

Research Paper **XVII**

NEPALI MIGRATION TO JAPAN

Pathways, Costs and Decision-making

Sadikshya Bhattarai, Arjun Kharel, Preshika Baskota,
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Abstract

The paper contributes to the as-yet-small body of literature on Nepali migration to Japan, by examining the experiences of aspirant migrants enrolled at the Japanese language institutes in Nepal. It specifically examines Nepali youth's purpose of migration to Japan, costs of migration, sources of funds to pay for migration, and role of social networks in the overall migration process, including decisions about the selection of language institutes and the migration pathways to pursue. Aspirant migrants to Japan tend to be younger and with higher education on average compared to workers migrating to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia, the top destinations of Nepali workers. The Japan aspirants come from households with significantly higher than average income and have strong social networks in Japan. The social networks of family, friends, and relatives strongly influence the decisions in every major step of the migration process, from the selection of Japan as a migration destination to the choice of colleges and employers in Japan and language institutes in Nepal. Migration to Japan for education is costly, with most student migrants in the sample spending or expecting to spend about NPR 1–1.5 million (ca. USD 7650 to 11,500) to go to Japan. The expected costs for labour migration significantly varied among respondents, with some expecting to go for free while the others expecting to pay up to NPR 0.5 million (c. USD 3825).

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—The Authors

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepali Migration to Japan

Migration—within Nepal and internationally—for employment and education is a dominant feature of Nepali society. Employment is still the main driver of international migration from Nepal although an increasing number of men and women are also migrating for higher education (Bhattarai et al 2023). Besides the neighbouring country of India, which requires no documentation to enter, the most popular destinations for Nepali workers are the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia. According to the 2021 census, over half a million Nepalis (554,244) were in India for employment (National Statistics Office 2023). Meanwhile, the GCC countries and Malaysia together accounted for 95 per cent of the over 6.7 million labour permits issued to Nepali workers for overseas employment in a period of about three decades between 1993/94 to 2022/23 (Bhattarai et al 2023, 59).¹

Given the context of acute labour shortages arising from ageing populations and low birth rates in Japan and South Korea, along with nationals from many other Asian countries, Nepali workers have also begun migrating in larger number to these two countries (MoLESS 2022; Cooke and Jiang 2017). Between 1993/94 and 2022/23, the Government of Nepal issued nearly 33,000 labour permits to Nepalis to work in Japan (Bhattarai et al 2023, 59). Although it comprises only a small proportion of the total labour permits issued during that period—0.5 per cent—Japan is considered a prized destination due to significantly higher wages and better working and living conditions (Kharel 2016).

Migration of Nepalis to Japan for work can be traced back to as early as the 1980s when Nepalis started arriving in Japan on short-term visas (Yamanaka 2000). While these visas were intended for purposes such as tourism or business and were valid for up to three months, most Nepalis overstayed their visa and worked without permission.² By the early 2000s, Nepalis had begun going to Japan as ‘skilled workers’,³ most as chefs of foreign

1 This number does not include the Nepali workers travelling to India. No labour permit from the Nepal government is required to work in India.

2 Yamanaka states that in 1996, 74.4 per cent of the total 284,000 visa overstayers from various countries, including Nepal, had arrived on short-term visas, 7.0 per cent with ‘Japanese language students’ visas, 4.5 per cent with ‘entertainer’ visas, and 3.0 per cent with ‘university student’ visas.

3 Skilled worker included ‘activities to engage in services which require industrial techniques or skills belonging to special fields based on a contract with a public or private organization in Japan.’ These

cuisine (Immigration Bureau 2005). In recent years, in addition to skilled labour, Nepalis have been migrating to Japan as trainees, engineers, business managers and specified skilled workers (Immigration Service Agency of Japan 2022).

Japan has also emerged as an important destination for Nepali youths seeking overseas education. Nepalis have a relatively long history of going to Japan for studies. The earliest recorded case was in 1902 when a group of eight Nepali students went to Japan (Kharel 2022). While that particular instance occurred under the auspices of the then regime, the first documented independent migration took place in 1916 when a Nepali student went to Japan to study electrical engineering (JUAAN 2023). After Nepal and Japan established diplomatic relations in September 1956, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) began offering scholarships to Nepali students, and in 1959 the first Nepali went to study agricultural engineering under this arrangement. However, detailed accounts of Nepali migration to Japan for education were largely absent until the late 1990s. Figures from the Immigration Bureau of Japan shows that 48 Nepalis arrived in Japan as ‘pre-college’ students in 2000 (Immigration Bureau 2005). Over the years, there has been significant increase in the number of Nepalis migrating to Japan as students. Data available from the Immigration Service Agency of Japan on Nepali residents in Japan by status of residence shows that the average number of Nepali students in Japan has been around 23,000 each year from 2014 to 2021 (Immigration Service Agency of Japan 2019; 2022).⁴ According to the latest available figures on the Nepal side, Japan accounted for over a quarter (20,408) of the total 86,337 no-objection certificates (NOCs) issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) between 31 December 2022 and 8 September 2023.⁵ During this period, Japan ranked just behind Australia, for which 23,962 NOCs were issued. Previously, during the Covid-19 pandemic-affected fiscal year of 2020/21, Japan ranked at the top, with 8,146 NOCs of the 27,978 issued that year (MoEST 2022).

Financial Aspect

With Japan emerging as an important destination for Nepali migrants, it has also grown to become a major source country for remittances. Nepal received over USD 400 million, or 4.4 per cent of total remittances, from Japan in 2023 (Kharel et al 2025). Migrants, however, also spend large sums of money in university fees and recruitment costs as well as for other expenses during the migration process. A 2016 study by the International

include chef of foreign cuisine, sports instructor, aircraft pilot, or craftsman of precious metals.

4 In the years between 2014 and 2021, the number of Nepali students in Japan was the lowest in 2014 at 15,697 and highest in 2019 at 29,417.

5 Data provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). An NOC is an official letter issued by MoEST, granting approval to Nepali students to pursue higher education abroad. The letter needs to be presented at the Immigration Desk in Nepal’s airport while leaving the country and is also mandatory for making financial transactions to foreign universities to pay for tuition and living expenses.

Labour Organization (ILO) found migrant workers paying on an average NPR 910,000 (c. USD 8,600)⁶ to work in Japan (ILO 2016). While the Government of Nepal has set a ceiling of NPR 50,000 (c. USD 385)⁷ as recruitment fees for migration to Japan under the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), there is no limit for recruitment fees and related costs in the case of other forms of migration to Japan for work (see Section 2 for avenues of migration to Japan). Likewise, there is no ceiling on fees charged by education consultancies.⁸ Additionally, except when undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate degree courses are taught in English in Japan, prospective migrants also need to pay for Japanese language classes since language proficiency is usually a prerequisite for both visas and residency permits.

Contribution of the Study

Nepali migration to Japan has received some attention from researchers. Available literature has looked at migration trajectories and work experience of undocumented Nepali workers (Yamanaka 2000); transnational community activities of Nepali over-stayers (Yamanaka 2003); changing family structure of Nepali migrants (Yamanaka 2005); experiences of Nepali over-stayers (Minami 2008); the role of social capital in the migration of Nepalis (Kharel 2016); career trajectory, employment, family life and future plans of Nepali cooks in Indian-Nepali curry restaurants (Yamanaka 2021); and the role of international education consultancy in education migration (Kharel 2022).

Within this backdrop, this paper aims to contribute to the as-yet small body of literature on Nepali migration to Japan. More specifically, it examines the reasons for migration, the actual costs of migration to Japan from Nepal, the means aspirant migrants use to pay for their migration and the role of social networks in the overall migration process to Japan, including decisions about the selection of language institutes and the migration pathways to pursue.

6 1 USD = NPR 105.95 for fiscal year 2016/17. The period end (middle) value of exchange rate has been used for conversion. Nepal Rastra Bank, 'Quarterly Economic Bulletin,' *Economic Bulletin* 60, No. 4 (July 2023): 135.

7 1 USD = NPR 130.63 for fiscal year 2022/23. The period end (middle) value of exchange rate has been used for conversion. Also, exchange rate for fiscal year 2022/23 has been used throughout the paper unless stated otherwise. Nepal Rastra Bank, 'Quarterly Economic Bulletin 60.'

8 However, Education Consultancies Association Nepal's (ECAN) code of conduct mentions that member consultancies 'shall not be allowed at present to collect service charge more than Rs. 15,000/- and it is required to justify the amount to be collected'.

2. AVENUES OF MIGRATION TO JAPAN

Different avenues are available to Nepalis for migration to Japan for employment and education. A relatively well-established migration infrastructure on the corridor, comprised of bilateral agreements and policy frameworks and institutions in both countries, facilitates these migration flows.

