



Drivers of overseas higher education aspirations among public university students in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The increasing trend of Bangladeshi students pursuing higher education abroad reflects changing educational aspirations and expanding global opportunities. The main objective of the research was to identify the motivational factors that affect Bangladeshi students' intentions to pursue higher education outside the country by focusing on the students studying in public universities across Bangladesh. The research was conducted among 200 students from four public universities in Bangladesh. To explain the factors influencing students' intentions, the Push-Pull Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, and other relevant theories, such as the Human Capital Theory and Social Exchange Theory, were employed in the study. The findings reveal that major push factors include dissatisfaction with the domestic education system, economic and political instability, and corruption. In contrast, key pull factors include the perceived quality of education abroad, better career opportunities, and greater personal safety. The findings also indicate that students' socioeconomic backgrounds, academic performance, and family influence play significant roles in shaping their intentions to study overseas. These findings have important implications for addressing brain drain and strengthening Bangladesh's higher education system to enhance its global competitiveness. The study therefore recommends coordinated efforts among policymakers, higher education institutions, and educational advisors to improve the quality of domestic higher education and to manage international student mobility more effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility has expanded substantially over the past few decades as globalization, technological development, and easier access to information have broadened students' awareness of educational opportunities beyond national borders. However, students from developing countries, the decision to pursue higher education abroad is shaped not only by the attractiveness of foreign universities but also by dissatisfaction with educational, economic, political, and employment conditions at home. Bangladesh represents an important context in which these two sets of forces coexist. Despite the growth of higher education in the country, many Bangladeshi students have come to

view studying abroad as a means of achieving improved academic performance, career success, safety, and a better standard of living. The available data show that the number of Bangladeshi students studying abroad rose from 24,112 in 2015 to 44,338 in 2021 (Salman & Howlader, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic also became an important turning point in international higher education. Travel restrictions, border closures, health risks, financial uncertainty, and the rapid shift to online learning disrupted student mobility and altered how prospective students assessed overseas study. At the same time, the pandemic increased attention to destination-country safety, institutional support, affordability, immigration possibilities, and long-term career security. Studies conducted during and after the

pandemic indicate that these concerns continue to influence international students' mobility decisions (Mok et al., 2024; Guan et al., 2023; Liu & Wu, 2025). Therefore, the post-COVID-19 context is relevant when examining contemporary Bangladeshi students' aspirations for higher education abroad.

The Push-Pull approach can be used to differentiate between unfavourable home-country conditions that force students to leave and desirable attributes that attract them to foreign countries. Most of the previous studies have highlighted push factors such as political instability, economic difficulties, inadequate research facilities, limited job opportunities, and poor-quality education at home. Some of the pull factors include high-quality education, career opportunities, institutional reputation, safety, financial aid, and higher standards of living (Aziz et al., 2024; He et al., 2026; Di Pietro & Perez-Encinas, 2025). In Bangladesh, expectations from family, socio-economic factors, academic performance, and social networks also shape educational choices. The desire to study abroad should be seen as a multidimensional decision rather than a preference for foreign education.

Much of the international student-mobility literature has been developed around established destination countries and international education markets, while comparatively limited empirical attention has been given to outbound mobility originating from Global South countries, particularly Bangladesh. Consequently, findings generated in other contexts may not fully explain how political instability, corruption, employment limitations, financial constraints, family influence, and dissatisfaction with domestic higher education interact in shaping Bangladeshi students' aspirations. Moreover, previous research tends to focus on single push or pull factors without considering their common impact and relative importance. In the post-COVID-19 era, the international higher education environment differs in its perceptions of safety, mobility, economic benefits, and the importance of foreign qualifications. The current research attempts to fill these gaps by investigating the motivations of students enrolled in Bangladeshi universities to study abroad, considering both push and pull factors. This research does not assume that studying abroad solely reflects a desire to take advantage of attractive

foreign education; rather, it seeks to assess the relationship between push factors, such as dissatisfaction with domestic education, and pull factors, including perceived advantages of studying abroad. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a more context-sensitive explanation of outbound student mobility from Bangladesh and to generate evidence relevant to higher-education quality, graduate opportunities, and the management of potential brain drain. Accordingly, the specific objectives are to identify the factors affecting students' decisions to study abroad; examine the push and pull factors motivating higher education abroad; determine whether motivation varies with academic performance; and assess the role of socio-economic factors, including financial support and background, in students' aspirations to study abroad.

