

# Barriers to Pursue Higher Studies Abroad: A Study on Social Work and Social Sciences Students in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

*Pursuing higher education abroad helps students to compete in a more challenging world and prepare for a future where they become more qualified professionals. Nowadays, a growing number of students desire to pursue higher education to enrich their knowledge and skills. Most often, in the developing world, studying in their home countries isn't enough to broaden their vision, strengthen skills, and build networks. However, pursuing higher studies overseas is rare in Bangladesh. The study seeks to investigate the constraints that discourage the students from studying abroad, and to propose possible methods to address these barriers. Using quantitative methods, data were collected from the students of Rajshahi University. Results showed that the willingness to pursue higher education abroad is more prevalent among students from wealthy or middle-class families compared to lower middle-class or poor families. Majority of students mentioned poor economic condition as the main hurdle to pursuing higher education abroad, along with lack of proper guidance. It is therefore recommended that the government provide national scholarships for academically-gifted students who lack the financial means to study abroad.*

*Keywords: higher education, barriers, scholarships, economic condition, capacity building*

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the aspiration to pursue higher education abroad has grown significantly among university students in Bangladesh. Studying abroad is commonly regarded as a pathway to higher education possibilities, cross-cultural experiences, the acquisition of global skills, and employment profiles (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; UNESCO, 2020). In a fast-moving world across the globe, knowledge economies are dominating, and international education is key to preparing students with the competencies necessary for building careers in world labor markets (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Yet with this huge emphasis, only a handful of graduates in Bangladesh can afford to study overseas. It shows that around 1.1 million students passed from higher educational institutions in the year 2021, but only 44,338 students chose to study abroad (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, as cited in Ananthanarayanan, 2023). This wide gulf is part of the larger systemic and socioeconomic obstacles that prevent most students from studying abroad.

One of the main challenges identified for international students is the high cost of tuition and living expenses, along with limited access to clear information about available scholarships, inadequate institutional support, complex visa procedures, and sociocultural barriers that hinder access to global education (British Council, 2018a; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). In Bangladesh, these difficulties are exacerbated by economic disparities, rural-urban gap in access to information, and lack of institutional capacity to guide students properly (Chowdhury, 2019).

The present study intends to explore these barriers in light of these achievements. While primary, secondary, and general level of education in Bangladesh focus on providing basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, it often fails to equip students with the skills of critical thinking, research, or with a global consciousness necessary for being successful in an international academic environment (World Bank, 2021). This gap may be closed by higher education outside the country, but in many cases, it is too expensive.

While the study of student mobility in South Asia has been gaining

attention among scholars, there are comparatively few empirical studies examining the barriers experienced by Bangladeshi students, specifically in fields like social sciences and its applied branch, social work. This study addresses that gap with respect to the international dimensions of higher education by exploring the awareness, motivation, and constraints related to the aspirations to go abroad of university students.

By highlighting these challenges, the research is intended to advise policymakers, university support systems, and learning and teaching development initiatives. These interventions could more effectively help students, particularly those from underrepresented communities, to overcome obstacles to global education. Improved access to overseas education not only benefits students individually but also contributes to creating a globalized and competitive national workforce (Knight, 2015; Ministry of Education, Bangladesh, 2022).

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***Broader Picture of Social Sciences and Social Work Students Pursuing Higher Education Abroad***

As the fact that higher education has become more internationalized, it provides more opportunities for students to gain global exposure, enhance research skills, and experience cultural diversity. The phenomenon of student mobility at the higher education level is an important factor in academic and professional growth (Altbach & Knight 2007). Students go on study abroad programs to have access to better academic resources, specialized knowledge not available at home institutions, and better job prospects in the current expanding global labor market (OECD, 2023).

The pattern is widely recognizable in diversified disciplines, but Bangladeshi students mainly engage in international education in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and business-related disciplines (Rahman, M. M. et al., 2021). Students with a background in social sciences, particularly those studying social work and general social science, constitute the other side of the coin, with a considerably lower presence in international mobility. The reason behind this disparity is examined in this section.

### ***Financial Constraints***

The main obstacle for social sciences students in Bangladesh is their financial condition. Freightening foreign student fees with the cost of living, travel, and criminally heinous application fees, studying abroad becomes an absurd impossibility for many. Although scholarships are available, scholarships and funding opportunities are not many and highly competitive, especially for non-STEM disciplines (British Council, 2018b). Government and institutional patronage for social studies scholars are also inadequate and most of the scholarships are channeled toward certain disciplines such as technical and business studies (R. A. Khan, 2020). Naturally then, large numbers of highly skilled individuals are deprived of access to international education by their financial profile.

