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Educational Policy Contraction and International Student Mobility: Nepali Graduates and Prospective Students Respond to Changes in Australia

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ABSTRACT: *We examine the effects of educational downgrades on early-career Nepali graduates navigating post-study life and prospective students to Australia. This research uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, with both qualitative and quantitative data. This research has employed a descriptive, exploratory research design. The findings reveal that three dominant factors play crucial roles in selecting alternative destinations for international study. The study concludes that Australian educational downsizing markedly reshapes aspirations and expected returns to education due to increasing uncertainty, whereas Nepalese students are redirected to alternative destinations, underscoring the need for student-friendly policies for destinations and a stronger*

domestic education system. Therefore, this research focuses on the Nepalese case, linking Australian higher-education downsizing to academic disruption and career uncertainty among international students.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education worldwide is undergoing an exponential transformation driven by rapid technological advancements, globalization, demographic shifts, emigration, and educational policy reforms (Marszowski et al., 2020). UNESCO (2023) reported that global demand for higher education has surged in recent years, with enrollment doubling since 2000, especially in Asia and Africa. The fundamental reasons behind the exponential growth in global student mobility are digital transformation and online education, the global reputation of private educational institutions, the employability of skill-based education, and a climate-conscious education system (DAAD, 2023). In line with this, higher education in Australia, Canada, the USA, the UK, and some European countries thrives due to academic reputation, migration incentives, affordability, travel convenience, and strong governance (Glass & Cruz, 2023). Van der Zwaan (2017) opines that universities in 2040 will survive only through radical reinvention that establishes a shift from isolation to integration, from disciplinary to multidisciplinary, and from uniformity to diversity and other collaborative dialog. Conclusively, these are all the massifications of global higher education widely popularized in Western countries (Small et al., 2021).

Unlike many other countries worldwide, Australia has long been a prime destination for international students because of its high-quality education, cultural diversity, and favorable poststudy work policies. As a result, Australia represents one of the most preferred educational destinations for Nepal, with more than 50,000 Nepali students enrolled in 2022 alone (Department of Education, 2023). However, recent structural downsizing within Australian universities has challenged this appeal. Khadka (2024) reported that recent policy changes, such as reduced permitted work hours, higher language proficiency requirements, increased financial evidence, along with restrictions on reapplying for a student visa after a temporary graduate visa, and tighter course-level changes, along with

the increasing assessment level, limited access to Australian higher education for prospective students from Nepal. Similarly, staff redundancies, course elimination, and the narrowing of student services have reshaped the learning environment, impacting not only enrolled students but also prospective applicants (Bhattarai, 2025). Baral et al. (2024) reported that the key motivational factors influencing Nepali students to pursue foreign degrees reveal that broader career opportunities are significant drivers, whereas other commonly assumed factors are not strongly associated. This trend in Nepal's higher education system can be addressed by adopting a more holistic, career-centric approach that helps retain qualified manpower and supports national development. As a result of declining public funding, decreased revenue from international students, and frequent structural policy fluctuations, universities in Australia face a wide range of inconsistencies and losses. Such challenges emphasize the vulnerabilities and urgency of sustainable funding strategies and policy reforms in the sector (Universities Australia, 2024). Persistent outflow of efficient manpower leads to decreased farm productivity and weakened small enterprises and other community-based sectors. Additionally, the deficiency of qualified professionals further slows economic growth and community development practices (Singh, 2025).

Currently, higher education in Australia has experienced remarkable downsizing in terms of funding cuts, staff reductions, limited courses, and the shutdown of regional campuses. Such downsizing in the Australian education system, further intensified by COVID-19 and the subsequent economic shift, has raised significant concern about the impact on international students' mobility, especially those from the Global South, including Nepal. Even the restructuring of universities aimed at ensuring financial sustainability may unknowingly weaken the long-standing reputation of Australian universities as the dominant destinations of high-quality education (Marginson, 2022). The contractionary policy measures taken by the Australian higher education authority, however, are prone to a decline in the availability and diversity of programs, the downsizing of the student support ecosystem, and the absence of qualified academic staff who mainly facilitate the mentoring and mediation of international students (Guthrie et al., 2023). These elements can influence the educational achievement and aggregate experiences of international learners, thereby discouraging student mobility to Australia. Despite these facts, empirical research that examines the effects of structural and policy change on the mobility of students and the lived experiences of international students is limited. Since many policy papers explore fiscal efficiency and institutional freedom, a limited number of studies have examined specific implications, particularly for those who originated from developing countries with insufficient alternatives for quality education abroad (Universities Australia, 2023). Empirical research in this discipline remains critical to vitalizing the reshaping strength of educational downsizing to academic landscapes along with patterns of international education and sociocultural integration (Bozkurt et al., 2022).