Literature Review

Student mobility consistently shows that the decision to pursue higher education abroad is influenced by a combination of academic, economic, professional, social, and institutional considerations. Many studies have emphasized educational reputation and quality, scholarships, curriculum, career prospects, self-development, cultural diversity, family and peer influence, institutional reputation, and information availability as significant determinants of the destination choice (He et al., 2026; Nafari et al., 2017; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Such evidence shows that students choose destinations based on several factors rather than a singular motive. In most cases, such factors are discussed independently from each other and do not explain how students prioritize various pull and push factors when forming their intention to study abroad. Contextual factors are also revealed in the literature. Parental influence becomes a key factor in countries with a collectivist mentality, where parents may promote studying abroad not only due to future advantages but also because of concern for cost, the new environment and safety. Other researchers focus on institutional branding, service quality, cultural proximity and attractiveness of cultural difference (Clavel, 2015; Hasan, 2013; Min et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2014). These findings are not necessarily contradictory; rather, they suggest that the importance of particular factors depends on students'

social context, resources, and expectations. This makes direct generalization across countries problematic and reinforces the need to examine student mobility within the specific socio-economic and political environment in which decisions are made.

Hasan (2013) found institutional recognition, reference group effects, and information availability to be critical factors for Bangladeshi students choosing foreign universities. Similarly, Hossain (2022) highlighted educational costs, university facilities, and cultural compatibility. More broadly, the relevant literature has pointed to program availability, scholarships, academic quality, demographic differences, and marketing effects (Donkor et al., 2020; Mallick et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Nuseir & Refae, 2021). Moreover, recent studies in the post-pandemic era have found that international mobility has become more intertwined with questions of lifestyle, immigration, safety, and opportunity (Mok et al., 2024). Nevertheless, all these studies reveal the importance of structural factors in the home country and the attractiveness of destination countries, but have failed to provide an integrated understanding of the interplay between these two domains for Bangladeshi public university students. Accordingly, the research gap addressed by the present study extends beyond the simple absence of studies on Bangladesh. First, prior researches frequently examine individual push or pull determinants without assessing their combined and relative influence on students' intentions. Second, Bangladesh-specific evidence does not adequately integrate domestic educational dissatisfaction, economic and political instability, corruption, employment constraints, family and peer influence, and perceived quality-of-life concerns with destination-related attractions such as educational quality, research opportunities, career prospects, safety, tuition costs, and university ranking. Third, relatively little attention has been given to whether academic performance and socio-economic background differentiate students' motivations. Finally, the changing post-COVID-19 environment creates a need for updated evidence on how contemporary uncertainties affect outbound educational aspirations. By examining these

dimensions within a single empirical framework, this study moves beyond a descriptive listing of motivational factors and seeks to provide a context-sensitive explanation of the forces underlying Bangladeshi public-university students' intentions to pursue higher education abroad.

1. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

The current study was based on an integrative conceptual framework integrating a number of prominent theories. The basic framework adopted in this study is based on the Push-Pull Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), along with some additional concepts of Human Capital Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory. The basic element of this entire framework is the dependent variable, i.e., "Motivation to Study Abroad," which refers to the desire to pursue higher education abroad. Students' motivation to seek higher education abroad is influenced by two broad categories of independent variables: push and pull factors, which function as pressures deterring students from their home country or as attractions to more favorable international learning environments. Based on the Push-Pull Theory, push factors are unfavorable circumstances in the home country that prompt students to seek alternatives outside it. In the context of Bangladesh, this theory provides a useful foundation for categorizing the factors that influence students' decisions to pursue higher education abroad into two main groups. Push factors encourage students to leave their home country, such as dissatisfaction with the domestic education system, political instability, economic challenges, and corruption, while pull factors attract them to foreign countries through higher-quality education, better career opportunities, improved lifestyles, greater safety, and lower tuition costs. These variables are also applicable to the Human Capital and Social Exchange theories, as students seek long-term gains in terms of income, career, and personal development, rather than the costs associated with studying abroad. Besides clarifying the direct impact of various types of push and pull factors, the framework also provides a theoretical basis for understanding how

psychological, economic, and social dynamics influence the motivation of Bangladeshi students, thereby providing the basis for the empirical investigation in this study.