Migration for Employment

The governments of Nepal and Japan have signed two agreements for the recruitment and supply of Nepali workers to Japan: i) the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), and ii) the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) programme.⁹ The TITP is managed by the Japan International Trainee & Skilled Worker Cooperation Organization (JITCO). Under the TITP, foreign workers are recruited as trainees in different sectors of work for a maximum of three years. The system is designed to transfer technical skills and knowledge to the home countries of the trainee workers, who return to their homeland after technical training and work experience in Japan (JITCO n.d.a). A Record of Discussion was signed between Nepal and Japan in 2003 to send Nepalis to Japan under the TITP.¹⁰ However, it was only in 2010 after the implementation of the directive for sending Nepalis technical interns¹¹ that Nepalis started to migrate to Japan as trainees. Starting 1 January 2024, migration to Japan under the TITP has been being regulated by a ‘Memorandum of Cooperation’.¹²

9 For more information on TITP, see ‘What is the Technical Intern Traineeship Program?’, <https://www.jitco.or.jp/en/regulation/index.html>; for more information on SSW programmes, see <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/ca/fna/ssw/us/overview/>.

10 We would like to thank Keiko Yamanaka for passing on information on the contents of the Record of Discussion received from Hiroshi Oguchi of the Public Relations Office of JITCO on 12 February 2024. According to the communication from Oguchi, JITCO receives information about sending organisations and trainees and provides it to Japanese companies and organisations; provides the requests and plans of Japanese companies, etc, to the Nepali side; and exchanges information and tries to resolve problems. Likewise, Nepal provides information on appropriate sending organizations; provides necessary information such as information about trainees, qualifications and license systems, etc.; and supports the return of trainees who have completed their training.

11 Officially known as the ‘Directive (with First Amendment, 2010), 2009 for Sending Nepalis Technical Interns to Japan’. See: <https://ceslam.org/our-publications/japan-technical-intern-training-program/>.

12 That is, the ‘Memorandum of Cooperation on the Technical Intern Training Program between the

Nepali workers' migration to Japan under the visa residency status of the SSW is governed by a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) signed in 2019.¹³ The MoC allows Nepal to send workers to Japan to work in 14 different sectors, including nursing, janitorial work, manufacturing, agriculture, fisheries, food and beverage manufacturing, and food services industry (JITCO n.d.b). The Government of Nepal has implemented the Procedures for Sending Specified Skilled Workers to Japan, 2024¹⁴ to guide Nepali migration to Japan under this agreement.

Besides the government-managed migration programmes, Nepalis also have the option of migrating to Japan for work on their own or via recruitment agencies. They can apply for other types of work such as professor, researcher, business manager, legal/accounting services, medical services, nursing care, engineers/specialists in humanities/international services, skilled labourers (e.g. chef), among others.¹⁵ In addition, usually in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Nepali government also sends trainees to Japan under trainee visas (which is different from the TITP). These are usually government officials who go to attend short trainings and seminars (3–4 days) or long-term trainings (9–12 months).

Migration for Education

Nepali students go to Japan either to study Japanese language or for undergraduate and graduate education.¹⁶ Educational institutions in Japan have specific requirements for admissions, based on the courses and levels that prospective students want to join. For instance, admission in Japanese language schools (in Japan) requires, among others, that aspirant students have: i) completed 12 years of school education, ii) have the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N5 level¹⁷ or equivalent certification, and iii) sufficient financial resources to cover tuition and living expenses in Japan. Similarly,

Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan and the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security of Nepal', available at <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001409140.pdf>.

13 See: Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, and Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security of Nepal, 2023.

14 See: Ministry of Justice et al. (Japan) and Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (Nepal), 2019.

15 See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026.

16 Based on key informant interviews conducted for this study.

17 The JLPT N5 is the first level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and measures the 'ability to understand some basic Japanese'. N1 measures the 'ability to understand Japanese used in a variety of circumstances'. For detailed information on the five levels (N1, N2, N3, N4 and N5) of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), please see Japanese-Language Proficiency Test. n.d. 'N1-N5: Summary of Linguistic Competence Require for Each Level.' Accessed 29 June 2023, <https://bit.ly/3TEE3rg>.

to be accepted into universities and colleges, individuals must have passed the N1 or N2 JLPT examination and/or the Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students (EJU). There are exceptions in the case of undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate courses taught in English, where knowledge of Japanese may not be necessary. The duration of language school varies depending on the intake period, ranging from about one year and three months to two years. Upon completing language education in Japan, students with a bachelor's degree from Nepal can either enter the workforce or pursue further education in Japan. Those without a prior degree have to enrol at a university or a vocational institution before they can transition into the workforce.¹⁸ After receiving admissions at Japanese universities, colleges or language schools, individuals need to obtain a Certificate of Eligibility (CoE) from one of the regional immigration services bureau in Japan to apply for a student visa.¹⁹ While a CoE per se is not required to apply for a visa, it does speed up the process.²⁰

Infrastructures of migration have been established in both Nepal and Japan to facilitate Nepali students' migration to Japan. There are language institutes in Nepal that offer Japanese language courses (primarily N5 level) to students while also facilitating the overall migration process. Then there are educational consultancy service providers that only help with applying for and gaining admissions to universities in Japan but do not run language classes.

There are various Japanese language tests available in Nepal to assess Japanese language proficiency, but the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and the Nihongo Achievement Test (NAT-TEST) are widely considered the most credible. The JLPT test is administered and organised by the Japan Foundation and the Japan Educational Exchanges and Services in cooperation with a local institution (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test n.d.). In Nepal, the Japanese Language Teachers Association Nepal (JALTAN) has been hosting the JLPT in coordination with the Japanese Embassy twice a year since 2000. However, the administration of these tests only in Kathmandu and the limited number of test dates each year pose accessibility issues, particularly for those aspirant migrants from outside the Kathmandu Valley.

Alternatively, students can choose to take the NAT-TEST, which is equivalent to

18 Interview with a representative of an educational consultancy in Nepal.

19 Certificate of eligibility (CoE) is a document issued by Japan's Ministry of Justice and serves as an approval the applicant meets the entry requirements as set by the Japanese government. Any individual who applies for long-term visa for Japan such as a work visa, or student visa, is required to get a CoE, which is applied for via the employer, university, or other sponsors (proxy) in Japan.

20 It is recommended but not mandatory to obtain a CoE before applying for the student or work visa and that having a CoE shortens the visa process, although it does not guarantee issuance of visa. Likewise, CoE can be rejected for various reasons such as lack of financial documents, not submitting all the required documents, incomplete or incorrect application, among others. See: 'General Visa: Student,' Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed 24 June 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/visa/long/visa6.html.

the JLPT in terms of test format and question types (NAT-TEST Senmon Kyouiku n.d.). The NAT-TEST is administered and operated by Senmon Kyouiku Publishing (the official institution administering the NAT-TEST) through their regional offices in different countries and conducted every two months. In Nepal, test centres are located in Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan, and Itahari.

Other language tests available in Nepal include the Japanese Communication Ability Test (J-CERT), the Japanese Language Capability Test (JLCT), the Japanese Proficiency Test (JPT), the Test of Practical Japanese (J-Test) and the Japan Foundation Test for Basic Japanese (JFT Basic). Compared to JLPT and NAT-TEST, these tests are conducted across a wide range of locations, making them more geographically accessible. However, while the validity of JLPT certificates do not expire, the other tests, such as JLCT, are typically valid for one to two years. Furthermore, universities or employers may recognise or require individuals to take different exams depending on their policies or the required level of language proficiency.

3. METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted in August–November 2022 with 107 students enrolled in Japanese language institutes in Nepal. These aspirant migrants were selected through a purposive sampling method from 11 institutes ready to participate in the study. Every attempt was made to the extent possible to ensure the sample was representative of the country’s diversity in terms of caste/ethnicity, gender and place of origin. Further, to make sure that the sample represented a variety of experiences, no more than 15 individuals were selected from any single institute.

Research participants were selected via a two-stage process. First, a list of Japanese language institutes was prepared using personal and organisational networks as well as through a Google search. The institutes were divided into four categories—A, B, C and D—based on the level of Japanese language taught, the number of students enrolled at the time of the survey as well as in the preceding years, and the number of former students who had successfully migrated to Japan (see Annex).

In the final count, the sample contained 11 institutes willing to participate in the study, consisting of two from Category A and three each from Categories B, C and D. At the next stage, students enrolled in the institutes and planning to migrate to Japan were selected. Due to the Covid-19 situation prevailing at the time, the interviews were conducted over the phone using the software Open Data Kit (ODK).

Among 107 research participants, 69 were men and 38 women. Similarly, 52 were from Bagmati province, 13 from Sudurpashchim, 11 each from Gandaki and Lumbini, nine from Karnali, eight from Koshi and three from Madhesh. Likewise, in terms of caste/ethnicity, 64 research participants belonged to Hill Caste groups, 36 were Hill Janajatis, five were Hill Dalits and two were Tarai Janajatis.²¹

The survey was supplemented with five in-depth interviews with selected respondents. The latter were purposively selected with consideration of their caste/ethnicity, sex, age, and type of visa they had applied for or were intending to. A further 14 interviews were conducted with individuals and representatives of different organisations identified through a stakeholder mapping exercise. These informants consisted of representatives from Japanese language institutes, private recruitment agencies, migrant support organisations and returnee migrant workers. As with the survey, most of these interviews were conducted over the phone although some were conducted in person after the lifting of the Covid-19 restrictions.