Norton & Cherastidtham (2020) argued that educational downsizing is a strategic measure that supports coping with global economic pressures and digitization, thereby increasing institutional strength and innovative outcomes through online learning and targeted academic offerings. As blended learning and global education models grow rapidly, physical mobility may become less important. However, students from other countries often value lived engagement, official campus support systems, and cultural intersections, which are almost impossible to replicate on digital platforms (Tran, 2022). Therefore, the long-term viability of such a shift remains questionable without deeper insights into student preferences and outcomes.

A critical gap has been identified in the scholarly literature regarding the effects of educational downgrades in Australia on global student mobility, academic outcomes, and multicultural integration. Similarly, there is a lack of long-term career analysis and of attention to the vulnerabilities faced by migrant students during transition, especially from the perspective of early-career graduates. However, the literature appears inadequate to address the declining levels of trust and expectations in Australian education and migration policies for prospective students, which increasingly influence the selection of potential destinations and educational investment. These education and migration dynamics necessitate empirical research that explores these issues from the perspectives of students from the Global South, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, to reinforce reforms in migration and institutional policy. This type of research would significantly contribute to recent academic discourse along with guidance for equitable and sustainable global education policies. Therefore, this research examines the effects of changes in the education system on early-career Nepali graduates navigating post-study life and prospective students in Australia for future study. This paper further analyzes the multidimensional effects on educational engagement, job opportunities, and public aspirations at the individual and national levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global scenario of student mobility

Since the inception of international education migration in the early 20th century, it has evolved into a worldwide industry shaped by systems, players, and technologies. Commercial brokers, as socially and technologically embedded intermediaries, have attracted greater attention by connecting students' aspirations with policies and global systems during the post-COVID period (Luk & Yeoh, 2023). As a result of geopolitical tensions, degree saturation, and pandemic disruption, mobility patterns shift from east-to-west dominance to a multidirectional pattern, especially east-to-east flows. This requires universities to improve regional connections and promote inclusion (Cheng, 2021). However, Woldegiorgis (2024) noted that neoliberalism reinforces global academic hierarchies, marginalizing regions such as Africa. Dagar (2021) argued that students' academic mobility is influenced by globalization, which serves as an

instrument of global change. According to Allen and Bista (2022), foreign students are increasingly seen as a threat to national security in the United States under the Trump administration, which could reduce student inflows and affect international visa policies. By reviewing the Erasmus program in Europe, Breznik et al. (2024) found that the quality of services provided to moving students remains insufficient and that stronger institutional regulations are needed. Moreover, Kaur and Mehra (2025), who analyzed student outflow from Punjab, India, to Canada, reported that student migration is significantly influenced by the policies of the host country and stakeholders' participation.

Varghese (2009) criticized the market-centered perspective of higher education from a governance perspective, pointing out that even if such a system increases access, it remains vulnerable to a significant decline in economic, business, and other activities and needs more robust state mechanisms to promote equity. According to Astley (2024), students face many difficulties in their academic and social integration, underscoring the need for stronger institutional support. Similarly, Kaini (2024), focusing on the Nepalese case, emphasizes brain drain as a serious issue, noting that students departing for better prospects leads to instability and an antiquated social system. To check this, market-driven education, sustainable employment, and better governance can reverse the outflow in origin. Timsina (2025) challenges the idea of a homogeneous student experience and advocates for inclusive policies that address the economic, social, and cultural barriers faced by international students. Similarly, Tamang and Shrestha (2021) report that Nepali students pursue international education mainly for financial and career advancement, highlighting the need for policies that align with their aspirations. However, the selection of destinations for college is largely shaped by educational agents who assist in preparing the necessary documents (Bista, 2017).