Hypothesis H1: Push factors significantly influence Bangladeshi students' motivation to pursue higher education abroad.

Hypothesis H2: Pull factors significantly influence Bangladeshi students' motivation to pursue higher education abroad.

2. Analytical Framework



Figure 1. Analytical framework of factors influencing Bangladeshi students' intentions to study abroad
(Source: Developed by the author, 2026)

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study used a quantitative research design to examine the factors influencing Bangladeshi university students' motivation to pursue higher education abroad. The reason behind using quantitative research is that it is capable of generating results that can be quantified and generalized with a large sample. The study collected empirical data to validate or contradict theoretical assumptions, especially with respect to internal (push) and external (pull) motivational influences as they interact with behavioral intentions. The study has used survey questions based on a Likert scale to determine the extent to which various push and pull factors influence on studying abroad.

Survey instrument

The study used a structured questionnaire to collect demographic and motivational information. The instrument included closed-ended Likert-scale items measuring key push and pull factors, together with open-ended items that allowed respondents to provide additional comments on their personal motivations. The principal constructs covered dissatisfaction with the domestic education system,

career aspirations, quality-of-life expectations, family and peer influence, and socio-economic background.

Sampling procedure

The target population consisted of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in selected public universities in Bangladesh. Purposive sampling was used because the study specifically required respondents who had an interest in, or were considering, higher education abroad. The final sample consisted of 200 students. As a scientific planning benchmark, Cochran's sample-size formula for a large population was considered: $n_0 = Z^2 p(1-p)/e^2$. Using a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), the conservative proportion $p = 0.50$, and a 10% precision level ($e = 0.10$) gives $n_0 \approx 96$. Therefore, the achieved sample of 200 exceeded this minimum planning benchmark. Because the final selection was purposive rather than probability-based, this calculation is used to justify the survey size and not to claim population-level statistical representativeness.

Data collection procedure

Primary data were collected through the structured questionnaire from eligible students who met the study's sampling criteria. The use of more than one questionnaire-distribution mode was intended to improve accessibility and participation

among students from different academic and socio-economic backgrounds. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. No secondary dataset was used in the empirical analysis.

Data analysis

After data collection, responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and the distribution of responses to the push- and pull-factor items. The results are presented through numbered tables and figures to support clear interpretation of the observed response patterns.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles throughout the research process. The participants were informed about the objectives of the study and were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the collection of non-personally identifiable data and the use of data coding. Ethical approval was obtained from the respective academic committee before data collection.

RESULTS

Demographic profile of respondents

The demographic profile of this study (Table 1) reveals that a considerable number of respondents (70%) were male. In academic distribution, the most common level of education for the respondents was 4th year students (34%), while Master's Students constituted (29%). As for the income distribution, the highest number of respondents fell into the category of earning between BDT 30,001 to 50,000 (39%), while 35% of respondents earned less than 30,000.

Motivation to study abroad

Respondents' preferred destinations for pursuing their education overseas are illustrated in Figure 2. The USA tops the list (13%), while other destination choices include Europe, Germany, Canada, Australia,

and the UK. Since the destination names mentioned overlap, including both countries and regions, Figure 2 should be understood as a description of the destination preferences indicated by the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic information of the Respondents (N=200)

General Information	Categories	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	140	70
	Female	60	30
Current academic year	1 st Year (Honors)	12	6
	2 nd Year (Honors)	38	19
	3 rd Year (Honors)	24	12
	4 th Year (Honors)	68	34
	Masters	58	29
Primary/basic income	≤30000	70	35
	30001-50000	78	39
	50001-70000	39	15
	70001-90000	14	07
	≥90001	08	04

Source: Adopted by author

Motivation for pursuing higher study abroad

The motivation of the participants to take up further studies abroad is illustrated in Figure 3. The highest percentage belongs to those who are "Very Motivated" (35%), then "Much Motivated" (28%), "Moderately Motivated" (18%), and "Slightly Motivated" (17%) while only 2% said that they were "Not Motivated."

