores Nepali students' motivations and lived experiences, thereby shedding light on the socio-structural factors likely shaping their educational mobility. The Hokuriku region has become an attractive business expansion site for Japanese language schools because of its low operational costs and enhanced accessibility via a bullet train directly connected to Tokyo. The presence of international students in the Hokuriku region has led to the emergence of ethnic grocery stores and relocation of recruiting and real estate companies to support students with part-time job placements and housing. Their involvement in the local labor market as employees of convenience stores, hotels, and restaurants also signifies their growing engagement in various spheres of Japanese society.

Against the backdrop of the shifting paradigm of ISM, this paper situates the experiences of Nepali students within the broader dynamics of neoliberal globalization. This research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of ISM by examining marginal mobilities (Collins & Ho, 2018) and calls for a more humanized approach to research and policy that recognizes the diverse identities and struggles of international students and prioritizes their well-being and enhancement of their mobility experience (Gomes, 2024; Mittelmeier et al., 2023).

Underpinnings of International Student Mobility

The literature on ISM predominantly frames it as a means of capital accumulation, often involving privileged students undertaking academic degrees in Anglophone countries to maintain and reproduce social advantages upon returning to their home country (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012; Yang, 2018). However, the global proliferation of the international education market in the context of neoliberal globalization has reshaped this narrative, expanding access to ISM beyond elite circles (Waters & Brooks, 2021). Recent developments in ISM extend beyond the conventional elite narrative of `distinction and reproduction` (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012), facilitating the broader participation of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in educational mobility beyond West-centric, traditional destinations (Brooks & Waters, 2022; Olwig & Valentin, 2014).

Existing literature on ISM has frequently employed a push-pull framework to analyze student decision-making processes, destination choices, and motivations for studying abroad (Cao et al., 2016; Mazarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors are unfavorable conditions in the home countries that compel students to leave, whereas pull factors attract students to the destination countries (Cao et al., 2016). In a recent empirical study on Bangladeshi university students, Zaman et al. (2024, pp. 6) found that the push factors, such as poor education quality, unemployment, political instability, corruption, discrimination, and environmental degradation, force these students to consider leaving their home country, while pull factors in destination countries, such as improved standards of living, better economic and career opportunities, the rule of law, migration prospects, and cultural diversity, make going to a foreign destination more attractive. Krzaklewska (2008, pp. 95–96) categorized Erasmus students' motivations as experimental and career-oriented. The experimental dimension included cultural and personal motivations, such as learning a new culture, having new experiences, and meeting new people. The career dimension encompasses both career and academic motivations. While the experimental dimension primarily drives American, British, and European students to attend high-ranking universities or experience adventure, Asian and African students are more commonly motivated by education and career-related factors (Yasmin et al., 2022; Krzaklewska, 2008).

Studies have reported several other factors that influence the choice of study destinations, including historical and cultural ties, geographic proximity, education quality, costs, program availability, host country environment, post-graduation immigration prospects, financial support, and employability opportunities (Sidhu & Ishikawa, 2020; Wu et al., 2019)—from an analysis of educational agents' websites in five South Asian countries, Rust (2023) observed that educational

agents may actively construct and communicate push-pull factors to align student aspirations with the perceived attraction of studying in a host country.

Despite the dominant use of the push-pull model to discuss the ISM motivations, it often overlooks the complexity and multiplicity of the factors involved. For example, the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts in which students make educational mobility decisions and the various factors influencing their mobility aspirations have been less recognized (Findlay, 2011). As Lipura and Collins (2020) pointed out, the push-pull framework considers students' decision-making as a linear process, ignoring how aspirations often unfold unpredictably. In addition, Martin (2017) argued that it reduces mobility motivations to instrumental goals and portrays students as 'passive subjects to external forces'.