21 The categorisation of caste and ethnic groups used in this study follows Pitamber Sharma (2014).

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Hereafter, the paper discusses the socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants followed by their past migration experience, reasons for migration and role of social networks in the migration process. It then presents the migration costs and sources used to pay for them. While the findings can claim to provide a general picture of Nepali migrants hoping to go to Japan, it is only indicative of what the process of migrating to Japan consists of.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Age and Marital Status

The majority of study participants were young, with an average age of 22 years. Most were between the ages of 18 and 22 years (70 per cent), followed by 23–27 years (29 per cent) and 28–32 years (2 per cent). Only a small percentage (4 per cent) were married and even a smaller proportion (1 per cent) had children. The youth of research participants can explain the very high proportion of the unmarried in the sample. Likewise, 90 per cent were planning to go to Japan for study while 9 per cent were migrating for work.

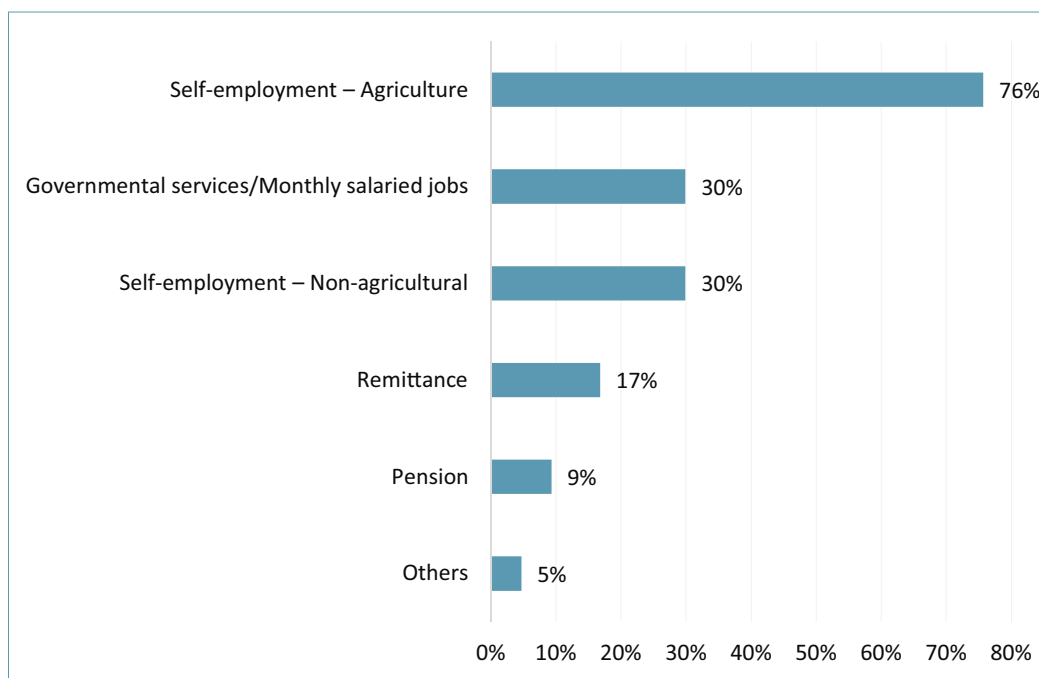
Education

Except for one respondent who had only 10 years of schooling, all the others had completed at least high school (12th Grade). Among the latter, 87 per cent had finished high school while 12 per cent had completed undergraduate degrees. This finding corresponds with the Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 2017/18, which also found a large proportion of Nepalis migrating to Japan (for study, employment, or other reasons) with higher secondary education while the majority of those going to GCC countries and Malaysia had lower levels of education.²²

Around 30 per cent of the research participants (16 per cent of the women and 38 per

22 The calculation of raw dataset from Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18 shows that 45.1 per cent of international migrants who migrated to Japan for work, education, or other reasons have completed higher secondary and 45.3 per cent of those who migrated to South Korea had similar educational qualification. The NLFS 2017/18 data also shows that 26.3 per cent of international migrants who migrated to Japan for work, education or other reasons have a bachelor's degree or above while 28.2 per cent of migrants to South Korea had similar educational qualifications.

Figure 1: Household Income Source of Research Participants



N=107; Note: Multiple responses. 'Others' includes house rent, daily wages, and social security allowance.

cent of the men) had taken vocational training. While the duration of the training ranged from a few days to more than six months, most (53 per cent) had taken a short-term training of less than six months. The training sectors included plumbing, auxiliary nurse midwife, computer-related work and cooking.

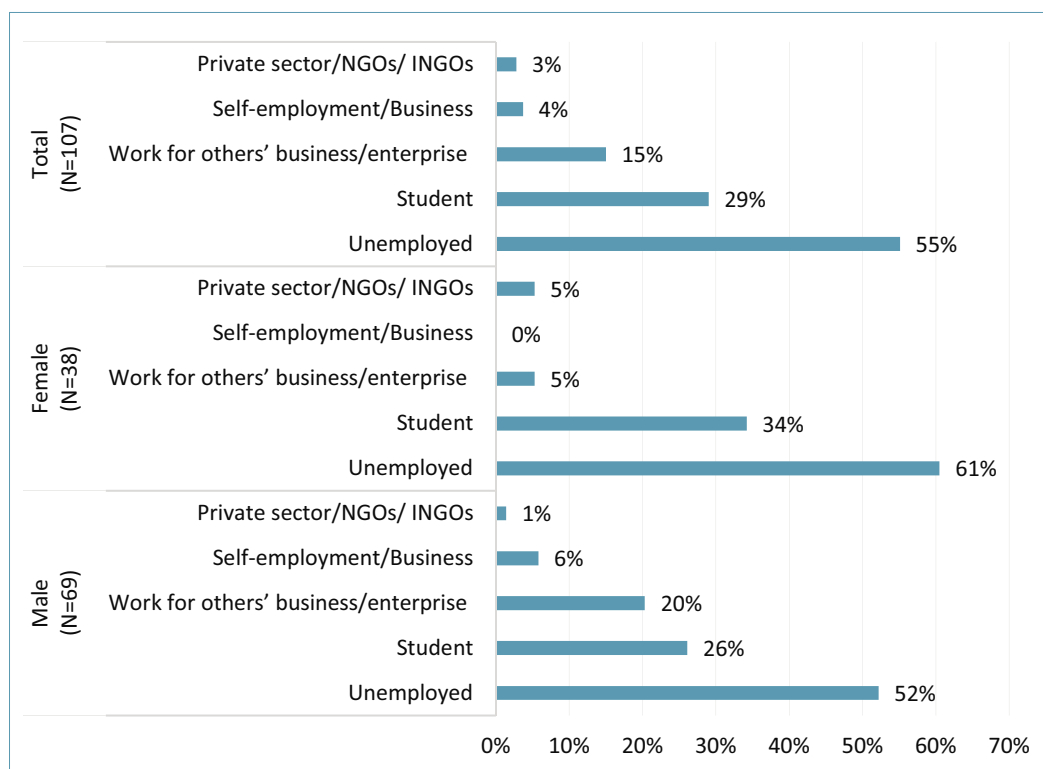
Household Wealth and Income

The study found that those aspiring to go to Japan are from relatively wealthier families. Among the 72 respondents who reported the household income, 63 per cent had annual household incomes of above NPR 1 million (ca. USD 7,650), while it was NPR 0.5–1 million (ca. USD 3,800–7,650) for 19 per cent of respondents and between NPR 50,000–500,000 (ca. USD 380–3800) for the rest. The average household income of the respondents was much higher than the average annual household consumption expenditure in Nepal,²³ which was reported to be about NPR 126,000 per annum (c. USD 965) in 2023 (NSO 2024).

Most respondents (52 per cent) had multiple sources of family income. Self-employment in agriculture like livestock farming, poultry farming, fishery, etc., was the most common source of household income (Figure 1). The other sources were salaried jobs and self-employment in non-agricultural sectors.

23 The annual nominal household consumption expenditure is an aggregate of the food consumption expenditure and non-food consumption expenditure of the household.

Figure 2: Occupation of Research Participants (by sex)



N=107; Note: Multiple responses.