Overall, the literature indicates that Australian educational downsizing represents a structural reconfiguration of the global education–migration regime rather than a temporary policy adjustment, with disproportionate effects for early-career graduates and prospective students from Nepal. Recent declines are especially a result of narrowing post-study opportunities, intensifying compliance, and declining institutional support, and many different tightening formalities are reshaping students' aspirations, trust, and destination choices. Student migration is therefore influenced by intrinsic as well as instrumental factors that motivate them to select suitable destinations (Nhi, 2025). These dynamics need to be examined to determine the migration-specific and process-oriented lenses, so that appropriate policy guidelines for educational access, early career transition, and mobility decisions of international students can be established.

Theoretical lens of student outmigration

Migration is not just an economic or spatial variable that moves people from one place to another. Rather, it consists of multiple factors associated with the place of origin and destination that shape the overall structure and size of

migration. This perspective is aligned with the *push–pull theory of migration*, which was first proposed by Everett Lee in 1966. Lee's theory explains migration decisions as a result of factors that push individuals away from their place of origin and pull them toward a destination. According to Lee (1966), every place has both benefits and drawbacks. While the negative aspects often push individuals away, the positive aspects either encourage them to stay or draw new people from outside (Faridi, 2018). In the case of Nepal, the idea of Lee's theory in terms of income and opportunity differentials, as well as other various factors, applies to Nepalese graduates in Australia, and other potential students wishing to study there, even if educational policies fluctuate frequently. Saraswati et al. (2025) reported that economic push factors and the belief in the prospect of greater opportunities in urban areas influence rural youth's migration decisions, leading most students to choose permanent rather than cyclical migration.

While push factors such as limited work opportunities locally, unequal access to health services, and other facilities drive students from Nepal to developed countries such as Australia, the pull factors include better healthcare and other resources in urban areas, with a focus on persistent service inequalities that are explicitly seen despite the federal restructuring of the country (Rai, 2024). Theoretically, these push factors include various analytical themes, such as uncertainty caused by policy changes, decreased post-study opportunities, strict visa rules, and induced assessment levels, along with financial inconsistencies, whereas the basic inputs for survey questions and interview themes are perceived educational stability in alternative destinations, better job prospects, and renewed opportunities in Nepal. This paradigm describes how downsizing in the Australian education system affects migration decisions, employment insecurity, and expected returns on human capital. This is how the theory truly contextualizes the current research phenomenon.

Education in Australia

Higher education in Australia has evolved from a predominantly state-funded public sector to the Oxbridge model and, more recently, to a market-oriented and internationally competitive sector. Despite institutional reform, academia has remained influenced by contemporary elites and imperial as well as practical norms that privilege dominant groups while marginalizing others. These conflicting political and ideological frameworks have affected overall knowledge creation, scholarly engagement, and the long-lasting effects of the colonial system in higher education (Phillips, 2024). Nevertheless, it is believed that the Australian higher education system is rapidly approaching the pinnacle of globalization. Additionally, there is a persistent focus on investment in Australian education due to the misalignment between labor-market demand and the state of higher education in developing nations (Lin & Guo, 2025). More details, with explicit insights, are being reviewed further for clarification in the present situation.

Workforce restructuring

The higher education system in Australia is distinguished by its strategic support of government, alignment with global standards, and dedication to workforce preparedness and lifelong learning. Through these progressive trends, the study offers critical insights for improving the professional skills of future experts and for formulating more effective, globally aligned educational policies in various national contexts (Baranovska & Zhuravel, 2022). During the period from 1989 to 2021, the Australian university workforce experienced remarkable structural change as a result of policy reforms, an increase in international students, and broader economic reforms. These transformations in higher education reflect the long-term and usually unforeseen consequences of public policy change. To address the growing disparity and ensure a sustainable academic environment, there is a desperate need for broader interventions and a more equitable workforce, driven by increased casualization, gender disparities, and executive expansion (Croucher, 2023).