Drawing on the concept of transnationalism (Schiller et al., 1995), this study critically examines the educational mobility motivations and lived experiences of low-resourced Nepali students beyond the explanatory limits of the push-pull model. Given that recent language-based non-degree educational mobility to Japan increasingly involves socially and economically marginalized students, their decisions and aspirations are situated within transnational social fields where networks, imaginaries, and obligations span multiple geographies and scales (Schiller et al., 1995). Influenced by the studies that focus on transnational obligations (Geddie, 2013), life-course strategies (Findlay et al., 2012), and motivation dynamism (Carlson, 2013), this paper adopts a transnational lens to explore how mobility decisions are shaped relationally and in process, involving actors and institutions across both sending and receiving contexts.

Undertaken under precarious circumstances—often involving debt, poverty, and social exclusion (Collins & Ho, 2018; Wilson et al., 2023) — this educational mobility represents more than an economic strategy; it is a transformative journey of self-becoming (Tran, 2015). Therefore, this paper argues that transnationalism offers a more adequate framework to understand why and how low-resource, non-degree-seeking students navigate and make sense of their aspirations, uncertainties, and experiences. While the recent market-based trend of educational mobility has included historically marginalized students, it is often understood from deficit-driven perspectives. Students enrolled in non-degree courses at peripheral destinations are frequently viewed as having certain deficiencies, such as a lack of linguistic and cultural capital, while ignoring their multiple identities. Recent studies examining the emerging diversification of educational mobility (Chacko, 2020; Cheng, 2016; Gilmartin et al., 2020) have revealed that students often experience multifaceted challenges, including financial constraints, cultural adjustment issues, and precarious living and working conditions.

A growing body of literature on ISM during and after COVID-19 has highlighted international students' vulnerability, including mental stress, discrimination, and the challenges of online learning due to the extended lockdowns and mobility restrictions (Gaitanidis, 2021; Sondhi, 2025). This disruption has led ISM discourses to prioritize human justice and the well-being of international students by focusing on the role of emotional resilience and institutional support in shaping their experiences (Gomes, 2025; Lee & Waters, 2024; Sidhu & Ishikawa, 2020). The heightened precarity of international students during COVID-19 makes it evident that they are more vulnerable during crises and, therefore, need more supportive international education practices and policies beyond economic narratives.

Japanese Language Schools: A Gateway to the Japanese Labor Market

Japanese language schools that provide Japanese language courses for international students are key hosting institutions for international students and serve as a gateway to further education and employment opportunities in Japan (Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019; Sato et al., 2020). These rapidly growing language schools have recently become crowded with international students from South and East Asian countries, particularly China, Nepal, Vietnam, and Myanmar. While Japanese language school

students constitute more than 31% of the total international students in Japan, 107,241 out of 336,708 students in 2024 (JASSO, 2025), they are often overlooked in academic discussions.

International students in Japan are seen as a source of human resources to address the changing demographic challenges and shifting economic priorities (Yonezawa, 2020). The Japanese government has employed strategic approaches to attract and retain these students. These initiatives, for example, the Plan to Accept 100,000 Foreign Students in 1983, the 300,000 International Students Plan in 2008, the Global 30 Project in 2009, and the Top Global University Project in 2014-2023, have been designed to foster human capital for the Japanese labor market through the internationalization of higher education (Hennings & Mintz, 2015). Immigration policies also aim to facilitate international graduates' education-to-work transition by allowing them a six-month-to one-year post-graduation job-seeking visa.

A handful of studies have explicitly focused on Japanese language students. These studies have explored how Japanese language schools bring in and supply international students to the Japanese labor market, limiting their role as visa sponsors and failing to perform their broader educational and welfare responsibilities. In her study of Chinese students, Liu-Farrer (2009) conceptualized this trend as "educationally channeled labor migration," while Dadabaev et al. (2021), focusing on students from Uzbekistan, describe it as "language migration." Kharel (2022) documents how Nepali students instrumentalize Japan's "side-door" labor migration system. Similarly, in her ethnographic analysis, Shrestha (2023) discusses the role of commercial agents in commodifying student labor, often channeling them into exploitative work.