### ***Societal Stigma and Employment Perception***

There's a ton of social sciences students who can embody these often-maligned groups: social sciences and social work graduates have an image problem when it comes to getting a job. The stereotype in Bangladesh is that employment opportunities are better or more lucrative for an engineering, medical, or business studies graduate, while a social science graduate may not find a good job or get a high salary (Haque & Akter, 2019). This attitude impacts the decisions of students and the expectations of families, leading many people to stay away from studying social sciences overseas let alone studying social work. The common misconception has often been that if you study social sciences or social work, you'll limit your job opportunities, and that story begets students who are not interested in and cannot afford to study these fields.

### ***Institutional Support, Perception of Inadequate Guidance, and Support from the Institution***

There is little academic and career advice received by not only social sciences and social work students with respect to international education relative to other second promotion courses. University support systems primarily cater to the students in technical and professional fields, and hence, better access to information regarding scholarships, visas, studies overseas are provided (M. A. Khan, 2020). As a result, social science and social work graduates need to negotiate international education from the

“back foot” with little institutional support, which complicates the process and creates obstacles.

### *Cultural and Familial Influences*

In the field of social sciences, especially in social science studies and social work, there is a lack of conducive environment for these subjects due to cultural values which do not put much importance for any kind of higher education except engineering or medical sciences. In addition, it has been alleged that existing research regarding social sciences and liberal arts had numerous problems and resistance. Families tend to coerce students to choose degrees with more explicit economic rewards, which further marginalizes the social science disciplines in a theoretical and practical sense (Haque & Akter, 2019). This mindset not only restricts the number of students pursuing these subjects but suppresses their aptitude for international opportunities. A lot of students cross off studying abroad from their list entirely just because they don't think they are going to end up with a job or social status.

### *Academic Preparation and Global Compatibility*

In Bangladeshi social science curricula, research papers that are focused on courses and international collaboration are generally very weak and this hinders students from attaining the admission requirements of renowned global universities (World Bank, 2021). In addition, international students face academic cultural shock from learning new methods of studying and teaching, research outcomes, academic writing styles, and ways of communication. These difficulties are even greater for those with little cross-cultural experience or English language-based training, which decrease their global program success rates even more.

In summary, social sciences and social work students in Bangladesh do have an interest in pursuing education abroad, yet, they confront a range of structural, financial, cultural, and institutional barriers. Addressing these issues will involve cooperation between policymakers, universities, and scholarship agencies to better democratize international education across the disciplines.

### ***Disparity in Study Fields Among Bangladeshi Students Abroad***

More than 50% of students with a social science background study abroad in STEM and business fields (ICEF Monitor, 2021). A similar pattern is observed in destination countries like the U.S., where most Bangladeshi students are concentrated in engineering (35%) and business (20%) programs with representation in social sciences in the range of 10% to 12% (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022).

The remainder of the debate about scholarship opportunities, though, demonstrates different academic priorities at play. According to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (2020a), social sciences made up only 14% of Bangladeshi commonwealth scholarship holders and even less opted for social work or developmental studies. According to the British Council (2015), this minority represents less than 2% of the total number of Bangladeshi students studying abroad and there is limited diversity on Bangladeshi campuses and postgraduate programs.

### ***The Need for Addressing This Gap***

The global exposure of social sciences has the promising potential to further improve these challenges. However, this study has presented some comprehensive implications and linkages on policy formulation, and its recent relevance to the social research that will eventually achieve its objective in the national development policy and global disciplines. Participation in international social sciences programs can strengthen the policymaking framework in Bangladesh by enhancing research capacity, evidence-based decision-making, and the development of effective social welfare interventions (UNESCO, 2020). We need both funding and direction, and policy initiatives to develop more opportunities for students in social sciences to go abroad for their graduate studies.

Based on the overview of these barriers and points of potential solutions, this study seeks to shed light on the underrepresentation of Bangladeshi social sciences students in international education and possible approaches to address these challenges.

## Statement of the Problem and Objectives of the Study

After reviewing the existing literature, there no research has been conducted on the barriers of pursuing higher education abroad experienced by students with a background in social sciences, such as students from social work. The present study examined the following objectives:

1. To explore the knowledge and interest of social science and social work students toward pursuing higher education abroad.
2. To address the barriers that prevent social science and social work students from seeking higher studies abroad.