COVID-19 impact

There has been a significant decrease in Australian higher education as a result of COVID-19, which has also influenced pedagogical and methodological changes in global education. Many universities have adopted cost-cutting measures such as staff reductions and organizational restructuring, even though data indicate that such measures are disproportionate globally (Doidge & Doyle, 2020). Institutional sustainability and the ability to meet future worker demand raise serious concerns worldwide. The pandemic revealed serious issues in the Australian higher education system, including its reliance on funding from overseas student revenue (Marginson, 2021; Owen et al., 2022). By applying an institutionalized framework to understand the significant influences of national legal institutions and economic conditions on adoption across various sectors, an investigation was conducted on downsizing as a strategic but disruptive human resource practice. It has been concluded that the downsizing decisions made by Australian higher education organizations are dynamic and context specific and are impacted over time by changing institutional forces, where COVID-19 was considered a primary cause of structural instability (Piyanontalee et al., 2024).

Marketization and financialization of the Australian education system

Mass job losses and course cuts during the pandemic highlight the unsustainable nature of the neoliberal restructuring of educational sectors oriented toward student-centric to resource-centric outcomes. It demands a radical rethinking of the public university's mission, urging a return to values that prioritize societal contribution and national development over commodification and profit-driven logic (Parket et al. 2023). Downsizing, characterized by large-scale staff cuts and budget compressions, disproportionately affected international cohorts (Guthrie et al., 2022). Prior research emphasizes the emotional, academic,

and financial toll on students from low- and middle-income countries (Rizvi, 2021). However, evidence on how such restructuring affects early career graduates or deters future aspirants from countries such as Nepal is limited. Pokhrel et al. (2024) introduced brain drain as a consequence of globalization, which drives Nepalese students abroad to pursue higher education. Despite the prospects of a positive outcome, educational outmigration ultimately hinders a nation's progress. To overcome this hindrance, the relevant authorities should take proactive steps to enhance local professional and educational infrastructure, implement sustainable development plans, and connect with the Nepalese diaspora to articulate the nation's progress toward realizing the national goal of "Prosperous Nepal and Happy Nepali".

Many studies have emphasized the increasing trend of students moving outside Nepal and its wider implications. The growing number of Nepalese students studying overseas for undergraduate degrees is strongly influenced by the role played by educational consultancies. These organizations now play a significant role in determining goal and destination selection decisions as a result of the liberalization of the economy and globalized settings. Likewise, increasing reliance on consultancies requires a critical analysis of the methods, goals, and broader effects on youth development and the higher education system in Nepal. Because of weakening socioeconomic and institutional conditions and the loss of skilled human capital, student migration from Nepal continues to increase, along with persistent developmental challenges (Dahal, 2023). To counter these issues, Nepal must carefully implement short-term policies to identify returning talent and leverage diaspora networks, while long-term plans should focus on structural reform of unstable political systems and strategic investment in high-potential industries, such as tourism, agroforestry, and hydropower. Such initiatives seem crucial for overcoming the existing losses caused by outmigration into sustainable national development (Chirangivi, 2015).

In support of this perspective, Kaini (2024) emphasizes the issue of brain drain as a major effect of foreign student migration. Furthermore, he added that structural issues, such as poor administration, a lack of local opportunities, and an outdated educational system, are driving the mass exodus of talented youth seeking better education and working overseas. To solve such issues, Kaini further suggested reforming the domestic higher education system, establishing long-term opportunities, and enhancing governance to ensure return migration and national reintegration. Taken together, these studies highlight the complex interplay among Nepalese youth mobility, governance issues, educational goals, and the effects of globalization.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this research, a predominantly quantitative mixed-methods design in which in-depth interviews were conducted with early-career Nepali graduates in Australia and a few carefully selected key informants who were professional education counsellors in Nepal served as primary data, supported by a randomly selected quantitative survey (Stake, 2005). Qualitative information was obtained through