While these studies (Liu-Farrer, 2009; Sato et al., 2020; Shrestha, 2023) have highlighted the institutional failures that have resulted in students' precarious experiences and zoomed in on the students' deficiencies, such as limited opportunities to engage in the Japanese community meaningfully, lower Japanese proficiency among non-Chinese character (kanji)-background students, and the prioritization of part-time work over academic goals, little attention has been paid to their sociocultural context of mobility. It has failed to recognize the students' transformative potential and agency in navigating their migration trajectories.

Nepali Students in Japanese Language Schools: Precarious Pathways to Mobility

The rapid expansion of Japanese language schools has led many Nepali students, particularly those from less-privileged backgrounds, to seek upward social mobility through education and employment opportunities in Japan. For many Nepali youth, Japanese-language schools have been an alternative pathway to international migration, as access to higher education in traditional English-speaking destinations such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom remains financially and academically challenging. This can also be attributed to dissatisfaction with higher education opportunities and the youth unemployment rates in the home country (Sato et al., 2020). Despite the significant financial investment required for educational migration, discontent resulting from political and economic chaos has pushed many Nepali youth to seek educational opportunities abroad to improve their employability and career prospects. Social networks and the rapidly growing intermediary educational agents and consultancies in Nepal are central to this migration paradigm, functioning as indispensable conduits that facilitate migration by actively promoting Japanese language education as a viable route for both academic and employment prospects (Kharel, 2022; Shrestha, 2023).

The rapidly growing Nepali students' experience in Japan is characterized by increasing precarity because of linguistic and cultural barriers, economic and emotional hardship, and visa uncertainties. Previous studies report that Nepali students often engage in labor-intensive, casual work in sectors such as the food industry, hospitality, cleaning, and other service industries, under exploitative conditions and with significant job insecurity (Kharel, 2022; Sato et al., 2020; Shrestha, 2023). This results in a dual burden of academic obligation and economic survival, leading to heightened stress, limited opportunities for career advancement, and constrained social mobility.

Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by the widespread “earning narrative” promoted by educational agents in Nepal, which claims, “You can earn more than 300,000 yen (approximately 1,976 USD) a month by working part-time in Japan” (Immigration Services Agency, n.d.). It encourages Nepali parents and students to take financial risks without adequately preparing for uncertainties in Japan, which often leads to considerable economic hardship and parental debt. This expectation-experience gap tends to result in precarious experiences. Although Nepali students are reported to experience numerous uncertainties and adversities, how they develop resilience strategies to navigate these challenges remains an essential but underexplored question in the existing literature.

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and field notes with 15 Nepali students attending Japanese language schools in the city of Hokuriku in 2023. Eight of these interviews were audio-recorded. While the recorded interviews were conducted in late 2023, the study is greatly enriched by insights from many students I met, spoke with, and observed during my three-year stay in the city and my ongoing research in the Kanto region.

When I moved to the city as part of my job in 2020 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I encountered very few Nepali students. Surprisingly, with the easing of border restrictions in late 2022 and early 2023, I noticed many Nepali students in public spaces such as train and bus stations, supermarkets, and convenience stores. This visible surge in Nepali students in a small regional city has deepened my research interest. This led to further engagements with them to understand why and how they chose a relatively lesser-known city for international students. Background information was collected through multiple meetings with the participants before the interview recordings. After listening to their stories in an informal setting, the interviews were recorded. However, I found that students tended to be more open and expressive in unrecorded conversations than in recorded interviews. I continued data collection through interviews until recurring themes indicated that thematic saturation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2006). This study is based on the narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2022), which focuses on the importance of stories in making sense of experiences. The interviews were structured in a way that allowed open-ended conversations and encouraged participants to explore emerging topics.