## Research Methodology

### *Participants and Procedure*

A cross-sectional study design was used in the current investigation to determine the respondents' attitudes and other variables of interest (Kesmodel, 2018). This study was conducted by using a quantitative approach, where a questionnaire survey was utilized as the primary method, and literature review and observation were used as the secondary method (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A semi-structured questionnaire was used to conduct the survey in-person to examine the knowledge and interest toward pursuing higher education abroad and to identify the barriers that prevent them from seeking opportunities overseas. The research used a proportionate simple random sampling approach to recruit participants. Following Slovens' 1960 formula for the known population, where  $N = \text{total population} = 360$ ,  $e = \text{sampling error}$ , for 95% confidence level, the sampling error is 0.05, the calculated sample size  $(n) = [360 / \{1 + 360 \times (0.05)^2\}] = 189.47$ . Therefore, the convenient sample size is approximately 200 from two departments: Social Work and Social Sciences at the University of Rajshahi which was selected using a convenient sampling procedure.

All correspondence with the participants was conducted in Bengali, the native language, with their informed consent. The data were collected in November 2023 and January 2024.

### ***Analytical Strategies***

The data aims to examine the knowledge and interest toward pursuing higher education abroad, to identify the barriers preventing students from seeking higher studies overseas, and to recommend strategies for overcoming these barriers, particularly for underprivileged students. First, the sample characteristics were explored by estimating descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values. Then, higher statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS 23.0 software, adopting a general linear model to examine the main and interaction effects. Knowledge of the students was designated as an independent variable; interest of the students was analyzed as a dependent variable, and the barriers of pursuing higher education were examined as moderating variable. Furthermore, Microsoft Excel was employed to visually represent the interaction effect.

### ***Ethical Issues***

The study included a sample of the students of Bangladesh. As this research included human participants, all procedures were carried out in conformity with the Helsinki Declaration of 1964, as well as any subsequent updates or equivalent ethical norms. The Review Committee of the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Rajshahi in Bangladesh provided approval for the current study. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, comprehensive information regarding the purpose and methodology was provided to all students. Subsequently, their informed consent was duly obtained. The participants were continuously informed that their participation in the interviews was voluntary and that they were under no obligation to complete it. In addition, to mitigate the potential for reporting bias, their responses were collected anonymously and treated with utmost confidentiality.

## **Findings of the Study**

### ***Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents***

The evidence from the related variables in Table 1 indicates the financial limitations of university students in Bangladesh that cause obstacle for higher level studies in foreign countries. The sample consisted

of an equal proportion (50% female, 50% male). 48.5% of students came from households earning less than 20,000 BDT (Bangladeshi Taka) per month—suggesting that a substantial number of students come from low-income households with limited financial flexibility. The average monthly income is only 44.5% of people earning less than 5,000 BDT, severely challenging them to save for educational exchange programs. Only 12% earn on their own, and just 4.5% were awarded scholarships, demonstrating limited financial aid. In addition, 66.5% of students do not save money, and only 4.0% of students save expenses for further studies, while 84.5% of students have no savings. As a result, studying abroad is financially impossible for many.

The findings demonstrate that poverty, lack of financial support from family, and little or no personal savings are significant impediments to accessing international higher education opportunities for Bangladeshi students. As a result, financial limitations highlight the necessity of enhancing scholarship schemes, educational loans, and policy measures to mitigate the students' economic hurdles when seeking higher education abroad.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	100	50
Female	100	50
Total	200	100
<b>Monthly income of household (in BDT)</b>		
Less than 20,000	97	48.5
Above of 20,000 up to 40,000	50	25
More than 40,000	53	26.5
Total	200	100
<b>Monthly income or gotten money (in BDT)</b>		
5,000	42	21
Less than 5,000	89	44.5
More than 5,000	69	34.5
Total	200	100
<b>Source of expenditure</b>		
Self-earning	24	12

Variables	Frequency	%
Family support	164	82
From scholarship	9	4.5
Total	200	100
<b>Probability of saving money</b>		
Can save money	40	20
Can't save money	133	66.5
Have to rely on loans	27	13.5
Total	200	100
<b>If can save money, purpose of saving money</b>		
None	169	84.5
For higher education	8	4
For running current education	9	4.5
For meeting personal interests	14	7
Total	200	100