in-depth semistructured online interviews with 20 early-career Nepalese who graduated from 2019 to 2024. In addition, they are now working in different states of Australia, namely Sydney, New South Wales, and Melbourne. The representative students are 13 male and 7 female graduates, along with five educational counsellors, selected for their expertise, working in different educational consultancies in Nepal, serving as key informants in this research. As qualitative data dominate, greater analytical weight is given to qualitative data, where quantitative data play a supplementary role and data integration is limited to the interpretation stage only. Interview guides were used to explore themes such as institutional downsizing, financial barriers and visa challenges, employment uncertainty, and perspectives on future migration to the home country. Thematic analysis and narrative analysis techniques have been used for qualitative information. Similarly, quantitative data were obtained from an online survey of 50 prospective students willing to go abroad as primary information, whereas published reports and official documents from national and global organizations, along with scholarly publications, were taken as secondary sources of data. As data collection tools, survey questionnaires were developed in Google Forms for quantitative data, capturing variables such as the prospects of Australian education, career growth, university choice, course options, academic support, and future migration intent.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey results. While the data set is limited in scope and consists of only 20 participants, the findings offer valuable exploratory insights into the lived experiences and decision-making processes of early-career Nepali graduates in Australia and prospective students in Nepal. This sample size is supposed to be saturated because of the similarity in outcome, and no new codes appeared across the three states from which participants were taken that were observed from concurrent transcription and theme monitoring. Because of the limited sample size selected from the nonrandom technique, the findings may not be representative of the rest of the cases. This sampling technique is suitable because deliberately selected participants can possess relevant experiences, valuable insight, and willingness to respond, which ultimately match the analytical focus of this study. Although this research primarily depends on qualitative data followed by descriptive survey data from prospective students who are interested in Australian education, this study uses a parallel lens to understand how the retrospective experiences of graduates intersect with the forward-looking aspirations of prospective students.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the information obtained from early-career graduates is classified and coded on the basis of themes such as visa challenges, employment uncertainty, and prospects for return migration. Similarly, analyses are performed to produce objective-based findings. To ensure the validity of the findings, members were checked by returning the theme summary to 4 selected graduates for clarification and confirmation, and the peer debriefing technique was implemented by meeting with a university expert on qualitative methods twice, in the initial and prefinal stages, to conclude the findings. The researchers were ethically aware and considered it as a fundamental basis to undertake this research. All participants

provided informed consent, and the collected data were anonymized, stored securely, rigorously adhered to scholarly research ethics, and used only for research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Lived experiences of early career graduates in Australia

Graduates reported substantial difficulty in securing poststudy employment because of reduced university career support and limited employer engagement. Reduced job prospects and the need for local experience were principal hurdles that early-career graduates frequently faced. Similarly, stricter visa rules and limited post-study work opportunities have been viewed as fundamental barriers for all early-career graduates.

Table 1: Thematic matrix composed of sample quotes with frequencies

Theme	Sample Quote	Frequency (n=20)
Institutional downsizing caused by	"Teacher shortages, poor enrollment in is education degrees, financial disparities, and so on."	17
Employment Barriers	"Hard to get jobs in Australia poststudy. This in turn affects the ability to get PR and settle long-term."	15
Visa Challenges	"It's hard to get a visa or engage in any profession according to qualifications."	13
Financial Hardship	"First, financial challenges as the fees are rising and hard to manage… depression due to family separation."	15
Emotional Stress/Mental Health	"Lots of emotional degradation due to socioeconomic factors: loneliness, anxiety, and depression."	13
Perspective on Future Migration	"Yes, these changes are pushing Nepali students toward alternative destinations like Canada and UK."	11
Adaptation to Policy Changes	"Students are clever to adopt most changes, focusing on higher education and PR-friendly courses."	13

Theme	Sample Quote	Frequency (n=20)
Top Concerns	"Visa uncertainties, limited poststudy work opportunities, rising living costs, and changing immigration."	17

Note: The frequency values in the table represent the repetitions/assertions of the participants.

Many experienced delayed work visa processing and increased competition in the Australian labor market. Some financial and emotional stresses, such as high living costs, pressure to repay debt, and isolation from friends, family, and previous institutional support, are common issues faced by most participants who responded to the inquiry.