Participants were initially selected through personal networks, and subsequent participants were identified through snowball sampling. The recorded sample included eight participants (five males and three females), all in their early to late twenties, from five different language schools located nearby, three of which were recently established. One school was in its first year of operation, and its student body included 60 students, fifty-nine of whom were Nepalese. All the study participants were in their first year of language school at the time of data collection. After graduation, six of them joined vocational schools (*senmon gakkō*) in the Tokyo and Saitama regions; one was in Osaka, and the other, who had a bachelor’s degree from Nepal, has managed to secure a full-time job. I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The interviews were conducted in Nepali. They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English, drawing on my bilingual proficiency in both languages. The data were analyzed thematically by applying Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach, entirely following the manual process. I analyzed the participants’ interviews thematically through multiple rounds of listening and reading, then systematically generated initial codes, identified and reviewed themes, and finally constructed an analytic narrative that captured key patterns relevant to my research questions. The interview questions broadly covered three themes: pre-study preparation, host country experience, and post-study trajectories: (1) motivations for education mobility, (2) everyday life and institutional experiences in Japan, and (3) future aspirations. The paper draws from all eight interview insights, including those of other students I met and talked with during my three-year stay there. However, it focuses on analyzing narrative accounts in detail that offer rich insights

into the context and complexities underlying educational mobility motivations and experiences. In addition, to understand institutional perspectives on the recent developments and discourses on international students, I reviewed the policy documents, including the official websites of the Japanese government, and relied on other secondary sources.

Findings

Through an analysis of the participants' narrative accounts, four key themes emerged that highlight the sociocultural contexts influencing Nepali students' educational mobility decisions and experiences.

Aspiration for Economic Security, Safety, and Independence

Reena, a 27-year-old student, viewed educational mobility as a means of escaping prevailing socioeconomic constraints and ensuring personal independence and economic opportunities. She worked as the manager of a mobile outlet in a small city in Nepal. However, increasing dissatisfaction with her low wages led her to decide to come to Japan. Reflecting on her motivations for mobility, she stated:

I came to Japan because I wanted to be independent. I also had opportunities in Nepal, but we do not get a good salary for our labor. This is not enough for future savings. In addition, I have heard that Japan is the safest place for girls and would offer better opportunities.

Reena's narrative illustrates the influence of traditional gender relations on mobility decisions. Although the dream of economic prosperity is central to Reena's migration aspirations, her mobility decision is significantly shaped and conditioned by societal gender expectations (Geddie, 2013; Martin, 2017). Reena's gendered experience, particularly in a society in which women are likely to experience some gender-based discrimination and violence, influences her decision to migrate to Japan, with safety being one of her concerns. Reena's belief that 'Japan is the safest place for girls' reflects her intention to be in a place that ensures freedom, safety, and economic opportunity, which she finds lacking in her society (Tamang, 2009). This difference between her sociocultural experience of restriction and limited opportunities and her perception of Japan's modernity, which is linked to safety, autonomy, and better opportunities, motivated her to migrate to Japan. In addition, her aspiration to achieve financial independence before marriage reflects an attempt to challenge and negotiate her gender norms within the family.

Her parents' insistence on marriage before her departure to Japan highlights the persistence of traditional gender roles that expect Nepali women to remain at home or move with their husbands (Zharkevich, 2019).

As I experienced the hardship during my childhood, I was more committed to being self-dependent before marrying. When I decided to come to Japan, my parents insisted me to get married before I moved. Anyway, I convinced them.

On the other hand, in the case of Rajina, educational mobility was closely tied to her family obligations. Her decision to migrate to Japan was not primarily driven by personal ambition, as in Reena's case, but rather by a sense of responsibility to support her family financially. Therefore, she faced no resistance from her parents.

I do not have any elder brothers. My elder sisters are already married, and I have a younger sister and brother to look after. So, I thought I should go abroad and earn, and I found Japan as the right option.