### ***Respondents' Knowledge and Sources of Information Regarding Studying Abroad***

As presented in Table 2, many students in the field of education remain unfamiliar with scholarship opportunities due to limited access to reliable sources of information. According to the findings, 95.5% of students are aware of study abroad opportunities, while 4.5% do not know about such opportunities, thus they do not pursue it due to the lack of access to resources and guidance. 30.37% of students obtain information on their own (self-effort), 28.27% get guidance from teachers, and 20.42% were from the social work department. Still, institutional support is lacking as only 10.47% received some knowledge from their curriculum, while 10.47% relied on social media. A lack of higher education counseling puts students at a disadvantage because many rely on online information alone. Universities need to bolster career counseling, faculty mentorship, and study abroad workshops to help give students accurate, accessible, and comprehensive information.

**Table 2.***Respondents' Knowledge and Sources of Information Regarding Studying Abroad*

Variables	Frequency	%
<i>Knowledge of the students regarding higher education opportunities abroad</i>		
No knowledge	9	4.5
Have knowledge	191	95.5
Total	200	100
<i>Source of acquiring knowledge</i>		
By self-effort	58	30.37
From Social Work curriculum	20	10.47
From Social Work department	39	20.42
With the help of the teachers	54	28.27
Via social media	20	10.47
Total	191	100

*Respondents' Attitudes Toward Pursuing Higher Education*

Table 3 shows the proportion of the students' interest in pursuing higher education, along with the primary constraint that has held them back from this pursuit. The results indicate that 50.5% of students want to study abroad and 49.5% do not want to study abroad, which means that only a few students are interested in this aspiration. For students who show "no interest," the main barrier is lack of exposure in science and social science students (49.0%), followed by financial limitations (43.5%), lack of proper knowledge and information (4.5%), and the last one is low confidence (3.0%). These findings indicate that economic difficulties and low academic potential for social sciences represent the greatest barriers. For those who have knowledge of studying abroad ( $n = 101$ ), 91.1% have knowledge of available scholarships and 8.9% do not. Many of the students should at least be aware of financial aid options available, but a large percentage of those disinterested in pursuing higher education due to economic or academic barriers speaks to the need for both institutional support and funding opportunities, as well as career counseling, to help encourage more students, specifically those from a social science background, to study in universities abroad.

**Table 3.**  
*Respondents' Attitudes Toward Pursuing Higher Education*

Variables	Frequency	%
<b>Interest of the Students</b>		
Not interested	99	49.5
Interested	101	50.5
Total	200	100
<b>If not interested, constraints behind it</b>		
Lack of opportunities for Social Science background	98	49
Poor economic condition	87	43.5
Lack of confidence	6	3
Lack of proper knowledge and information	9	4.5
Total	191	100
<b>If interested, knowledge regarding scholarship opportunities abroad</b>		
No knowledge	9	8.9
Have knowledge	92	91.1
Total	101	100

## Discussion

These findings offer important information about the students' knowledge, interest in, and barriers to obtaining higher education abroad. The discussion complements the two objectives of the study, which are:

1. To know about students' knowledge and interest to study abroad.
2. Identification of factors that inhibit students from pursuing higher studies overseas.

In relation to Objective 1, which is understanding the students' awareness and interest in studying abroad, the results showed that 95.5% of students know about study-abroad opportunities, but a small percentage (4.5%) was unaware of it due to the lack of guidance and access to information about it. 30.37% of the students gathered information through their own efforts, 28.27% of the student's got information from their teachers, 20.42% of the students got information from their Social Work department, and 10.47% of the students were informed

from their curriculum, while the same percentage of students relied on social media. This implies that there is no structured institutional support in this field, and many students are left to fend for themselves with personal research and generalized sources. As Marginson (2018) explained, students from developing countries have relatively less access to study-abroad guidance compared to their counterparts in developed nations, which prevents them from making informed decisions. Students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle to find their way through the myriad of opportunities and challenges presented by international higher education without formalized academic counseling and structured scholarship information (Altbach, 2016). The study also revealed limited interest among students. Of those surveyed, only 50.5% of students showed interest in studying abroad, and 49.5% were uninterested. Poor socioeconomic conditions, as well as academic limitations have contributed to the low interest rate. Factors such as financial resources, exposure to the world of higher education, and supportive institutions have highlighted how they play a pivotal role in students' interests in these areas (OECD, 2019).