The level of personal interest of respondents in further studying abroad is shown in Figure 4 below. Answers at levels 3, 4, and 5 make up 29%, 29%, and 23% correspondingly, which means that 81% of all respondents expressed interest in studying abroad. In contrast, only 19% of respondents chose the two lowest levels.

From the findings above, it can be observed that there are certain pull factors which are of great significance for the selection of higher education destinations abroad by the Bangladeshi students. The quality of life in developed countries influences 63% of the students. This is because of the fact that 35% of the respondents have stated "Very Much" and 28% of them have mentioned "Much" for the quality of life in developed countries. The quality of education and

research in developed countries is another factor which influences 65% of the students. It can be seen that 40% of the respondents have given a rating of "Very Much" and 25% of the respondents have rated the factor "Much." Career opportunities in developed countries are highly attractive for 67% of the students. The security in developed countries influences 60% of the respondents while financial factors (lower tuition fees) influence 46% of the students.

It can be noted from Table 3 that the scope of career opportunities in developed countries (67%) and the quality of Education and Research (65%) are the two most influential pull factors which encourage students to opt for studying abroad. The third important factor is quality of life and security in developed countries. However, the roles played by University Rankings and Lower Tuition Fees are comparatively low. This indicates that students' decisions to study abroad are driven by their aspirations rather than by financial considerations.

The results show that several push factors of Bangladesh have a strong influence on students' decisions to go abroad for studies. The current political situation of Bangladesh is found to be the most influential factor which is reflected in 66% of students who are either "very much" or "much"

influenced by it. In the same way, shortage of jobs and corruption in the country are very influential factors which have influenced 70% and 72% of students respectively. The education system in the country motivates 64% of students while the quality of life and security system of the country motivate 69% of students highly. Economy of the country also works as an influential factor which affects 61% of students. Social influence is found to be relatively less influential which can be seen from the fact that family and peer groups strongly influence only 37% of students.

Table 5 reveals that the Lack of Job Opportunities (70%), Corruption in the Country (72%), and Political Situation (66%) are the dominant push factors that encourage students to study abroad. The Current Education System and Economic Situation also exert a high level of influence, indicating general dissatisfaction with the domestic context. In contrast, Family and Peer Group Influence have a moderate impact. Overall, it is evident that unfavorable socio-political and economic conditions in the home country are the main reasons pushing students to seek better educational and career opportunities abroad.