As these narratives exemplify, their language-based educational mobility to Japan can be attributed primarily to the aspirations for greater personal autonomy, safety, and financial stability, and is increasingly embedded in a multifaceted sociocultural context (Findlay et al., 2012). When asked about their daily lives in Japan, they shared their linguistic, cultural, financial, and emotional struggles with navigating a new sociocultural environment. Despite their multiple challenges, they expressed optimism regarding the future in Japan. At the time of the interview recording, they both worked part-time at convenience stores, which they considered an opportunity to practice Japanese through everyday interactions with customers.

Educational Mobility as a Family Project

The educational mobility of Nepali students in Japan reflects not only their personal ambitions but also the collective aspirations of their families, shaped by cultural expectations and economic responsibilities (Thieme & Wyss, 2005). Families often make significant financial investments in tuition fees, expecting such education to secure a better future for their children. However, for Utsav Japan, it was not his first choice. He initially planned to migrate to another country, but after his visa was rejected, he decided to apply to Japan. When asked what motivated him to come to Japan, he shared the following narrative:

My parents wanted to send me to `Ramro Desh` (lit. "a good country," often referring to the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, the UK, and other European countries). I first applied to Spain, but my visa was rejected.

For Utsav, educational mobility is not merely an individual endeavor but a collective family strategy for socioeconomic upliftment, which is also regarded as a marker of family prestige (Klaunig et al., 2024). His parents' aspiration to send him to a *Ramro Desh* (i.e., 'good country') reflects the crucial role parents play in shaping their children's mobility decisions. Utsav's parents' preference for Anglophone destinations for their son's migration highlights how parents decide on their children's migration destination. When asked about his motivation for migrating to Japan, he mentioned that it was part of his family's plan. Initially, his parents had planned to send him to Spain, which they considered a *Ramro Desh*. However, after his visa was unsuccessful, Japan became an alternative destination.

I paid thirty thousand Nepali rupees for documentation and a language class. I invested a total of 13 lakh Nepali rupees (approximately 9,400 USD) to come to Japan.

Japan has become an increasingly popular option for many Nepali youth, particularly those unable to access traditional Western educational destinations (Shrestha, 2023). This trend has been further reinforced by the rapidly growing number of educational consultancies in Nepal that specifically target diverse student populations. Utsav's parents made a substantial financial investment in his migration to Japan with the hope that it would contribute to uplifting the family's socioeconomic status. The total amount Utsav spent, approximately 9,400 USD on his migration to Japan, indicates a substantial financial burden for Nepal's lower-middle-class families, many of whom rely on loans to cover the costs.

In addition, as migration has become a cultural norm in Nepali society, sending children abroad is regarded as a matter of family pride, symbolizing "progress, modernity, and cosmopolitanism" (Valentin, 2023, p. 198) and serving as a means of elevating social status in contrast to 'reproducing social status' (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012; Yang, 2018), as discussed in literature. In Utsav's case, education migration is essentially a family project planned and invested in by his parents and linked mainly to their hopes and aspirations of upward social mobility. Raman's account also highlights the important role of family expectations and friends' networks in shaping mobility decisions.

My parents often asked me to try to migrate to the foreign country. I also thought that I had to do something for them. As my friends were also interested in coming to Japan, we decided to join the language classes.

As mobility is deeply embedded in familial hopes and aspirations for improving socioeconomic status, the participants shared that they sometimes feel pressured due to their multiple transnational responsibilities (King & Raghuram, 2013). As many Nepali students come from low-resourced socioeconomic backgrounds and rely on loans to finance their mobility to Japan, repaying these loans in Nepal while managing tuition fees for their schools in Japan presents a significant economic challenge, often leading to overwork and night shift work, and negatively impacting their performance in school. However, Kamal, the youngest participant in this study from Kathmandu, has a different story. Initially drawn to Japan through his interest in anime, he reported having fewer family obligations than the others. Nevertheless, he expressed pride in being able to send part of his earnings from part-time work to his mother.