4.1.4. Employment Status

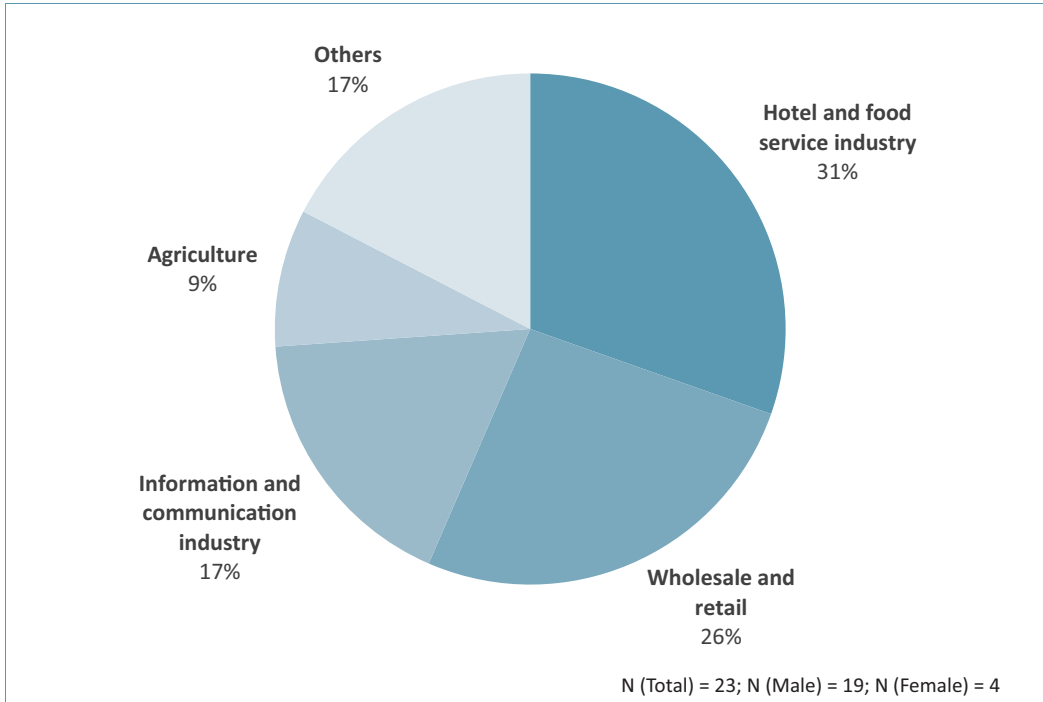
An overwhelming majority of the research participants were unemployed (55 per cent) or students (29 per cent). The rest were employed or self-employed (Figure 2). The rate of employment was lower for women compared to men.

The high rate of unemployment among aspirant migrants to Japan indicates the magnitude of unemployment, particularly among the youth in Nepal. The NLFS 2017/18 had found unemployment rate to be 11 per cent in 2017/18, with 69 per cent belonging to the age group 15–34 years (CBS 2019).

Among the respondents who were employed, 30 per cent were involved in the hotel and food service industry, followed by 26 per cent in the wholesale and retail business, and 17 per cent in the information and communication industry (Figure 3).

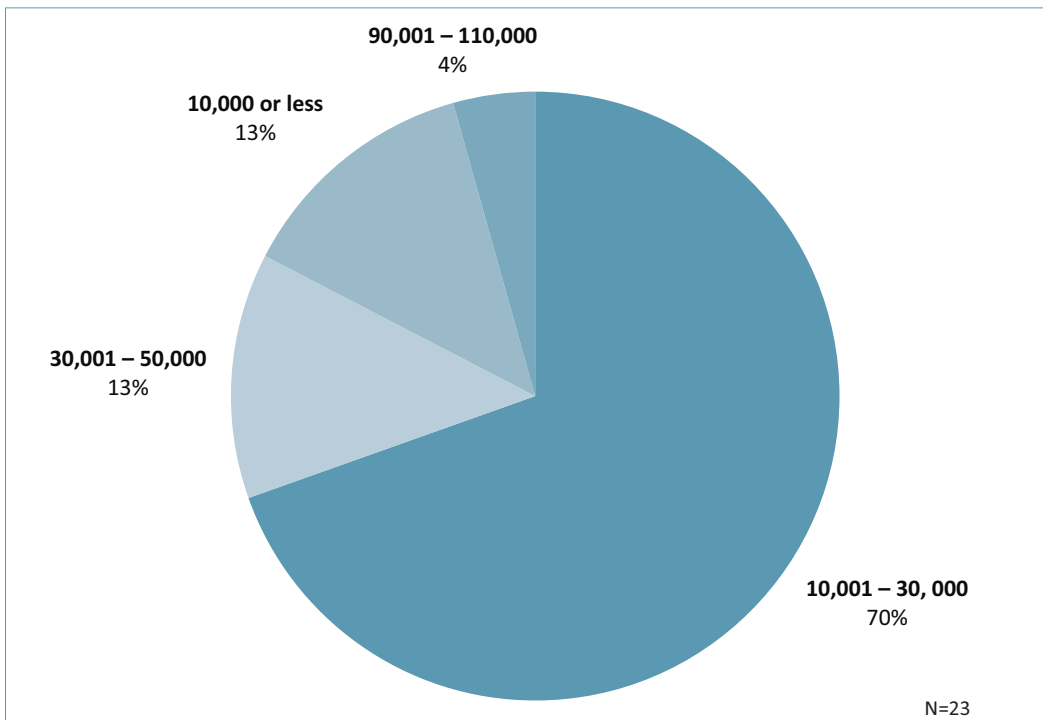
Of those employed, 70 per cent reported their monthly salary ranged between NPR 10,001 and 30,000 (ca. USD 75–230) while there was one who earned over NPR 90,000 (ca. USD 700) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Sectors of Occupation



Note: 'Others' includes financial, banking, travel agency, education (teacher).

Figure 4: Monthly Salary of Employed Respondents



Past Migration Attempts

A few research participants (11) had been unsuccessful in their attempt to go abroad in the past. The countries they had tried to migrate to were Japan itself, South Korea, the United States, Portugal, Israel, and the United Kingdom. Of the four who had tried for Japan, two cited the rejection of the Certificate of Eligibility (CoE) as the reason for not being successful in their previous migration attempt, one mentioned not being selected by the company and one did not know why. Two were not able to go or take the required test because of the Covid-19 pandemic; two others mentioned failing in the test and/or interview for recruitment/admission; two said they were not selected by the company or university; and one had personal issues. The four who had tried to go to Japan for work or study planned to apply under a different visa category. Hence, those who had earlier applied for student visas planned to apply for work visas and vice versa. Five of the respondents had been to a foreign country in the past, with four travelling for study and one for personal work. The countries they had been to were India, China and Japan.

Reasons for Migration

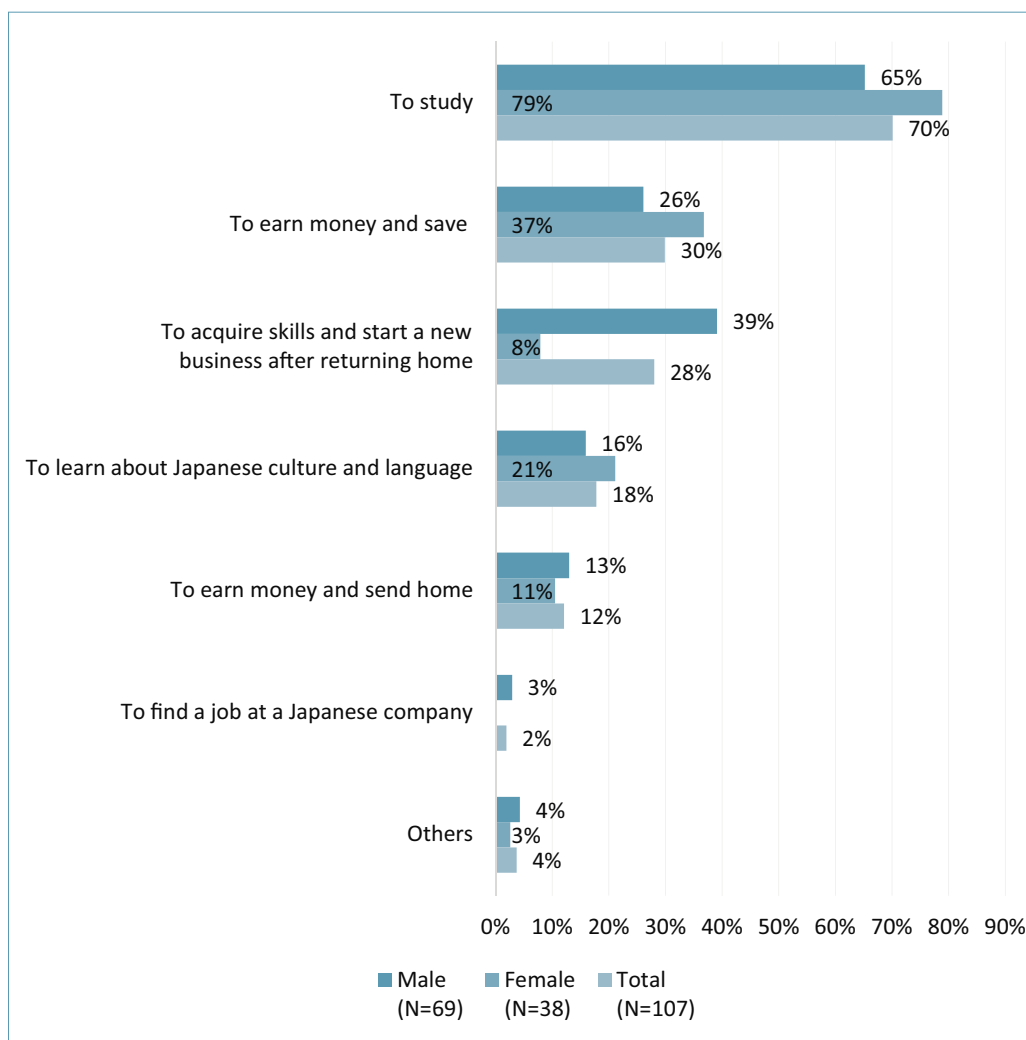
Research participants wanted to migrate to Japan for a number of reasons, with education ranked the highest. Seventy per cent of the respondents were planning to go to Japan for education (Figure 5). The second most popular reason was to earn money (30 per cent), followed by acquiring skills and starting a business in Nepal. Learning about Japanese culture and language was also an important reason for many respondents. A higher proportion of women was planning to migrate to study and earn money compared to men. The proportion of women planning to migrate to acquire skills to start a business in Nepal was about four times lower than that of men.