In relation to Objective 2, which focuses on identifying the barriers to higher education abroad, the findings reveal that financial constraints are the most significant challenge. Specifically, 48.5% of respondents come from low-income households earning less than 20,000 BDT per month, while only 12% reported being financially sustained. Moreover, 66.5% of students cannot save money, 4.0% of students save money for higher education, and 84.5% have no savings. These study-abroad opportunities, as previous studies suggest, remain inaccessible to students from low-income backgrounds due to financial constraints (British Council, 2018a). Furthermore, 49.0% of students cite limited availability of opportunities for social sciences as a significant challenge. This is representative of a wider issue in literature, where international scholarships and funding opportunities are often biased towards the STEM and business fields at the expense of the social sciences (OECD, 2020). Of these programs, Bhandari and Blumenthal (2011) noted that two thirds of scholarships and funding programs are taken up by students studying in STEM disciplines, providing the remaining third of scholarships to social science students. Similarly, M. A. Rahman et al. (2021) argued that students from non-STEM disciplines face extra challenges, such as the scarcity of finances available to fund these students, low support in hosts universities, and

uncertainties about their career prospects in social sciences abroad. The other main constraint is the lack of proper knowledge and information (4.5%) and low confidence (3.0%). According to research in countries where study-abroad guidance systems are not fully functioning, students turn to peer networks and social media, which can lead to the promulgation of misinformation, and a lack of clarity on scholarship opportunities and admission processes (ICEF Monitor, 2021). The absence of initiatives such as career counseling and institutional mentorship discourages students to a greater extent from applying to foreign universities (R. Khan, 2020).

In terms of recommendations on strategies for overcoming barriers and efforts to promote higher education opportunities, one must realize that these challenges are pervasive. Therefore, targeted policy interventions and institutional reforms to increase access to higher education abroad are needed, especially for underprivileged students. Structured career counseling, mentorship and shadowing programs, and scholarship workshops should be introduced to offer students awareness, as well as practical knowledge (Haque & Akter, 2019). It's also critical to expand financial aid programs. Scholarship opportunities should be increased by international organizations and local institutions, and low-interest student loans may be offered to individuals from low-income backgrounds (Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, 2020a, 2020b). They should also consider initiating partnerships with overseas universities for public institutions (British Council, 2015) to offer exchange programs abroad at a low cost and waive off tuition fees for disadvantaged students. Finally, the social sciences have an important role to play in higher education, particularly in the international level, working to bridge the divide in academic performance. Universities should be able to speak out in favor of equal funding opportunities for social sciences students, allowing disciplines beyond STEM to receive equal financial and academic recognition (UNESCO, 2020).

The results elucidate some of the critical barriers—financial hindrances, absence of institutional support, and limited opportunities—faced by Bangladeshi students in pursuing higher studies abroad, particularly in the field of social sciences. Giving students access to scholarships, implementing structured counseling systems, and financial support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds are ways in which policymakers and universities can help to overcome these issues. In the absence of such

interventions, higher education mobility will continue to be a privilege enjoyed by the rich, furthering educational inequality in Bangladesh.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

This study has some clear limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample was limited to only fourth year and master's students from only two departments (Social Science Studies and Social Work) of the social sciences background. Therefore, future studies should use more representative samples from other students of different semesters or year level from more departments of social sciences background. Second, this study consisted of a cross-sectional design, and thus the results should not be interpreted as conclusive proof of the causal relationship, but rather associations. Third, the conclusions of this investigation were derived from data that was self-reported by the participants. Subsequent research endeavors may utilize objective measurements to verify the hypotheses stated in this research.

### **Conclusion**

Results of this study raise awareness of the fact that although Bangladeshi social science and social work students express need for exposure to study-abroad education opportunities, numerous barriers, notably financial considerations, lack of sufficient institutional direction, and little consciousness for social work as a profession, persist in hampering their desire to make it a reality. Although they are motivated, many students from low middle-income families do not have access to the resources and systems required to compete in the field of international education. Moreover, even though there are some scholarships and programs offered all over the world, even to Bangladeshi students, knowledge and access are rare. Underrepresentation of Bangladeshi social science students in international education suggests urgency of integrating policy, scholarship, and institutional practice to support outbound studies. Expanding access to accurate information, strengthening academic advising, and raising the professional profile of social work in the country are crucial measures to empower these students. If these issues can be mitigated, Bangladesh can utilize those students to contribute to global research and policy, as well as national development through increased academic and professional mobility. The importance of eliminating systemic barriers to award

scholarships to capable and worthy individuals who may have unavoidable life circumstances should not be underestimated.

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