The basic themes and related quotes are presented in Table 1. Even though recent student enrollment is not so strict, it was prevalent a few years ago. The top concerns of Nepali early-career graduates are high tuition, living costs, and visa fees. Similarly, limited part-time work options and a shortage of cost-effective rental housing were frequently mentioned by most of the participants. Frequent changes to visa and permanent resident rules created significant uncertainty for immigrant students. Furthermore, more than half of them realized potential health issues and argued for better alternative destinations to migrate to, such as Canada or the UK. However, none of them are showing any intention to return to their home country.

Structural/institutional causes

Among the participants in this research, the vast majority attributed downsizing in Australian higher education institutions to structural flaws such as a shortage of quality teachers, a decline in student enrollments, and inequalities in university funding. This reflects a strong fear that the quality and stability of academic programs are being undermined by institutional inconsistency, which deters overseas students. One of the Nepali graduates currently working in New South Wales shared the following:

I have observed that a lack of qualified instructors, especially for online and vocational training, is becoming increasingly common, particularly in rural Australia. A smaller budget or more individuals choosing cities could be the basic causes. Compared with others, certain professions are in high demand and are more easily employed, such as in nursing, engineering, and medical jobs.

The employment barriers marked by 15 participants as a significant obstacle are closely connected with the last argument. The chances of graduates obtaining permanent residency (PR) and long-term settlement are severely hampered by their inability to find employment in Australia that matches their academic

degrees. According to the participants, institutional downsizing seems to prevent access to both education and work, which they view as interconnected.

Furthermore, the visa issues preferred by 13 participants reflect the limitations of the options of Nepali students. The participants highlighted the challenges of securing visas and the lack of professional recognition of their credentials. Students' academic and professional travel is made more unstable by these concerns, exacerbating the structural hurdles that have already been established by downsizing and job difficulties.

Socioeconomic pressures

Among the 20 participants, 15 have experienced financial difficulties as a major issue. Because of increasing living costs and tuition fees, persistent burdens are felt as urgent issues that not only impair the capacity to continue their study but also fuel the emotional distress of the students. The hardship of being away from family is compounded with financial pressure, resulting in a cycle of stress that extends beyond the monetary sphere. Similarly, issues of mental health and emotional stress were reported as common experiences by more than half of the participants. Because of the combination of institutional uncertainty, regulatory constraints, and socioeconomic difficulties, participants felt loneliness, anxiety, and depression as a byproduct. This implies that the effects of downsizing go beyond structural constraints to have a significant negative impact on psychological health and overall quality of life while they are studying in Australia. One of the graduates opined that:

> *Nepali graduates like me feel language and cultural difficulties that create more complexities in passing the interview process; however, urban areas offer better career options but charge higher living expenses that might be out of the affordability of Nepali graduates.*

Student strategies & future outlook

The participants demonstrated agency and adaptability in negotiating the shifting terrain of Australian higher education despite these challenges. More than 50% of participants stated that the challenges they encounter are pushing them to consider other destinations, such as the UK or Canada, where migration and educational opportunities are more reliable. This finding indicates that if the existing situation continues, student flows may be redirected away from Australia. Similarly, 13 participants emphasized their ability to adapt to policy changes by carefully selecting programs and courses that align more closely with opportunities for permanent residency. Even though such modifications frequently involve additional financial and emotional sacrifices, this shows resilience and a proactive approach in response to institutional and legislative constraints. "In my experience, Nepalese graduates are still working at low wages; they cannot find academic jobs," one of the graduates claimed.

Finally, the top concerns (n=17) voiced by participants included visa uncertainties, restricted poststudy work opportunities, rising living costs, and

unpredictable immigration policies. Together, these issues represent the most urgent and immediate anxieties of Nepali students, capturing the cumulative impact of structural, socioeconomic, and policy-related challenges. One of the participants from Sydney mentioned that:

> *Early-career Nepali graduates in Australia face job insecurity, financial stress from high living costs, and emotional strain due to isolation, limited support, and uncertainty about their future in the shrinking education and job market.*