Research participants said that employment prospects are better after being educated in Japan. Given the huge difference in salary after studying in Japan, they preferred to study there, earn money and return after a certain period of time. A few research participants intended to stay in Japan and utilise their skills. A female research participant who had completed her Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and was planning to migrate to Japan for education said:

You can say that my long-term career goal is to go to Japan to study and stay there; so you can say that my future is in Japan itself. After studying, what I am going to do is nursing-related work. In Nepal after PCL nursing,²⁴ we will be working in the private

24 Proficiency Certificate Level (PCL) nursing is a 3-year nursing programme that students can undertake after Secondary Education Examination (SEE) or grade 10.

Figure 5: Purpose of Migration to Japan (by sex)



Note: Multiple responses.

sector and earn only 10,000–15,000 rupees. The Public Service Commission²⁵ exam is difficult. It is extremely difficult to make a career here [in Nepal] in a short period of time. Hence, my goal is to study in Japan and stay there to start my career and survive there itself.

Research participants gave multiple reasons for choosing Japan over other countries. Among them, the opportunity to learn about Japanese technology, good governance and

²⁵ Public Service Commission is a government agency that conducts examination to select candidates in the posts of civil service and other government services.

Table 1: Reason for Choosing Japan for Migration (by visa category, in %)

Reasons	Working visa	Student visa
To learn about Japanese technology	20	24.0
Good governance	10	22.9
Safe country	50	21.9
To learn about Japanese culture and language	-	18.8
Relatives in Japan	10	12.5
Acquaintances/friends in Japan	-	12.5
Good country to study	-	11.5
Dream country	10	4.2
Interest	-	4.2
Easy to get visa for study	-	4.2
Low hurdles to obtain a residence permit	-	1.0
High salary	20	1.0
Others	20	4.2
Total number (N)	10	96

Note: Multiple responses. 'Others' includes Japan being an Asian country, suitable, language, past experience, and also two respondents did not give any reason.

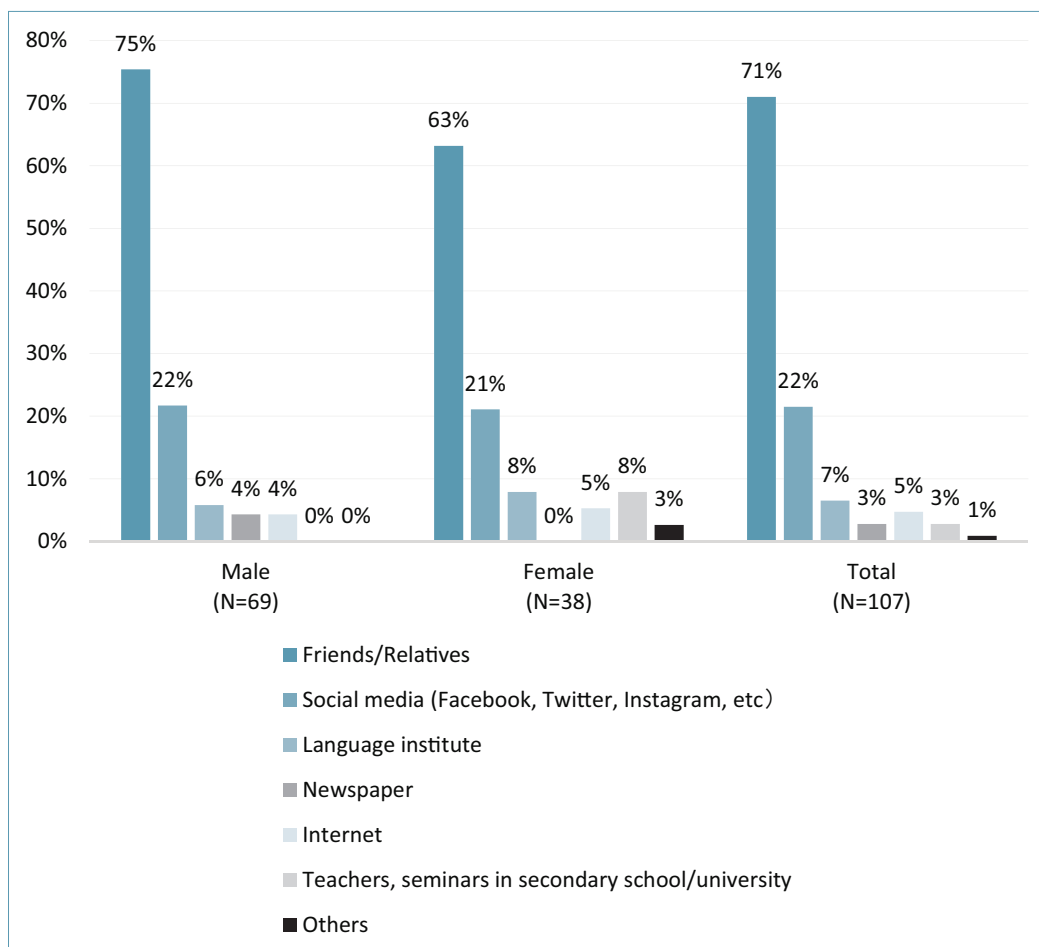
the perception of Japan as a safe country ranked highest (Table 1). Research participants going to Japan for education mentioned their interest in learning about Japanese culture as a reason for choosing the country. Highlighting the positive aspects of Japan, a female research participant applying for a work visa said:

I have already been to Japan on a student visa. During my stay I learnt the language and I know it well now. I learnt many things there and I feel it is safe for women. Even at night, it is safe. Rules are strictly followed. I like Japan very much. That's why I intend to go to Japan this time, too.... Earnings and safety are the two main reasons [for choosing Japan for work]. Also, if people go to the Gulf countries or Malaysia, it is perceived differently by people. That's why I did not choose those countries.... When I went to Japan earlier, there was no provision to go to [South] Korea on a student visa. Under the EPS,²⁶ the process is longer and more time consuming. As I wanted to get a student visa and I chose Japan over Korea. Now that I have been to Japan, I am inclined to go to the same country.

While most respondents expressed their preference for Japan due to its positive attributes, some said that their selection was based on convenience and perceived ease of getting a

26 Employment Permit System (EPS) is a government-to-government labour migration programme operated by the Republic of Korea (South Korea). For more information about EPS, see Baniya et al (2023).

Figure 6: Source of Information about Going to Japan (by sex)



Note: Multiple responses. 'Others' includes leaflet of language institute.

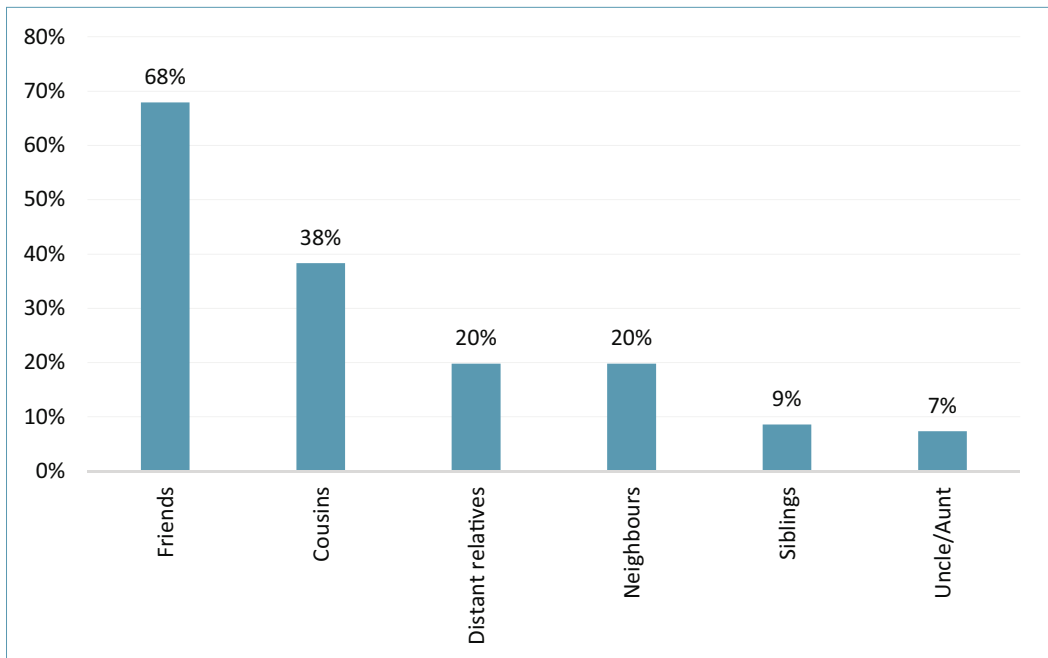
visa. A female respondent applying for a work visa said, 'I am not good at English. So, I chose Japan as my destination country because I don't have to use English there'.