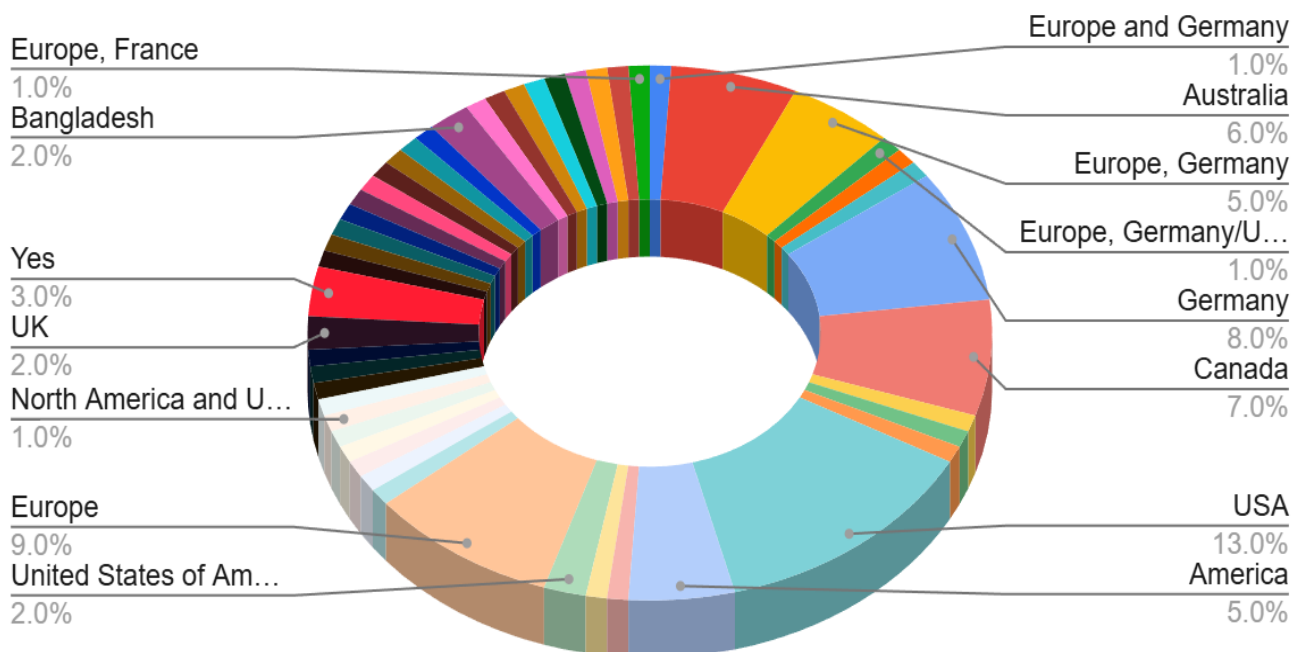


Figure 2. Preferred continent/country for higher study

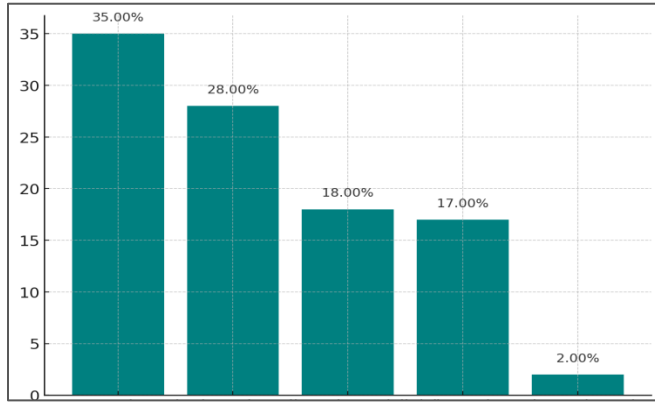


Figure 3. Level of motivation to pursue higher study abroad

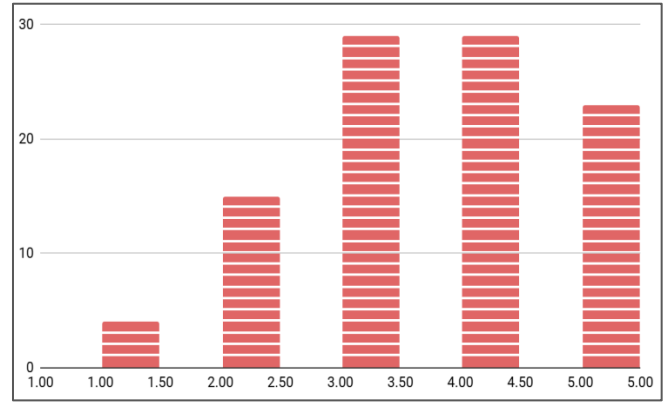


Figure 4. Extent of personal interest in pursuing higher study abroad

Table 2. Key pull factors affecting study abroad intentions

Pull factor	Very Much	Much	Moderately	Slightly	Not at all
Quality of life in developed countries	23.0%	40.0%	26.0%	11.0%	0.0%
Quality of education and research	36.0%	29.0%	24.0%	8.0%	3.0%
Scope of career opportunities in developed countries	40.0%	27.0%	25.0%	7.0%	1.0%
Security in developed countries	34.0%	26.0%	29.0%	9.0%	2.0%
Lower tuition fees in developed countries	17.0%	29.0%	34.0%	15.0%	5.0%
Ranking of universities in developed countries	21.0%	32.0%	32.0%	12.0%	3.0%

Source: Author's Estimation (2025)

Table 3. Summary analysis of pull factors

Pull factors	Very much & much (%)	Level of influence	Interpretation
Scope of career opportunities in developed countries	67%	Very High	Career prospects are the strongest motivator for studying abroad.
Quality of education and research	65%	Very High	High-quality education and research significantly attract students.
Quality of life in developed countries	63%	High	Better living standards in developed countries attract many students.
Security in developed countries	60%	High	Safety and stability are key considerations when choosing study destinations.
Ranking of universities in developed countries	53%	Moderate	Global university rankings moderately influence students' choices.
Lower tuition fees in developed countries	46%	Moderate	Cost considerations influence some students but are not the primary motivation.