I chose Japan over other destinations because I was greatly influenced by anime, and my parents supported my decision. Although I had been considering Japan since completing high school, I only applied after meeting a consultancy owner at my father's office, who assisted me with the entire process.

Since I started part-time work, I have regularly sent money to my mother, which gives me a sense of pride and fulfillment.

Educational Agents-Mediated Mobility

Even though multiple actors and social networks influence Nepali students' mobility decisions, commercial educational brokers appear to be at the center of their trajectory, facilitating complex mobility processes, from initial decision-making to the logistical arrangements required for studying abroad. Nepali students' vague dreams of going abroad tend to become a concrete plan after their encounter with what they repeatedly refer to as 'educational consultancies' that are rapidly mushrooming in almost all cities in Nepal (Kharel, 2022). They provide them with hope and confidence to achieve their dream of living in Japan, guaranteeing the Certificate of Eligibility (COE) and offering part-time work opportunities. All the students I spoke to rely solely on educational agents to navigate their mobility journey from school selection to documentation to flight and accommodation arrangements. The interview data revealed that complete dependency and trust in educational agents in Nepal often expose students to risks, including exorbitant service charges, false promises about opportunities in Japan, and inadequate preparation and counseling.

Rohit shared that his encounter with a school friend running an educational consultancy marked a turning point in his decision. This personal network played an influential role in persuading him to consider Japan a destination. The assurance that his friend would do all the documentation work and that no fee was needed before receiving the COE made the prospect seem low-risk, leading Rohit to agree to the process reluctantly. After a few months, his friend informed him that his school had sent the COE. However, Rohit was not optimistic about coming to Japan, as he was not mentally and financially well prepared. However, his family and relatives pressured him and regretfully shared that he reluctantly decided to come to Japan without attending Japanese-language classes. He shared his story:

When I went home for Dashain (the Nepali festival), I met a school friend, and he shared with me the idea of moving to Japan, as he had a consultancy. At first, I was not interested. My friend only asked for my academic documents and promised to prepare the other documents himself. As I was not required to pay any fees before the COE, I decided to give it a try. I did not have a passport either; he helped with that and other documentation.

As highlighted in Rohit's and Utsav's excerpt, educational agents strategically capitalize on personal relations and networks to persuade potential students (Beech, 2014), often reducing perceived barriers, for example, by offering logistic support such as preparing documentation and discounting or exempting initial fees.

My distant relative brother has a consultancy in Kathmandu; I joined the Japanese language class there. However, I could not attend class regularly because of the COVID-19 lockdowns (Utsav)

The prospect of having no investment risk before the COE is confirmed presents educational mobility to Japan as a low-risk opportunity, which has attracted many youths to pursue this pathway. Although students are initially attracted by the promise of reliable and reasonable counseling services, agents charge exorbitant service fees once the COE is obtained. Rohit noted that his friend had tricked him: "I paid 250,000 Nepali rupees (approximately 1,800 USD) as an agent fee; later, I knew it was 100,000 (approximately 720 USD) more than what my other friends had paid." This supports the finding of a previous study by Rust (2023) that educational agents in South Asia construct a false push-pull narrative through their websites to influence students' decisions.

Rohit's narrative reveals that their profit-driven motives and sometimes undesired and unethical practices expose them to significant risks and vulnerabilities. For example, despite the Japanese Immigration Bureau's minimum requirement of 150 hours of Japanese language study to be eligible for application to the COE (Immigration Services Agency, n.d.), Rohit did not attend a single Japanese language class in Nepal because his agent prepared a fake Japanese language course completion certificate for him. Rohit regretfully shares that due to his limited Japanese language proficiency, he was compelled to leave his part-time job and struggled to keep pace with his classmates.

These student accounts reveal that the false earning narrative spread by educational consultancies in Nepal has contributed significantly to the recent surge in Nepali international students in Japan, who are motivated more by the earning prospects promoted by profit-making education agents in Nepal than by genuine educational pursuits. Indeed, the language-based Nepali migrants present an excellent case that blurs the line between education migration and labor migration, leading to a debate on whether this phenomenon represents 'migration for education' or 'education for migration'.