4.4 Role of Social Networks

Research participants had learnt about migration to Japan through a variety of sources. Friends and relatives were the main source of information for the vast majority (71 per cent), whether planning to migrate for education or work and also irrespective of sex. This is in line with findings from other migration studies in Nepal that friends, family, and relatives are important sources of information for prospective migrants.²⁷ Social media

²⁷ See Sijapati et al 2015; Kharel et al 2022; Baniya et al 2023.

Figure 7: Presence of Friends and Relatives in Japan



Note: Multiple responses; N=81

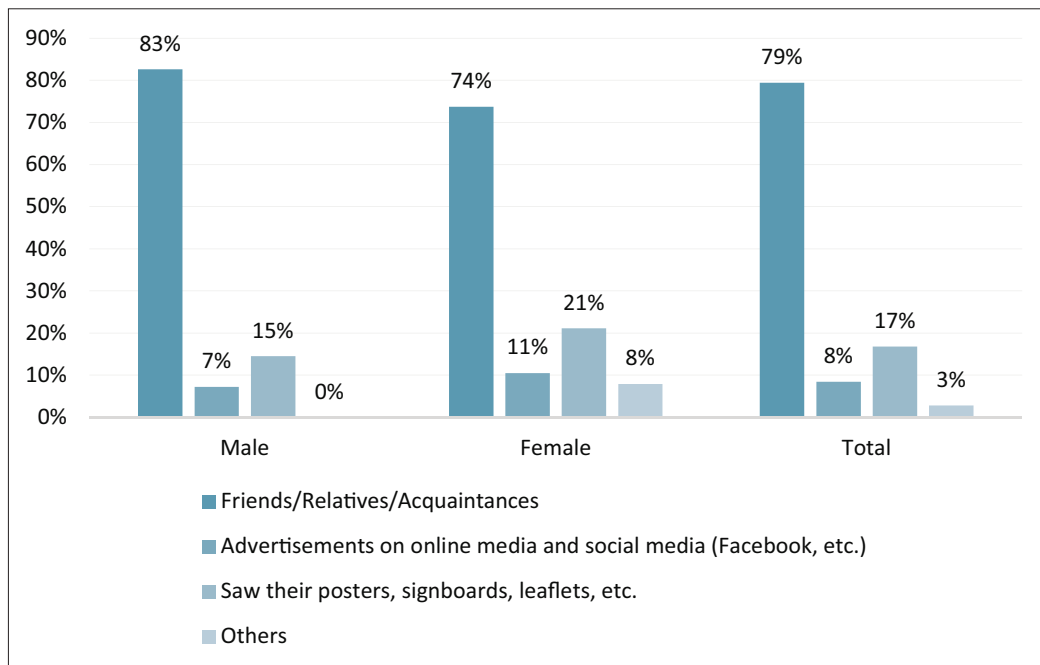
was also an important platform to learn about going to Japan, as reported by 22 per cent of the research participants (Figure 6). Most (76 per cent) knew someone in Japan, either friends, relatives or acquaintances, clearly indicating the significance of social networks in the decision to migrate (Figure 7). These migrant networks provide information to aspiring migrants on various facets like the work and study environment and may also provide socio-economic support initially, influencing their decision to migrate as well as their choice of destination.

A male research participant explained how the presence of friends in Japan and information from them helped him select Japan as a migration destination.

I have no friends in Europe. Several of my friends are in Yokohama and Tokyo. When I asked them for suggestions on what to do, they advised me that it would be better if I completed my undergraduate studies and then go to Japan. I was told that there are good opportunities in Japan if we have a good educational background.

The role of social networks was also crucial in the selection of language institutes. Most research participants had learnt about the language institute they were enrolled in at the time of the survey through friends, relatives and acquaintances (Figure 8). As a male respondent applying for a work visa said:

Figure 8: Source of Information about Currently Enrolled Language Institute (by sex)



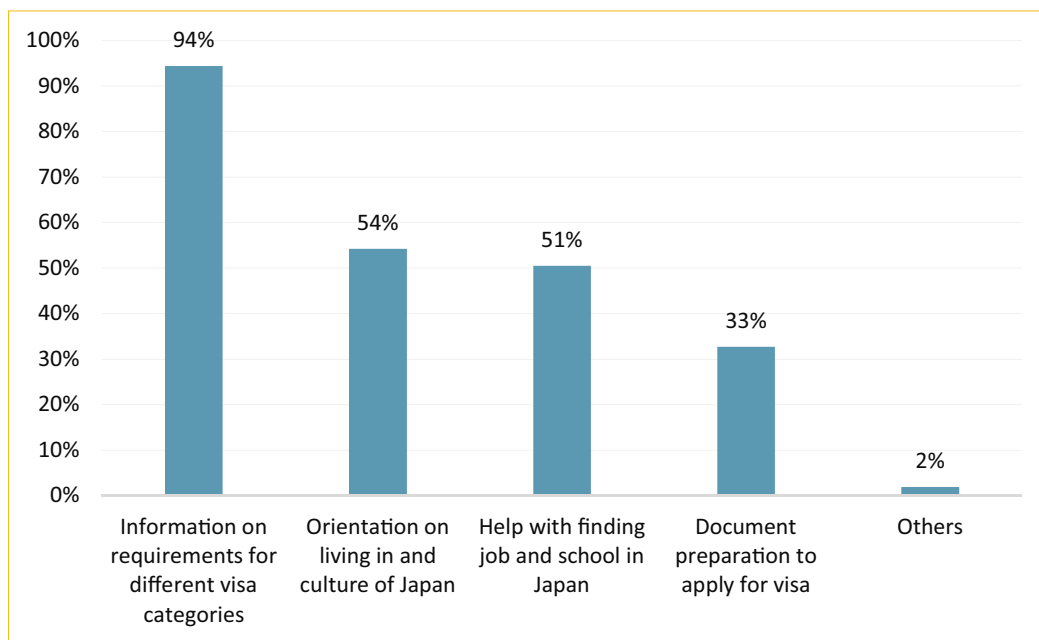
Note: Multiple responses. 'Others' includes marketing call from language institute and internet search.

First of all, after learning that Japan and Nepal had agreed to send Nepalis to Japan under the SSW programme, I decided to learn Japanese. It was also easier for me to come and stay in Kathmandu as I had friends here. I stayed in Kirtipur where my friends were. When I was staying in Kirtipur, I learnt about this institute and I also heard from my friends that the teaching is good here. So I directly went to this school and got admission. However, since I didn't go to other schools, I have nothing to compare the current school with. To do that, I would have had to take similar classes in other schools.

Aspirants often came in contact with the institutes through advertisements and they also considered other factors such as the quality of teacher and reputation of the language institute while choosing one. However, the role of social network was still important in the entire process, as explained by a female research participant:

In the beginning, when walking alongside the road, I saw many banners and got many brochures [advertising language schools]. One such advertisement said in big letters that Japanese language is being taught by an instructor with 10 years' experience and there was a photo and name of [the instructor]... Some of my neighbours were also studying in this school and from them I also learnt that the teacher at this school is good. I met [the instructor] and had a good impression after talking with him. So, I came here to study with him.

Figure 9: Services Other than Language Class Provided by the Institutes



Note: Multiple responses. 'Others' includes language classes and document preparation done from a different institute and lack of a response from the research participants as they had just started the language class.

4.5 Services from Language Institutes

Besides offering Japanese language classes, language institutes also worked as intermediaries in connecting migrants with academic institutions and employers in Japan, preparing documents essential for visas and the overall migration process. Nearly all the research participants (98 per cent) had used or said they would use the language institute they were enrolled in at the time of the survey for the preparation of the necessary documents.

Nearly all the respondents (94 per cent) said that their language institute provided information about the requirements and activities allowed in Japan for different categories of visas. Most (54 per cent) said that the school provided orientation on life and culture of Japan, while about a similar proportion also reported that the school helped find jobs and schools in Japan (Figure 9).

Such strong dependence on language institutes was also reflected in the awareness and the attitude of the respondents about the migration process. About a quarter of the respondents (26 per cent—20 per cent of the males and 37 per cent of the females) said they were not sufficiently aware of the migration process. It was also revealing that a huge majority (86 per cent) said they were not interested in learning the details as all the processing, including document preparation, was done by the language institute and/or

Table 2: Total Cost of Migration to Japan (by visa category, in %)

Total Cost (NPR)	Working visa	Student visa
None	50	0.0
100,000–500,000	50	2.2
500,001–1,000,000	0	5.4
1,000,001–1,500,000	0	80.6
1,500,000–2,000,000	0	11.8
Total number (N)	6	93

consultancy. Among the other reasons cited by this group was confusing information or lack of adequate information in the public domain in a language comprehensible to them.