Source: Author's Estimation (2025)

■ DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the factors determining Bangladeshi public university students' aspirations to pursue their studies overseas using a push-pull approach. The results indicated that both unfavorable circumstances at home and favorable situations abroad affect the aspirations of students to study overseas. From the push factors, the strongest reactions were associated with corruption (91% including Very Much, Much, and Moderately), dissatisfaction with the existing education system (87%), political situation (85%), unemployment (91%), economic condition (83%), and quality of life and insecurity issues (87%). These findings agree with a recent finding from Bangladesh that unfavorable perceptions of the existing domestic education system and expectations of better career prospects abroad are linked to more preference for an international pathway (Ali et al., 2026). These findings are consistent with contemporary push-pull literature, which indicates that choice of study destinations is influenced by a combination of academic excellence, economic condition, quality of life, and career-related issues but not by any individual factor (Nikou et al., 2025; Hemati et al., 2026).

The pull-factor results similarly emphasize academic and professional considerations. Quality of education and research motivated 89% of respondents when Very Much, Much, and Moderately responses were combined, while career opportunities motivated 92%, security in developed countries 89%, quality of life 89%, university ranking 85%, and lower tuition fees 80%. Recent international research supports the importance of these dimensions. Guan et al. (2023) found that tuition and living costs, institutional rankings, and employment-related considerations remain salient in destination choice after the pandemic. Experimental evidence also indicates that prospective study migrants respond strongly to information about financial support and expected educational success, reinforcing the importance of affordability and perceived returns to overseas study (Batista et al., 2025). Taken together, the present findings suggest that Bangladeshi students evaluate study-abroad opportunities as a combined academic,

career, financial, and quality-of-life decision. In contrast to the structural pull factors, the effect of family and peer influence is relatively weaker, with only 37% reporting Very Much or Much influence while 65% reported a moderate degree of influence or above. However, the effect of family and peer influence should not be underestimated. Recent studies indicate that the decision to study abroad is embedded in the family background in terms of resource endowment, social networking, emotional support, and feeling of security in the host country (Liu & Wu, 2024).

■ RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

On the basis of the above findings, the following recommendations may be made for the concerned stakeholders:

For educational institutions abroad: If an educational institution wants to attract Bangladeshi students, it is recommended that the institution focus on its academic reputation, research, career opportunities, and safety in the academic environment. It would also be beneficial if the institution offered scholarships, waivers, and part-time jobs to students.

For policymakers in Bangladesh: To improve the quality of education in public universities, the country's educational policy should be strengthened and updated. In addition, corruption, political instability, and economic insecurity are important issues that must be addressed to reduce brain drain. In this regard, the government may introduce scholarships in collaboration with universities in other countries. This may encourage students to pursue their academic careers without having to pursue higher education abroad.

For educational consultants and advisors: Educational consultants must provide academic guidance based on students' academic aspirations, financial capacity, and lifestyle. In addition, awareness campaigns about scholarships and other relatively inexpensive high-quality and affordable educational institutions may be beneficial.

■ CONCLUSION

The study aimed to contribute to existing knowledge of the motivations underlying Bangladeshi students' study abroad intentions by providing empirical evidence on the phenomenon. The study's findings are significant for the theoretical frameworks of the Push-Pull Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, Human Capital Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. It is also suggested that, to reduce the brain drain of Bangladeshi youth, Bangladeshi academic institutions should establish a stronger, more equitable, and more competitive academic system. Furthermore, international academic institutions need to understand the various motivations underlying Bangladeshi students' study abroad intentions. The study also has implications for future research on the long-term effects of study abroad experiences and the impact of global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on the academic aspirations of students from developing countries worldwide.

■ DECLARATIONS

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Data availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Authors' contribution

Md. Mahedi Hasan contributed to conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, and initial drafting. Md. Shamsul Arefin provided overall supervision, project administration, and manuscript final revisions and feedback. Bikram Biswas contributed to manuscript revision and feedback. All authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests in this research and publication.

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