Common narratives of Nepalese consultants on educational downsizing

Educational counselors from well-established educational consultancies agreed on procedural hardships, such as visa delays, financial requirements, and changing migration rules, along with educational downsizing in terms of course cuts, staff layoffs, and a decline in support services in universities, typically familiarizing them with recent policies and strategic ways to reassure them how to maintain student interest in studying Australia. The representative view of one of the counselors from Kathmandu, Nepal, opined the following:

> *Australia remains a top choice for Nepali students because of its high-quality education and career opportunities, but recent downsizing and policy changes have led to uncertainty. Students still see it as a land of opportunity, yet they need careful guidance to make informed decisions about their academic and professional futures.*

Along with this specific viewpoint, some common narratives are as follows:
- Despite the educational downsizing outcome, Australia remains a top destination.
- Procedural hardship, such as visa complexities, GTE criteria, and strong financial documentation, is manageable with qualified expert guidance.
- Counselors have reported that the issue of downsizing is institution-specific and cannot be generalized to the entire sector, for which they often steer students toward stable courses with consistent market demand, such as health, IT, and other technical areas, focusing on regional universities.
- To address the fears of students, most of them present regional campuses, with less affected institutions having extensive poststudy work rights.
- Consultants often convince prospective students that policy fluctuation is global and not just an Australian issue. That is why Australia remains a stable, open, and forward-looking destination.

Prospective student concerns in Nepal

The survey results indicate growing skepticism among Nepali students regarding the return on investment in Australian education. Major concerns include course instability, high tuition fees, and a lack of clear poststudy pathways. General information and their motives to go abroad for higher education are explained in the following section.

Table 2: Academic preference and choice

Variable	Most Selected Options	Response percent
Field of Study	Nursing, IT, Commerce, Engineering Mixed	
Institution Type	Regional University	17 (34%),
	Private College	14 (28%)
	TAFE/VET & others	11(22%)
	Group of 8 Universities	8 (16%)
Degree Level Preferred	Bachelor & Diploma	36 (72%)
	Master's Degree	12 (24%)
Main Reason to Choose Australia (Multiple response)	Quality education	32 (64%)
	Global recognition	32 (64%)
	Poststudy work rights	18 (36%)
	PR prospect	14 (28%)

Note: Online survey, 2025

As shown in Table 2, nursing and IT are the most preferred fields among prospective students in Australia, followed by business and engineering. The majority of students planning to study abroad prefer regional universities. Bachelor's degrees and diplomas are highly preferred, indicating that students right after school prefer to pursue higher education abroad. It shows a remarkable decline in student enrollment in domestic colleges at the bachelor's level. However, the majority prefer to study abroad for quality education and global connectivity, followed by post-study opportunities and permanent migration.

Even after downsizing policies were implemented, more than two-thirds of prospective students still applied to Australia for further study, whereas nearly 88 percent considered alternative destinations. However, approximately 12.5 percent of them are reconsidering alternative destinations other than Australia. The USA is another dominant destination for which nearly half of the students intend to apply, followed by Canada and New Zealand, with the exception of Australia, for studying abroad. The survey results reveal that the farsightedness of educated young people gradually shifts toward more secure destinations with better opportunities, without considering physical, financial, or other migration-related future risks.

Table 3 presents the sociopolitical reflection on educational outmigration in the host country, along with measures to improve conditions and to assume responsibility for reducing the massive outflow of students. Even though they are willing to go outside for further study, more than 80 percent of the respondents argued that it is harmful from the national prosperity perspective. Such a condition can be handled through improving the quality of the local education system, linking the Nepalese diaspora for the sake of national prosperity, and maintaining

political stability throughout the country, for which the Government of Nepal is highly responsible, along with respective families having high expectations of abroad earnings and the youths themselves who are eager to leave the country.

Table 3: Sociopolitical reflection

Statement/Question	Leading Response(s)	Percent/Count
Is youth outmigration harmful to Nepal?	Yes	88%
Suggestions for improvement	Improve local education, diaspora links, and political stability	70%+
Responsible actors	Government	75%
	Families	45.8%
	Youths	33%

Source: Online survey, 2025

Discussion

This study demonstrates how the academic and socioeconomic experiences of Nepalese students are affected by structural reduction in Australian higher education. These results are consistent with the findings of Marginson (2022) and Guthrie et al. (2023), who argue that, notwithstanding its financial motivations, university restructuring weakens academic diversity and student support networks. These claims are supported by the opinions of Nepali graduates, who highlight how institutional weakness and policy instability undermine long-term settlement prospects and educational quality.