4.6 Migration Costs

Migration to Japan for education is costly. Most respondents applying for a student visa said it would cost between NPR 1 and 1.5 million (ca. USD 7650 and 11,500) for their migration (Table 2). Most of that amount would be used to pay for university fees. Among the six respondents applying for work visas, three mentioned zero cost while the other three said the total would be NPR 100,000 (ca. USD 765) or more. One of the male participants going on a work visa said:

I have not paid any money for processing. I have paid only for language classes. The consultancy from which I am applying has been trying to act as a mediator. They told me the processing charge is free. The consultancy said that since we are the first lot [for it], it will be free for us, whereas many of my friends have had to spend 100,000–200,000 rupees [ca. USD 760–1530].

Table 3: Amount Paid for Japanese Language Class (by sex, in %)

Amount in NPR	Male	Female	Total
None	30.4	46.7	36.0
3,000–9,000	25.0	20.0	23.3
9,001–12,000	25.0	13.3	20.9
12,001–15,000	3.6	10.0	5.8
15,001–18,000	3.6	3.3	3.5
18,001–35,000	12.5	6.7	10.5
Total %	100	100	100
Total number (N)	56	30	86

Note: 21 research participants did not know the fee for language classes.

Table 4: Amount Paid for Document Preparation and Visa (by gender, in %)

Amount in NPR	Male	Female	Total
None	10.0	18.5	13.0
5,000–25,000	34.0	37.0	35.1
25,001–50,000	32.0	29.6	31.2
50,001–90,000	6.0	11.1	7.8
90,001–125,000	18.0	3.7	13.0
Total %	100	100	100
Total number (N)	50	27	77

Note: 30 research participants did not know the cost of document preparation and visa.

Aspirants also had to pay for language classes and for services related to document preparation. Among the research participants, 23 per cent had been taking language classes for up to three months, 25 per cent for 4–6 months, 28 per cent for the last 7–12 months, and 23 per cent for more than a year.

Language institutes normally collected a lumpsum to cover all the costs related to the migration process. For instance, over a third (36 per cent) of the respondents had not paid for language classes (Table 3). However, each had paid a documentation and visa processing fee of NPR 50,000–125,000 (c. USD 380–960), which includes fees for language classes. Similarly, 9 per cent had not paid anything for document preparation and visa processing, but everyone had paid up for language classes, ranging from NPR

Figure 10: Source of Fund to Finance Migration (by sex)

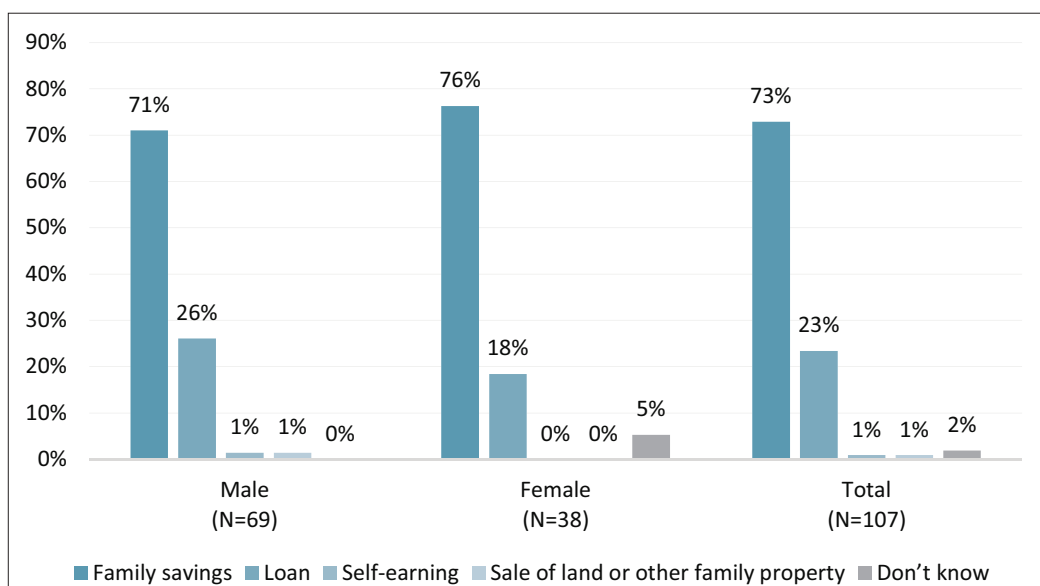
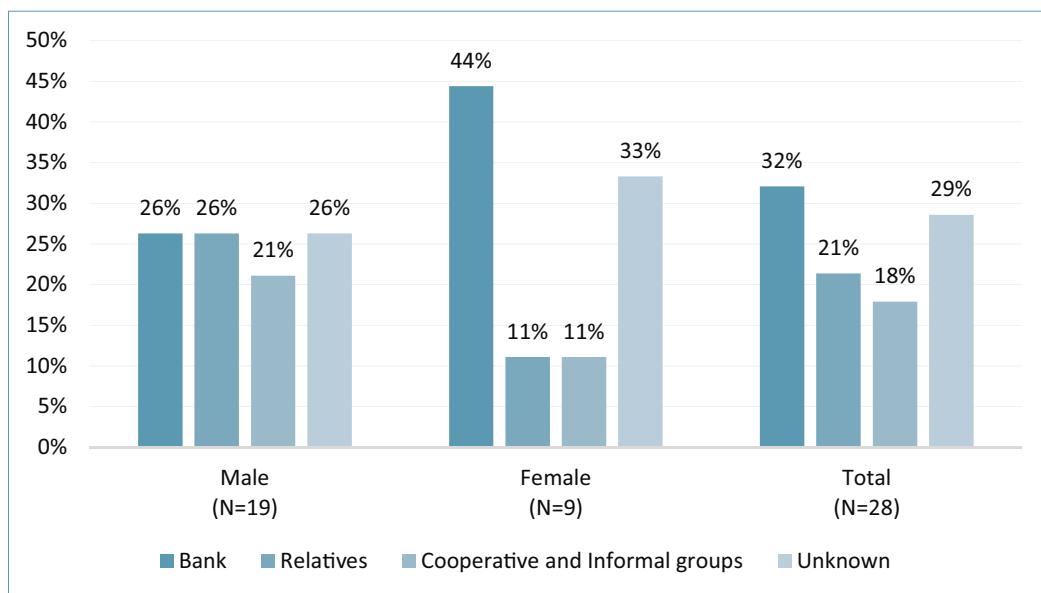


Figure 11: Source of Loan (by sex)



18,000 to 35,000 (c. USD 140 to 270).

4.7 Funding Sources

While most respondents, both male and female, had used their households' savings to pay for their migration to Japan, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) were taking loans (Figure 10). Banks, cooperatives, and relatives were reported to be the (potential) sources of the loans.

Table 5: Amount of Loan Borrowed or to Be Borrowed

Amount in NPR	Per cent
100,001–300,000	3.6
300,001–500,000	3.6
500,001–700,000	14.3
700,001–900,000	17.9
900,001–1,100,000	14.3
1,100,001–1,300,000	7.1
1,300,00– 1,500,000	7.1
Don't know	32.1
Total %	100
Total number (N)	28

Of the 28 respondents (19 males, nine females) with loans—at an interest rate of 12–24 per cent per annum—to pay for migration, half had borrowed from banks, cooperatives, or informal groups while 29 per cent of them did not know where it was coming from since their family was taking care of it (Figure 11).

While the (potential) loan amount ranged between NPR 100,000 and 1,500,000 (ca. USD 760 and 11,500), most borrowers took or were planning to take loans of over NPR 500,000 (ca. USD 3800). However, about a third of the respondents did not know the size of the loan borrowed/to be borrowed (Table 5). Of those in this last category, there were similar numbers of male and female respondents (five males, four females).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study reviewed the process of migration to Japan for work and study and examined aspirant Nepali migrants' purpose of migration to Japan, decision-making process, and costs involved in the overall migration process. Most of the participants' career goal was to study, earn and save money followed by acquiring a particular skill set in Japan and then using that skill in Nepal in the business sector. Similarly, factors such as Japan being a safe country, providing quality education, and the presence of social networks there were the major reasons driving the choice of Japan as their destination.

Another study of Nepali student migrants to Japan had also found the opportunity for better earnings and life to be drivers of education migration to Japan, especially against the background of lack of employment opportunities and political turmoil in Nepal (Kharel 2022). A CESLAM study on prospective migrants undertaking language classes to migrate to South Korea for employment reported similar findings (Baniya et al 2023). The aspirants had cited the prospect of earning more money compared to other destination countries, the low cost of migration, a safe working environment, lack of employment opportunities in Nepal, assurances of employment, improvement in the financial situation of their families, and success stories of returnees from South Korea as factors motivating them to migrate to South Korea.

Research on migration has explored the role of intermediaries and social network in an individual's migration process, including pre-departure, in the country of destination, and after return. Formal intermediaries such as recruitment agencies, education consultancies, and language institutes connect aspiring migrants with employers and universities abroad as well as help in the overall migration process. Likewise, migrant networks, i.e., 'sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin' (Massey et al 1993: 448), play an important role in an individual's decision to migrate. Studies have emphasised the role of social networks as a source of: i) information to aspirant migrants, for example, about jobs, country of destination, etc, (Munshi 2003; Dustmann et al 2016); and ii) financial and emotional support prior to and after migration (Munshi 2014; Comola and Mendola 2015). The role of migrant networks has been found crucial for integration in the country of destination (Chelipi-den Hamer and Mazzucato 2010; Lubbers et al 2010; Van Tubergen et al 2004) as well as in reintegration after return (Kuschminder 2017).