Between Uncertainty and Optimism

Although students expressed their aspiration to study in Japan in the hope of securing a better future, their narratives revealed that they have encountered multiple forms of precarity and have become entangled in cycles of exploitation and vulnerability. This is mainly due to the marginal institutional positionality of Japanese language schools and the commercial focus of the actors involved, who facilitate mobility and operate as semi-formal infrastructures of precarity (Sato et al., 2020; Shrestha, 2023). During conversations, the students reported that they found a significant gap between their expectations about language schools and their actual experiences.

Participants from a language school, which relies heavily on Nepali students, expressed dissatisfaction with both their educational agent and the language school regarding false information, exorbitant service charges, issues with visa duration, and accommodation facilities. Many shared that they were misled about the location of their language schools. Since the students were told that their language school was in Nagoya, they prepared accordingly. However, they ended up landing at different locations. This was a common strategy adopted by educational agents in Nepal while channeling students to a particular city. The limited knowledge about the school and its location also reflects the lack of sufficient preparation on the student's part. In addition, despite their two-year language course, they said that they received a six-month visa initially, which further intensified their anxiety.

All students in our school should use the school's hostel. Before, four of us used to share a room with two beds. It was so old and dirty that there were mosquitoes all around. Now, we have moved to a new location. It is better than the earlier one, but fifty-two of us have to share a single kitchen, and the room is not worth the amount we pay. (Rohit)

Rohit's experience with substandard accommodation facilities shows how profit-driven language schools' financial gain over students' education and welfare contributes to their precarity. Sato et al. (2020) noted that the deregulation of Japanese language schools has led to the exploitation of international students, as these schools are not classified as academic institutions and therefore do not qualify for public funding or receive adequate government attention, creating a space for malfunction.

I have mixed feelings. Sometimes, because of part-time work, weekly test pressure in school, weather differences, and when I feel unhealthy, I feel it would be better to enjoy my little resources in Nepal. Also, I feel anxious and bad when I miss my family and friends in Nepal and have issues with friends here. But I feel optimistic and proud when I realize I must struggle for my future.

Similarly, Reena's emotional experience, from feeling proud of her resilience to despair over financial strain and isolation, reflects the emotional toll of navigating an uncertain future. Her struggle to repay loans while under pressure to save for vocational school tuition fees highlights the economic precarity that most low-resourced Nepali students in Japan experience. Despite their overwhelming challenges, their determination to "struggle for the future" reveals how they view their adversaries as temporary phenomena in their journey.

I took out a loan to pay my school fees, but I am struggling to pay it back on time. At the same time, I need to save tuition fees for my senmon gakkō (vocational school).

Discussion

The mobility accounts of Nepali students reflect that their mobility decision to come to Japan is primarily driven by their aspiration for a better future. It involves and is influenced by multiple factors. Unlike a previous study that indicated academic and career-driven motivations of international students in national universities in Japan (Huang & Chen, 2022), this study explores how Nepali students' mobility decisions are shaped by intertwined social, economic, and gendered factors, revealing motivations grounded in structural precarity and aspirations for socioeconomic transformation influenced by educational agents and social networks.

The results demonstrate that the motivation behind the educational mobility of Nepali students is grounded in desperation over growing unemployment and a desire to embrace a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Educational migration, essentially a family project and perceived pathway to upward socioeconomic mobility, is closely tied to the familial expectations of financial upliftment. The development of migration infrastructure, particularly the role of education consultancies, which have emerged as crucial to promoting mobility, has a considerable impact on accomplishing the mobility dream. However, the profit-driven motive of educational consultancies has often resulted in misinformation, financial exploitation, and inadequate preparation and counseling, with the projection of educational mobility as another form of labor mobility. On the other hand, the students' narratives indicated a strong sense of hope and resilience in the face of tremendous challenges. They demonstrated their ability to acquire and exercise agency while negotiating systemic limitations.