Graduates cited financial pressure as a major obstacle, consistent with Rizvi's (2021) argument that there are greater concerns about the unfair burden placed on students from low- and middle-income nations. In line with Astley (2024) and Timsina (2025), who noted that overseas students frequently experience anxiety, loneliness, and cultural obstacles and that increasing tuition fees, living expenses, and separation from family intensify emotional pressure. These difficulties imply that students' mental health and overall integration are cumulatively affected by economic restructuring in host nations.

Similarly, students show resilience by adopting flexible tactics, including selecting classes that would benefit their public relations and considering other options. This adaptability is in line with that of Cheng (2021), who noted that global uncertainties were causing mobility patterns to change from traditional flows to multidirectional routes. Likewise, the desire to study in Canada and the United Kingdom of Nepalese students further supports the argument of Kaur and Mehra (2025) that the institutional cooperation and policies of the host country play a crucial role in determining students' outflows. As a result, prospective students were forced to seek education elsewhere because of educational downsizing in Australia.

From the Nepalese perspective, the results support concerns about brain drain and the deterioration of local institutions expressed by Kaini (2024) and Pokhrel et al. (2024). This study emphasizes the urgent need for reforms in domestic higher education, sustainable employment creation, and greater diaspora links, as 88 percent of surveyed students in Nepal agree that young outmigration is detrimental to Nepal. These findings are consistent with the arguments made by Chirangivi (2015) and Dahal (2023). The participants' observations on educational consultancies support Dahal's findings and further illustrate how intermediaries influence migration choices in Nepal's liberalized education market.

Considering all the above, most of the data suggest that downsizing in Australia would help the country achieve its short-term financial objective, but could jeopardize its standing as a major center for quality education. More significantly, by encouraging ongoing migration without clearer return pathways, this phenomenon further intensifies developmental difficulties for sending countries such as Nepal. Nepalese students constitute approximately 8 percent of the total international student population and are among the top 5 source countries for Australia in 2023 and 2024. However, as an effect of policy changes such as increasing visa complexity, the extra cost burden not only reduces the number of temporary visas but also eventually aggravates net remittance inflow when the education costs are exceeded in Australia (Ramirez, 2025; Baral, 2025).

Overall, the rigorous insights into participants' perceptions, along with the diverse literature, revealed that Australia's educational downsizing has promoted a gradual reorientation of international students' preferences rather than a decline in mobility expectations among students in Nepal. Such views are part of a larger global trend in which restrictive immigration and education laws in one or a small number of destinations stratify people toward more stable and desirable locations elsewhere. Thus, these findings situate Australia's experiences in a global education market that is becoming more competitive and where political uncertainty is redistributing the flow of students among nations. These comparative observations highlight the dynamic and interrelated nature of contemporary student mobility systems, even though the analytical focus remains on Australia.

CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the prevailing effects of educational downsizing in Australia on Nepalese graduates and potential students planning to pursue higher education outside the country, addressing a significant gap in the literature that has largely ignored students' experiences in the country of origin. The results highlight that Australian contractionary policy clearly distorts the expected returns on investments in human capital, increases uncertainty, and reshapes migration and educational expectations. The competitive aspects of student mobility worldwide are highlighted by the fact that educational downsizing helps redirect flows of Nepalese students to countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States rather than decreasing international mobility. By

composing how unstable policy functions as a structural push factor influencing both realized and anticipatory action. This study follows a qualitative-dominant design that allows us to capture lived experiences that microlevel analysis often overlooks. Therefore, in Nepal, the findings highlight the importance of improved career counseling, regulation of educational intermediaries, and investment in domestic higher education and graduate employment pathways. In the case of Australia, the findings highlight the need for greater policy coherence and transparency to maintain international students' confidence.

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