An ethnographic study of Nepali migrants to Japan from Malma in the western hills

of Nepal also demonstrates how social networks, such as family networks, neighbours and friends, enable aspirant migrants to raise money and facilitate the immigration process to migrate to as well as find employment in Japan (Kharel 2016). The CESLAM study on prospective labour migrants to South Korea also found significant roles of informal networks of friends and family in the migration process (Baniya et al 2023). An earlier study on labour migration trends in Nepal also highlighted how most migrant workers receive preliminary information about foreign employment through personal acquaintances, family and friends (Sijapati, Bhattarai and Pathak 2016). In this regard, this study finds that social networks not only influence the choice of destination but also migrants' decisions in the pre-departure period such as while choosing a language institute with friends and relatives playing an important role in where aspirant migrants' enrol.

The bilateral government-to-government migration schemes to Japan, i.e., the TITP and SSW programmes, have failed to gather momentum. In the case of the former, cumbersome documentation, complex webs of intermediary agencies at both ends of the migration process, exorbitant brokerage fees, irrelevance of skills acquired upon return, and unfavourable working and living conditions in Japan for some Nepali interns have hindered its smooth implementation (Yamanaka 2021). The programme has also faced criticism, both domestically and internationally, for serving as a platform for bringing in cheap labour into Japan rather than fostering technical skills of the trainees besides subjecting them to physical and psychological mistreatment (Verité 2018; Yoshida 2021).

Despite the signing of the Memorandum of Cooperation for Specified Skilled Worker Migration in 2019, the Government of Nepal has not been able to officially start the SSW programme. The directive for sending Nepalis to Japan under this scheme was approved only in February 2024.²⁸ Immigration policies in Japan have remained restrictive towards unskilled foreign workers (Saito 2022), limiting access to the Japanese labour market compared to countries of the GCC, which recruit low-skilled workers to fill the labour shortage. The resulting shortage of workers is being fulfilled by the opportunity provided to foreign citizens to study in Japan. Since the 1980s, the Government of Japan has been aiming to foster internationalisation in higher education in response to the dwindling number of skilled workers in the country (Exum 2023). However, admission to undergraduate degree requires high level of Japanese proficiency. Consequently, Japanese language schools have become an entry point for Nepalis to migrate to Japan after which they move to continue their higher education or find employment (Nam and Jin 2022; Kharel 2022). These Japanese language schools play the part of the medium for recruiting unskilled or low-skilled, part-time human resources for labour-short businesses or companies in Japan in the name of education. As Kharel (2022) states, the admission of foreign students through Japanese language schools serves as a 'side-door' immigration policy to bring in less skilled migrant workers to Japan. This, as Yamanaka (2021) points out, is detrimental to the students as they work multiple part-time jobs to finance their

28 As mentioned by a key informant.

study in Japan and 'spend their time and energy on the jobs, as a result of which they hardly master the level of Japanese necessary for advancing to Japanese universities'.

Additionally, most of the scholarly work as well as policies and programmes in Nepal have concentrated mainly on international labour migrants going primarily to the GCC countries and Malaysia. As important as the growing number of student migrants to Japan is, the fact is that most of them aspire to work during or after the completion of their studies. A study noted that among those who migrated to various countries for reasons other than work (including student migrants), a significant proportion (83 per cent) had continued to work in the destination country (Kharel et al 2022). It has been shown that many foreign workers in Japan face abuse and unpaid wages at the workplace and suffer from workplace-related injuries and even succumb to deaths (Osumi 2019; Ishimaru et al 2022). As per the OSH (occupational safety and health) statistics of Japan, there were 1548 fatal accidents (both foreign and native workers) reported in 2022 (Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association n.d.). It is necessary to provide mandatory orientation training to all Nepali migrants to Japan to make them aware of the rules and regulations there as well as means to access welfare organisations and diplomatic agencies in case of difficulties. The Government of Nepal can coordinate with Japanese language institutes to create pre-departure training primarily for those going to Japan to study to equip them with the necessary information. Furthermore, as discussed above, it can be beneficial to smoothen the migration process for recruiting low-skilled migrant workers in Japan, following the example of the Employment Permit System (EPS) implemented by South Korea. This will enable Nepalis who go to Japan ostensibly as students but with the primary purpose of finding employment to migrate without having to spend a lot of money in admission fees to Japanese language schools, universities, or colleges in Japan.

As the findings of this study show, people from wealthier backgrounds and with stronger social networks are able to migrate to Japan where they can earn higher incomes compared to migrant workers going to other destination countries such as the GCC countries and Malaysia. As a result, inequalities in access to economic opportunities can perpetuate existing income and social disparities in Nepal.

Some studies in Nepal have highlighted the impact of international student mobility in the form of brain drain (Kattel and Sapkota 2018; Shakya 2022). International student mobility is an important channel through which highly skilled Nepalis have been leaving the country. This is also reflected in the educational qualifications of the research participants in this study, which was significantly higher than of those going to the GCC countries and Malaysia. However, as the study's findings show, there are also Nepali migrants who aspire to return to Nepal after finishing their studies. It is hence important that the Government of Nepal start focusing on the utilisation of their skills. However, as past findings have also highlighted, due to challenges associated with the relevance in Nepal of these foreign-acquired skills, it will be important for returnee migrants to be provided with the necessary support and the right environment for their entry into the Nepali labour market (Kharel et al 2022; Bhattarai et al 2023).

Both student and labour migrants usually pay large sums of money to recruitment agencies and education consultancies, including to demonstrate language proficiency as required in countries such as South Korea (ILO 2016; Baniya et al 2023). This study re-affirms that aspirant migrants are spending huge amounts on language classes and document preparation or for fees to education consultancies. Since there are no fixed rates, there is a need for some kind of monitoring of language institutes and education consultancies and standard rates fixed as well. A specified service fee range will help ensure that students are not deceived and charged a higher amount than applicable.

Studies have found that migrants, particularly migrant workers, depend on various sources to pay for their migration abroad (ILO 2016; Sijapati et al 2017; Kharel et al 2022; Baniya et al 2023). The ILO study found that almost 85 per cent of them depended on loans to pay for their migration with traditional money lenders and friends/relatives being the main source of loans (ILO 2016). Another study on aspirant migrant workers to South Korea also found that they depended on multiple sources, including their family, and loans to finance their migration-related costs (Baniya et al 2023). Aspirant migrants to Japan involved in this study indicated they depended primarily on family savings and on loans from banks or relatives to finance their migration.

The increasing migration of Nepalis to Japan, primarily for study but often with the underlying motivation of seeking employment opportunities, underscores a complex interplay of factors driving this trend. While the pursuit of education remains a legitimate goal for many Nepali students, such migration also serves as the backdoor to import cheap workers into Japan. Learning new language and navigating the intricacies of the Japanese visa system and immigration procedures can be time-consuming and expensive. This raises significant ethical, regulatory, and labour rights concerns and highlights the need for reforms to ensure the rights and well-being of both students and migrant workers. In light of these complexities and challenges, there is a pressing need for further evidence to inform future policies and strategies. As Nepal and Japan endeavour to streamline migration processes and ensure the protection of migrant workers, as evident from the recent signing of the MoC for technical interns and implementation of the directive for sending specified skilled workers to Japan, the need for evidence-based policymaking becomes all the more imperative.

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Annex: Classification of Japanese language institutes

Category	Criteria
A: Advanced mega school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Schools that run classes for levels above N4 (N3, N2, N1) ii. The total number of students enrolled in 2021 or the preceding years is above 100 iii. The number of students that went to Japan after studying in the school in 2019 (pre-Covid-19) is above 100
B: Advanced small-scale school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Schools that run classes for levels above N4 (N3, N2, N1) ii. The total number of students enrolled in 2021 or the preceding years is less than 50 iii. The number of students that went to Japan in 2019 after studying in the school (pre-Covid-19) is less than 50
C: Mid-level mega school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Schools that run classes up to level N4 (N4, N5) ii. The total number of students enrolled in 2021 or the preceding years is around 100 iii. The number of students that went to Japan in 2019 (pre-Covid-19) is around 100
D: Mid-level small-scale school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Schools that run classes up to level N4 (N4, N5) ii. The number of students enrolled in 2021 or the preceding years is less than 50 iii. The number of students that went to Japan after studying in the school in 2019 (pre-Covid-19) is less than 50

Note: For detailed information on the five levels (N1, N2, N3, N4 and N5) of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), please see: Japanese-Language Proficiency Test. n.d. 'N1-N5: Summary of Linguistic Competence Require for Each Level.' Accessed 29 June 2023. <https://www.jlpt.jp/e/about/levelsummary.html#:~:text=The%20JLPT%20has%20five%20levels,scenes%20in%20actual%20everyday%20life.>

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