The data analysis revealed a noticeable lack of discussion regarding education and academic development among the participants. In other words, part-time employment appears to be at the center of their concern, as they need to fund their tuition fees, cover living expenses, and repay the

debts incurred to come to Japan. This suggests that students perceive educational mobility as another form of labor migration due to the consultancy-based narrative instilled in them, which focuses solely on the earning aspect of mobility before coming to Japan. Students are often presented with a rosy picture of earning enough through part-time work. However, disentangling them from this narrative is challenging, as their substantial financial investment in educational migration necessitates them to prioritize work over education. In addition, the low credential value of the institutions they attend compels them to shift their attention to an economic focus. Students prioritize immediate economic gains, knowing that their qualifications will not be translated into significant cultural or financial capital upon returning to Nepal.

Although this new educational mobility pathway, rooted in neoliberal market ideologies, has contributed to the democratization of ISM, this study demonstrates that low-resource Nepali students undertaking non-academic language courses in Japan experience multiple challenges and uncertainties. This study calls for a shift in the stereotypical portrayal of international students as subjects of economic profit to enhance their learning and overall migration experience. This study emphasizes the need for well-being perspective research and policy that recognizes the complexities and agency associated with the educational mobility of less-privileged students. This study, therefore, has significant research and policy implications. First, it suggests the need for alternative research perspectives to examine marginal educational mobility that contributes to international students' meaningful engagement in the host country, highlighting unexplored issues for further research. Second, it provides policymakers with insights into improving institutional oversight in Japanese language schools. Third, it emphasizes the need for an institutional support system, such as language assistance, career counseling, and mental health services, to address the challenges faced by Nepali and other marginalized international students.

While this study provides critical insights into the motivations and experiences of Nepali students in Japan, it has a few limitations. First, the small sample size and the concentration of participants only in Japanese language schools in a small city within the Hokuriku region restrict the generalization of the findings. Second, the study's narrow focus on the initial phases of mobility motivations and early challenges leaves gaps in understanding post-study trajectories, including how students transition into Japan's labor market and navigate workplace challenges, or reconcile their outcomes with their original aspirations for socioeconomic upliftment. These gaps highlight the need for multi-site and longitudinal research to understand how interpersonal, institutional, and structural factors influence students' migration experience and underexplored dimensions, such as in-classroom experiences, gendered dimensions, and the everyday negotiations of identity and belonging. A more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and limitations inherent in Nepal-Japan educational mobility would result from addressing these limitations.

Conclusion

This article draws on transnationalism to explore the multifaceted factors influencing the educational mobility trajectory of less-privileged Nepali students undertaking Japanese language education in Japan. The study demonstrates that the aspiration for socioeconomic mobility through better education and employment primarily drives the recent flow of Nepali students into Japanese language schools. This indicates the crucial role of the family, educational agents, and social networks in shaping their mobility decisions. The students' narratives revealed that the commercial nexus between education consultancies in Nepal and Japanese language schools in Japan pushes them into cycles of vulnerability. Their transnational obligations and responsibilities further exacerbated these precarities.

The study suggests an emerging trend of non-elite student mobility for language courses in non-traditional destinations facilitated by the educational markets. This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it distinguishes the Japanese language school students from those in universities or other academic institutions to avoid the risk of overgeneralization. It provides a

more nuanced understanding of their distinct experiences. Second, it points out the limitations of the conventional push-pull model in explaining the decision-making processes of low-resourced student populations; instead, it adopts a transnational framework to capture the complexity of their motivations. Third, it emphasizes the importance of student well-being for meaningful engagement in the host society and calls for a more humanistic approach to research and policymaking, one that recognizes international students' capacity for resilience and transformation. Finally, this study identifies the need for further research into the unexplored terrain of language-based educational mobility to deepen the understanding of this growing phenomenon.

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